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Fifty years of popularity of Theresa Lee Wai-chun and Miss 13-Dot: Changing identities of women in Hong Kong

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Background

Girls' comic artist Theresa Lee Wai-chun, widely known as "Master of girls' comics of Hong Kong" and a "fashion designer on paper," has been actively engaged in creativity for half a century. Her famous title, *Sapsam Dim* (in Cantonese Chinese) or *Thirteen Dot Cartoon* (in English), one of the classic comic works in Hong Kong, has touched several generations of readers. During the "East meets West" interaction period in 1960s and 1970s Hong Kong, the comic constructed a reference framework of images of modern women for its teenaged female readers. Despite the original, first-published-in-1966 *Thirteen Dot Cartoon* series ending in the late 1970s, the 6-frames-per-page, colored Thirteen Dot Cartoon appeared in various women's magazines and newspapers during the 1980s.

In the 30th anniversary year of July 1996, the title was republished in its original form as a "reappearance of classic" to reconnect its first generation of readers and attract new ones. This release coincided with the pre-1997 nostalgia leading up to Hong Kong's return to China. Later, between 2003 and 2010, the author updated her original artwork and published the "revival" generation edition. Together with previous editions, Lee's Miss 13-Dot are being handed down from generation to generation, connecting readers from several different decades.

Although the original 1960s work had remained popular for almost 50 years, the devoted and passionate artist, Theresa Lee Wai-chun, did not rest on her laurels. In the 40th anniversary year of 2006, a figure doll of Miss 13-Dot was produced to catch the creative trends of the time. Lee expanded her visual expression boundaries with photography by posing the doll in different scenarios, and by bringing Miss 13-Dot's famous drawn fashions to life on the doll.

In 2008, she extended her creative tools by using Photoshop to compose real objects, line art drawings and photos into her first full-colored graphic novel, *Lyun-lyun Baa-lai* or *Love in Paris* (author's own translation). This new work not only attracted a new generation of readers, it also brought Miss 13-Dot into the new millennium. By this time, the talented creator had become one of the artists frequently invited to government and commercial organized exhibitions and comics-related activities.

Theresa Lee Wai-chun is truly an icon and a legendary figure in the history of Hong Kong comics. She is the most well-liked comic artist to be interviewed by the mass media in Hong Kong. Interviews and reports of Lee and her creations have made regular media appearances over a span of five decades.

Over the past five decades, how have Lee and the comic character that she created, Sapsam Dim, Miss 13-Dot, been engaged in the societal changes of Hong Kong? This paper is going to examine some of those media interview materials from the past 50 years to analyze the projections and the public's reception of the comics throughout different generations. I argue that the case study of Lee and her cartoon reflects the changing identities of women in Hong Kong, from the path of searching for an identity, with attempts to escape modern patriarchal values, to continuous negotiation for recognition as unique individuals. Through reading the media materials on this case, we can appreciate the ongoing struggles of women to be recognized for their contributions to society, while resisting being stereotyped as a fixed image of any kind.

The changing identities of women

The media materials collected for this study represent a time span of almost 50 years over which the artist and her creation (mainly *Thirteen Dot Cartoon*) were projected to the public. Each of these media records can be categorized as one of four types: 1) Interview reports of the artist; 2) Features reports (without interviews) of the artist; 3) Reports (or publicity) of public events associated with the

artist; and 4) Miscellaneous. The artist kept a comprehensive record of media reports about herself, which this study is based on. Samples used here are mainly print media that appeared in various newspapers and magazines from 1965 to 2013. The collection includes more than 250 pieces of writings associated with the artist and her work. Without a doubt, Lee is the favorite comic artist of the media in Hong Kong, where she has made regular media appearances over a span of five decades.

The traditional meets the modern: From an imaginary idol to an ordinary woman

Lee was brought up under the strong influence of her mother, who, like a typical mother of that era, taught her daughter to obey her future husband. Her mother did not encourage her artistic and creative interests, and the youngster needed to pursue her interests without much support from her family. Her studies in painting and art were rewarded and her name printed for the first time in a newspaper when she won first prize in the teenage category in a children's fashion design competition in April 1965, organized by *Tin Tin Daily* and a department store (*Tin Tin Daily*, 1965). This “design competition” required only that a drawn design be submitted, rather than an actual finished outfit. Lee’s first formal public recognition of her talents was coincidentally a “fashion drawing” piece, a drawn depiction of fashion design.

This creative direction was reflected in her first serial comics, titled *Fafa Siuze (Miss Flower)*, published in March 1965. This publication date is according to the memory of her husband and also work partner. Because comic titles published at that time in Hong Kong did not carry publication dates to avoid seeming outdated, it is difficult to trace the date decisively and we must rely on the memories of the artist and her associates. *Fafa Siuze* only published eight issues before a big idea hit the artist with a catchy title, *Sapsam Dim*. The English title of the comics, *Thirteen Dot Cartoon* was always printed on the back cover of each issue with the intention of overseas distribution to South East Asia and other parts of the world (Fig. 1). The lead character is a young woman, Miss 13-Dot, whose great sense of fashion and family’s wealth allow her to actualize whatever random ideas come to her mind.

Miss 13-Dot was in fact an archetype of the artist herself. Her mother called the artist “13-Dot” (zai-se-ti,) a neutral term in Shanghainese slang that refers to girls or young women with frivolous attitudes (Qian, Nairong, Baohua Xu, and Zhenzhu Tang, 2007). Lee projected her interests in Western fashion, modern gadgets, and progressive liberal values onto her creations through little details in the stories that make up Miss 13-Dot’s daily life. She admitted that the character resembled herself in the early stage of her career, in an interview by Amy Lui published in the *China Mail* (Fig. 2), one of the earliest English-language newspapers in the history of Hong Kong. In that July 3, 1969 article, Lee remarked that the dreams she couldn’t fulfill for herself in reality could still be fulfilled through 13-Dot.

The character was a creation of the artist’s imagination that was shared by many; as the title of this report read, “She’s what all young girls dream they would like to be...” (Lui, 1969). This headline implied that her dreams were shared by many of her readers from this generation. 13-Dot was the comic world idol to the first generation of readers in the late 1960s and 1970s, when women’s movements in Hong Kong were undertaking legislative reform, such as the outlawing of polygamy in Hong Kong in 1971, in which concubinage was forbidden and women’s right to inherit property was protected (Women’s Commission, 2009).

Interview reports from the late 1960s to 1980s often labeled Lee as a “female comics artist”. Because of her female gender, most publicity materials appeared in women’s periodicals or women’s columns in newspapers. An article published in April 1969 in a woman’s magazine included samples of fashion design drawings along with the interview article of the artist. Wai-chun’s identity was unveiled as *Sapsam Dim*’s creator, as a “female” comic artist, and as the fashion designer for Miss 13-Dot. This can be summarized as the public reception of the artist and her creations by her first-generation readers, who were her age and no more than 10 to 15 years younger.

Sapsam Dim, Thirteen Dot Cartoon, was an immediate hit after its first issue published in 1966, when Lee was carrying her first-born daughter. The comic sold more than 50,000 copies each month in the first three years. Becoming a mother did not slow the artist’s creative output, though; the comic’s circulation reached its peak from 1968 to 1971, and then gradually slowed down until its official end in 1980. During this period, she was taking up another career path as an illustrator. Although the comics became less popular, Wai-chun still received media interviews from time to

time. Partly because of her background as Sapsam Dim's creator, she also embarked on another stage of her career as the key artist, together with her comic artist husband, for a new children's magazine, *Sannei Gogo (Brother Sunny)*, in 1978. Most of the interviews from that period barely mentioned the new publication, but instead focused on the topic of Miss 13-Dot. However, there were some interesting turns in her identity as a woman with a husband and children.

Referring back to the article in the *China Mail*, Wai-chun appeared as an independent woman from her husband with the comment: "he works his way, and I, mine" (Lui, 1969). Lee was then the married mother of two, and this statement was considered bold at that time. Despite her mother's teaching that a wife should obey her husband, the young artist, energized with rebellious thoughts, did not necessarily take her mother's advice. As a young woman with a progressive mind, Lee was confident about her identity as an individual woman and resisted being defined as subordinate to a male.

Interestingly, this attitude was not portrayed in the interview articles from the late 1970s and 1980s. For example, the article published on 19th March 1979 in *Sing Pao* revealed that the real life of the artist at that time was very ordinary. Just like any average housewife who needs to take care of her children and husband, wearing plain outfits and living a life that cannot compare to that of Sapsam Dim. The headline of another article, published 17th March 1980 in *Express Daily*, even reads: Lee Wai-chun is so unlike Sapsam Dim. And the blurb of the article reads: "13-Dot Cartoons' lead character was fashionable, and untrammled. However, its creator, Lee Wai-chun was honest and mature. She is a typical Chinese woman, who put her husband at the first place." This image was so unlike the one projected in the *China Mail* in 1969, slightly more than a decade before. Why were these two reports written the way they were? Was it because of the promotions for the new children's magazine that she and her husband were working on in the earlier period? Or because the artist was entering her 40s, with the assumption that her restless, creative mind had surely aged?

Despite that, Sapsam Dim and Lee Wai-chun were always on the mind of her first-generation readers, and some of the younger readers grew up to become industry leaders in their profession. Among them was Tina Liu, now a renowned image consultant with the unofficial title "First Lady of Looking Good" in Hong Kong, and the founder of Tina's Choice, a fashion accessories boutique shop, who interviewed Lee Wai-chun, wondering what she was doing after the comic ceased in 1980. She wrote her article in *City Magazine*, published in February 1986, coincidentally the 20th anniversary of the first publication of Sapsam Dim (Fig. 3). In this article, the writer expressed her personal observations of the interview, seeing Lee acting in a role subordinate to her husband. This disappointed Liu, as a fan of *Sapsam Dim* with vivid memories of Miss 13-Dot's beautiful drawn fashions and her imagined image of the comic's creator. Although she felt let down, Liu was thankful for Wai-chun and her husband for the memories that they brought her.

I marked the late 1980s as the end of a phase of Sapsam Dim as a hip icon (between 1966 and 1973) for her generation, and the generation immediately next to her. Lee and her work inspired readers to take paths related to fashion design or related areas; the artist herself, however, turned back and followed her mother's instruction to be obedient to her husband. I argue that these two decades marked the struggle of women to find identity in Hong Kong, as reflected in the case of Lee and Sapsam Dim.

Although by the late 1980s, Hong Kong society was generally accepting of women's careers, and women's fashions had successfully transformed into the Western-style ones that the artist had drawn in her comics, society was still fixated on the patriarchal value of expecting women to live under the direction of their husbands. A young soul may be able to rebel, but as time passes, that rebellious spirit is often overcome by the reality of a mother's duties, transforming the exceptional into the average. The impact of family commitments on a woman's career was rarely recognized at that time. It seems that this was the case for Lee at that point in her life. By ending this phase, the artist and her comics were actually entering a new era of remembrance and legacy formation.

From nostalgia to legacy: Resisting glorification of an iconic comics figure

The issues surrounding 1997 led Hong Kong in search of its own cultural identity and official recognition of its past, with its contributions by many people including cultural workers like Lee. During the early 1990s, the Hong Kong Art Centre's events: Hong Kong Culture Exhibition Series, such as *The Good and the Bad: Textbook and Comics in Hong Kong, 1930s-1970s* (September 1994)

(Fig. 4); *The Story of Hong Kong Comics, 1950-1970* (December 1995); and *Hong Kong Fashion Allure 50 Years* (February 1997), generated media attention on classic comics from the 1950s to 1970s, and aroused public interest in nostalgic Hong Kong.

Tina Liu was right about the remembrance of *Sapsam Dim* in her article written in 1986. Before the dawn of the handover, the public craved their memories of the good old days as a way to escape thinking about the uncertain future with China. Although most comics and fashion-related exhibitions organized by Hong Kong Arts Centre were group exhibitions, Wai-chun was the media's most favored interviewee. On top of that, the original *Thirteen Dot Cartoon* was republished in June 1996, and the artist's first solo exhibition organized by the Hong Kong Designers Association and held in April 1997, giving Lee more media attention than others.

Much like the reports of the past, the artist was still being labeled a "female comics artist", and the main focus was still on the contents of the fashion drawings in *Sapsam Dim*. However, this time, it had been 30 years since the title first published, and the moment was right to feed the nostalgia needs of the public, so the focus was firmly on the past glories of 1960s comics. Those reports were mainly about the remembrance, the classics, the fashion trends, the comeback, and the revival. In some occasions, reporters explored Lee's non-13-Dot creative work, such as her elaborated doll's house, drawings, craftwork, and transformed drawings of *Sapsam Dim* characters into patchwork, to break away from having similar content as other interviews of the artist. By this time, the artist was regarded as the "Master of girls' comics of Hong Kong," and "fashion designer on paper" as recognition of her achievement with *Sapsam Dim*. Along this direction, the frequency of her interviews reached a new height when her chronological archival book, entitled *An Illustrated History of 13-Dot Cartoon: The Work of Lee Wai-chun* was published in January 2003. Also, her second solo exhibition, entitled *13-Dot-dot-dot* was held in March 2003.

During the period of early 2003, Hong Kong was facing an economic downturn and a battle with SARS. There was one newspaper interview report (*Sun Daily*, 20th February 2003) with the uplifting title: "Lee Wai-chun wants 13-Dot to be happy." In another report in *Sing Tao Daily* (23rd February 2003), the artist was quoted as saying, "Hong Kong will be recovered" (Fig. 5). In these critical moments for Hong Kong, the artist and her famous character were like old friends to the people of Hong Kong. Although those reports were still in a nostalgic tone as the early 1990s began, the interview contents were expanded into the realm of Hong Kong history; moreover, the artist was entering her 60s at this time and beginning to be viewed as a grandmother. There were reports mentioning her age, mostly in a respectful and positive manner, except for one rare occasion due to the ignorance of the reporter. Lee at that time was indeed enjoying her life as a creative artist, while trying to cross boundaries beyond the media of comics.

In 2005, Lee teamed up with figure-doll making company Dog 9 to turn Miss 13-Dot into a real, three-dimensional object: a 12-inch-tall figure. She transformed three fashion drawings from the covers of the original series into real clothing for this newly delivered doll (Fig. 6). This doll was on display and for sale at the Book Fair in 2006. With this new creative tool in her hands, the artist made different outfits for the doll, displayed it in different places, and took photos of the displays, just as Gina Garan did for her Blythe back in 1997. The doll gave Lee a new creative space.

Invited by Alliance Francaise Hong Kong to Paris in November 2006, Lee created a series of promotional postcards with this new visualization method in June 2007 for the organization. Around the same time, the artist acquired proficiency using Photoshop and began composing her hand-drawn comics in the software on a photo background. Determined to create something new and have fun creatively, she taught herself to use the software despite having reached her 60s.

Her groundbreaking new work, a graphic novel entitled *Lyun-lyun Baa-lai (Love in Paris)*, inspired by her trip to Paris, was published in February 2008. Because of this new work, and the figure doll created earlier, the artist was able to provide new topics for the media. Although the interviews were still focused on 13-Dot and her fashion design (*Sing Tao*, 12th March 2008), now there were new works and refreshed images of 13-Dot that Wai-chun had drawn with the assistance of Photoshop. The artist was being recognized as a confident and energetic individual who was up to date with current trends. After a decade of being thought of as nostalgic artifacts, Lee and Miss 13-Dot finally received the status that they both deserved. Most importantly, the artist didn't stop or slow herself down despite her age, reviving the spirit seen when she was in the early stages of her career.

New generations of readers, whose mothers or grandmothers were once readers of the original series, also became fans of *Sapsam Dim*. The readers who grew up with the original comics will properly admire the continuing creative spirit of the artist. Those newly recruited readers will find a lot of reasons to love the artist and her work. Even with the great age difference, the art still speaks to them. One interview, with the headline “Sapsam Dim is not my daughter” (12th March 2008, *Apple Daily*) (Fig. 7), reflected that Lee and Miss 13-Dot are capturing a new audience who know very little about the character. Although the artist could continue to enjoy her fame and the legacy she rightfully earned in the 1960s, she refused to be content solely with previous accomplishments, much like the Sapsam Dim character inside her. Lee continued to update and revitalize herself with opportunities that she hadn’t encountered before.

Becoming a respectful individual: Revitalizing creativity as a forward-moving self

Following the launch of her graphic novel, *Lyun-lyun Baa-lai*, the artist was on the road for a traveling show held in shopping malls at four different locations in March to April 2008. “Ageless Miss 13-Dot: Lee Wai-chun” reads the headline in one of the interviews published in *East Week Magazine*, 16th April 2008. The blurb highlighted that her new work was the artist’s “comeback”. The fact that she taught herself Photoshop became the focus of some reports. She was a grandmother in her 60s, but still as vibrant as ever. The interview contents were still based on typical questions, such as how the artist started the title, the meaning of Sapsam Dim, her other art interests, and her creative processes for the new work.

The overall tone of the report was lively and positively depicted the new identity of the artist and the character. Sapsam Dim was updated with colors, and Lee was still as vibrant as she once was. The term “comeback” was inaccurate because the artist actually had been actively producing new work in various forms since 1996, such as the one-page comics for *TVB magazine* in 1996; illustration for Hong Kong Heritage Museum in May 2002; the “regenerated” edition of *13-Dot Cartoon*, with updated conversations, published in August 2003; the figure doll in 2005; the installation booth for the figure doll at the Hong Kong Book Fair in 2006; and so forth. In spite of all that, it was the full-color graphic novel made with the help of Photoshop techniques that brought the artist renewed attentions.

At this point, in 2008, after more than four decades of interaction with readers, the artist was respected as an individual, and the label of “female comic artist” appears less in the interview reports. Headlines like, “The most beautiful 13-Dot,” Sapsam Dim in the *Sun News* (20th March 2008) regarded *Thirteen Dot Cartoon* as some of the most pretty collective memories of Hong Kong. This article testified that her readership crossed over two or three generations: the generation that is her age, her daughter’s generation, and her granddaughter’s generation. When Lee was young, her creation was an alternate identity that her readers loved to have or loved to be. The artist has always kept a high spirit in her creative work, and even more so in the past ten years. As a grandmother, she projects uplifting attitudes toward life, impressing both new and old audiences with her creations. Her creative work is her entertainment and helps to pass the time. Her willingness to learn and maintain a positive attitude while growing older is an inspiration to the generations that have come after her.

Lee was the most prominent comics’ artist of Hong Kong who was able to keep creating over a period of almost 50 years, with most of the work done solely by her. She can’t be considered monetarily wealthy, unlike some male comics’ artists who turned their creations into mass productions and listed companies. Lee worked honestly with her hands and passion for creation.

When the Hong Kong government was looking for remedies to cure the economic downturn in 2003, they turned to the creative industries, including the comic genre, by organizing superficial attractions such as group comic shows and related promotional events. They set up comic statues to promote the comics industry of Hong Kong to overseas readers and viewers. As an important artist, Lee naturally received invitations to and participated in most of those events. In the event Hong Kong Avenue of Comics Stars in Kowloon Park, 24 statues of Hong Kong comics characters, including a Sapsam Dim statue, were created and opened to the public for two years starting on 27th September, 2012.

These kinds of superficial events are not likely to help the declined comics industry comes back to life, but they can be seen as a goodwill gesture to acknowledge and recognize the

contributions of artists in history. However, the statues can also be viewed as monuments designed to pay tribute to a past glory, the legacy of Hong Kong comics, which has now faded. But Lee's legacy goes beyond those unintelligent statues. She enjoyed her status and reputation, happily accepting reporter interviews and even had her picture taken in front of her Sapsam Dim figure statues (see 4th June 2013, *Apple Daily*) (Fig. 8).

Thirteen Dot Cartoon was once one of the best-selling comics not only in Hong Kong, but also in South East Asia and in overseas Chinese communities. Lee has been representing Hong Kong with her popular comics for decades. But she only officially participated in the world-renowned comics event, Festival International de la Bande Desinee, for the first time in 2011 (Jan 28-31). Together with 12 other comics' artists, she took part in the festival, being inspired and demonstrating her comics drawing skills live. She certainly deserved the recognition she received as a living treasure of Hong Kong. By this time, she had a new name given by reporters and by friends at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, Chun-ze. Ze, in English, means "elder sister". In Hong Kong, respected senior women are called by their names together with the word Ze, as a kind of title showing respect to the person (see 1st April, 2011, Wenwei Po). The artist has now moved beyond being the "female comics artist" or "creator of *Sapsam Dim*" or "master of girls' comics," or the "fashion designer on paper." She is herself, an individual who loves life and the creative process.

Lee is a legacy of herself, both as an individual and as a part of Hong Kong. Her old work is part of the collective memory of Hong Kong's people. One of her newest works, produced in July 2012 for the mural wrapped around the Central Market building, placed her signature drawing styles amid the hustle and bustle of the financial district of Hong Kong, Central. The interview report in *Ming Pao* (25th November 2012) best captured who she was at the moment: her life, her creative process for the mural, her comments about the young generation of comics artists, and the future development of the comics industry of Hong Kong. The interview no longer focused on the comic character, or her creation behind the characters. Rather, the contents were more diverse, with more thought-provoking comments in response to the questions posed by the reporter. The artist's identity as an individual moving forward is now firmly established. Spending fifty years non-stop in a creative career is a remarkable accomplishment.

Closing remarks

My paper has examined the different stages of how the artist was projected in print media. Due to the limited space here, I will leave further critical questions to the reader to reflect upon. For instance: Hong Kong was a key place for garment manufacturing in the 1970s to mid-1980s. Why couldn't such an infrastructure nurture a so-called "fashion designer on paper" into a real one with a mass-produced, wearable fashion label sometime over the past 50 years? Why couldn't Lee become the Vivienne Westwood of the East? Is it because of self-imposed restrictions by the artist herself, or Hong Kong society's long-standing dismissal of women's talents and abilities? Or, are there other factors involved? What can this case study of Theresa Lee Wai-chun and her work, *Sapsam Dim*, *Thirteen Dot Cartoon*, contribute to future development directions of Hong Kong comics in our globalized world? There are many questions that remain to be explored.

Language and translation remarks

All translations from Chinese materials are the author's own, unless otherwise noted. For the comic titles in Chinese, I have used Cantonese Romanization to reflect the dominant speech used daily in Hong Kong. As for the English name of the comic, I have used the corresponding English export title.

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「乖、唔乖」研討會 ——探討教科書與連環圖關係



在香港，教科書及連環圖同樣扮演著舉足輕重的文化角色，兩者更為兒童締造了兩個世界——一個「乖」，一個「唔乖」。為了探討兩者關係及對兒童成長歷程帶來的影響，藝術中心於過去一連兩天

在五樓包氏畫廊舉行展覽及公開研討會。

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李惠珍的十三點曾風靡當時年青一輩，重溫當年作品令她不禁會心微笑。



Figure 4: “The Good and the Bad Seminar – Relationship between textbooks and comic books”, *Ming Pao*, 1994

星島日報 11 古董衣飾 珍藏有價 13 香宮 新派富豪飯堂

10 名人熱話 23.2.2003

11 名牌時尚
12 名廠旅遊
13 名家飲食
14 名牌系列
15 名車競標
16 名人 Hightea

《13點》的李惠珍
又再興起，已經是大師級地位的她，接受訪問時沒有一點架子，有時還表現出一些可愛的孩子氣，例如有些訪問內容她會在事後說：「啊呀，這最好不寫啦，很醜的，會給人笑！」其實那只是很小的事。

李惠珍創造出不為生活憂愁的有錢女13點，但是她自己很反對凡事以錢掛帥。

13 李惠珍「香港一定會復元」

Figure 5: “Hong Kong will be recovered,” *Sing Tao Daily*, 2003.



Figure 7: “Sapsam Dim is not my daughter,” *Apple Daily*, 2008.



Figure 8: “Happy Sapsam Dim,” *Apple Daily*, 2013.