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## The Emerging Image of the Modern Woman in Hong Kong Comics of the 1960s & 1970s

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### Introduction

The comic book market in Hong Kong is very much dominated by translated Japanese imports, as is the case in other Asian countries including South Korea and Taiwan (Lent 1995; 1999). Compared to other Southeast Asian countries, however, Hong Kong has a relatively well-developed local comics industry that can share a portion of the market with the imported Japanese cartoon literature. Hong Kong's comic books, whether locally produced or imported from Japan, 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. Boys' comics such as *Lungfu Mun (Oriental Heroes)*, *Wind and Cloud*, and *God of Martial Arts* dominate the market. 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 (Wong and Yeung 1999). Reviewing the past 30 years of the development of Hong Kong comics, only about ten woman comic artists of any note can be found. However, in spite of the small size of the woman's comics market in Hong Kong, the popularity and influence of some of the well-circulated and popular comics make them well worth study. Comics for a female audience in Hong Kong emerged during a time when social roles and expectations for women were in flux, and early comics have much to reveal about the ideology, social development and cultural changes that characterized the context in which they were produced.

The first and ultimately most successful of the female artists of women's comics in Hong Kong is Lee Wai-chun, creator of *13-Dot Cartoons*. *13-Dot* was first published in 1966 (Figure 1) and ran continuously until the beginning of 1980, with 178 issues. This work was re-printed and re-published in 1996, gaining the attention of the general public as a nostalgic revival of a 1960s fashion phenomenon. Lee was recognized as the "Master of Girls' Comics" and as a "fashion designer on paper" because of the prolific drawings of colorful and widely varied outfits worn by the main character of her cartoon, Miss 13-Dot (Wong 1997). Lee's work is of significance not only because of its popularity and sheer length and consistency of production, but also because it was produced during a key time of transition in Hong Kong for the opportunities and potentials of young women. This article traces the



Figure 1: First Issue of *13-Dot Cartoons*, 1966.

cultural context, artistic production, fashion images, and gender values of Lee Wai-chun's *13-Dot Cartoons*. By examining the relationships between cultural context and the work of this first successful woman comic artist and using the theory of ideology and hegemony, the article argues that cultural changes in Hong Kong were integrated into women's comic art in ways that reflected both the imperatives of dominant culture and the expanding roles of

women in Hong Kong society. Lee Wai-chun was able to project a Westernized image of the modern woman without breaking away from many of the elements of dominant ideology related to Chinese women of the 1960s and 1970s in Hong Kong.

### **Comics, Humor, Gender Ideology and Social Change**

Hong Kong's locally produced comics have frequently and consistently been criticized for their reliance on violence, sex, and bad language thought to be unsuitable for youthful audiences (Choi 1991; Bolton and Hutton 1997). Beyond the attention to these well-recognized negative elements within Hong Kong comics, the field has received very little scholarly attention. Two articles cover the general field of comic art in Hong Kong (Lent 1995; Bolton and Hutton 1997) and another examines television cartoons rather than print comics (Chu and McIntyre 1995). Wong and Yeung's (1999) book examines the history of Hong Kong comics and traces their general thematic contents, providing a broader view of the cultural values embedded within them. This latter work begins the important task of examining Hong Kong comics that have included topics, themes, and values beyond the well-known genres of violence, sex, and triad activities. These lesser-known themes are both varied and significant in terms of their relationship to the development of Hong Kong culture, and as such they are perhaps more worthy of study than the larger and better known genres depicting underworld activity. Women's comics certainly constitute an important area of unexamined Hong Kong comics production. Their study can reveal much about social change, gender roles and gender politics in the Hong Kong context.

Although cartoons for female audiences in Hong Kong have not received scholarly attention, Western theorists of comics and humor have devoted sustained attention to issues of gender. 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 and Beard 1934; Meyer et. al. 1980; Toth 1994; Walker 1988). There are several important reasons why gender has been understood as a key component of humor research. As a form or mode of communication, humor has been seen as a masculine genre because its use is understood as a manifestation of aggression (Walker 1991). Partly because of this, women have been discouraged from participating in humorous genres, and have been discouraged from entering into fields such as stand-up comedy and comic art. Also, 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."

In part because of these concerns, studies of humor have traditionally separated women's humor into its own genre. As Alice Sheppard (1991) 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" (p. 36). 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 the last few decades, comics with "female" subject-matter have found a market niche very separate from that occupied by traditional, male-oriented comics. This has been no less true in Hong Kong than in other places.

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

Theorists and critics of popular culture in general, and comics in particular, assert the importance and relevance of their subject matter to the lives of audience members and to the larger culture in which individual texts take part. The nature of comics as a means of social critique and as a factor in the process of social transformation has been observed by many. Martin Barker (1989) emphasizes the relevance of political and ideological themes in comic art, noting that "the history of comics is a history of controversies" that have involved arguments over the meaning and influence of comics (p. 19). At various times, the influence of comics over readers has been feared as direct

and dangerous (Barker, 1989). Comics have long been understood as an intensely popular, potentially subversive, and particularly influential form of mass communication, one that could threaten dominant norms and ideology and potentially create social upheaval.

### **Historical Background for Women Comic Artists in Hong Kong**

The basic history of the economic development of Hong Kong tells the story of the tough and impoverished era of the 1950s. The economy of Hong Kong did not experience steady growth until the following decade. During the 1950s, although the economy was beginning to develop more rapidly, the society was still very much confined by traditional Chinese values as well as insufficient resources (Wong 1999). 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. 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.

With the improvement of the Hong Kong economy in the 1960s and 1970s, opportunities were created for women to join the work force in the industrialization stage (Westwood, Mehra, and Cheung 1995). These opportunities, once created, remained open to women. The 1970s and 1980s are the era in which Hong Kong was facing drastic changes, and basically all boys and girls received equal educational opportunities from the society (family-level decisions may not have been fully equal yet during this period) and legal rights for women were also constantly improving. Work force participation of women in Hong Kong was at a steady 45-50 percent during the 1970s and 1980s (Westwood, Mehra, and Cheung 1995). With the increasing number of women working in the production sector, many women enjoyed the freedom of being in control of their own finances and the power to create wealth on their own.

There were no prominent woman-authored comics for female audiences during this time. The appearance of women comic artists in Hong Kong after World War II began in the 1960s, at a time when a significant percentage of young women first had some personal income as well as exposure to higher education. Lee Wai-chun is the most outstanding woman comic artist from the 1960s, and no discussion of women's comics in Hong Kong can omit attention to her historic role. The main character, Miss 13-Dot, is a tall, slender, attractive young woman who has adventures that were unusual and exciting for young female readers in the 1960s and 1970s. To a certain extent,

Miss 13-Dot provided readers including blue and white collar workers, and college girls whose parents had spare money, important fashion trend messages. The image of Miss 13-Dot represented a Westernized modern identity and model for the local Chinese women, and this influence is obvious especially before the arrival of Hong Kong television's golden era in the mid-1970s (Wong 1997).

### *13-Dot Cartoons Story Outline*

All of *13-Dot's* stories are lighthearted and revolve around the main character, Miss 13-Dot. The cartoon presented this heroine in scenarios that broke out of the traditional mold of feminine behavior, often depicting Miss 13-Dot acting independently in adventurous, though implausible situations. Throughout the years that the cartoon was published, Miss 13-Dot was a high school student who engaged in various free-spirited adventures. These activities were often funded by her banker father "Mr. Cash" or tolerantly allowed by her lenient mother "Mrs. Lovely." Regular characters included her maid "May," occasional boyfriends "Loafer," "Richie," "Funny Bud," and "Monkey," and her best friends "Talky" and "Fatty."

Many of 13-Dot's adventures involve unrealistic scenarios, luxurious life, charity work and fantastic adventures. However, along with these elements of adventure, independence, and confidence, 13-Dot's success was also firmly tied to elements of dominant ideology including consumerism, glamour, and accumulation of wealth. The cartoon's protagonist was a young, wealthy, beautiful woman whose adventures were often related to shopping or other traditionally feminine pastimes. 13-Dot seldom engaged in activities that could be described as political, and many of her adventures, though unusual and undertaken independently, were silly or frivolous. The most popular and well-remembered aspect of this comic was its emphasis on detailed and varied fashions worn by 13-Dot, who frequently changed outfits within a single story. Readers were known to use 13-Dot's clothing as models to design their own clothes. In general, the story line of 13-Dot was quite similar to that of *Richie Rich*, with the young male protagonist replaced with a high school girl, and an oriental context.

### **Artistic Production**

*13-Dot* was created at a time when Western popular culture had begun to infiltrate and influence Hong Kong's local cultural production. Prior to the mid-1960s, the drawing technique of most Hong Kong comics very much followed the traditional Chinese style influenced by the 1930s Shanghai



Figure 2: Uncle Choi by Hui Gwun-wan, 1958

comics. Examples can be seen in “Uncle Choi” (Figure 2) by Hui Gwun-wan, first published in 1958, and “Master Q” (Figure 3) by Wong Chak, first published in 1965 (Wong and Yeung 1999). The arrival of *13-Dot* provided a new artistic direction to the local comics at that time, and went along with the rising youth culture of Western popular music and movies. Such an environment boosted the popularity of the comics, especially those created with new drawing style and story line different from the existing ones in the 1950s.

Lee’s appealing and detailed style in drawing the cartoon is well illustrated by the cover designs, which evidence the key elements of her artwork in the cartoon. In almost every issue, readers could be immediately attracted by the colorful depiction of the main character *13-Dot* in different fashion outfits together with the drawing techniques with which Lee experimented. The covers from issues #30 to 70 can be considered the best that Lee designed in the late 1960s. *13-Dot Cartoons* was published periodically as a weekly or bi-weekly with 60 black and white pages, each with six panels. The front and back covers utilized four-color printing, with



Figure 3: Master Q by Wong Chak, 1964

the identical image shown on front and back. Usually the cover carried some association with the theme of the story within that issue. For example, if the issue was released around Chinese New Year, the cover would likely incorporate elements related to this holiday. Summer issues might include beach or vacation themes.

13-Dot was always the main character on the cover, with the occasional addition of other supporting characters, but often by herself in magazine model style showing her full body. Lee's creations not only concentrated on the display of the model-like 13-Dot character, but often also played with the background, using different painting and drawing techniques. The most frequent drawing techniques adopted by Lee for her cover designs fit into five categories including pure painting, geometric layout, modern iconography, references to tradition, and use of collages. The pure painting technique entailed the use of free-form patterns and mixing of colors in the backgrounds to match the posture, gestures, and clothing of 13-Dot. This technique in the application of color added a sense of depth and space to the cover design, making the main character stand out from the composition. For example, issue #71 (Figure 4) employs a background of free-flowing color that

constructs a classical atmosphere suggesting fluid movement for the ballet dancers in the foreground. This free-form use of color makes a distinct contrast with the carefully planned geometrical pattern of issue #53 (**Figure 5**). On this cover, matching background and costume nearly blend together, forming an eye-catching pattern of stripes and optical illusion. The cover also makes use of trendy graphics such as psychedelic style from the 1970s. In issue #54, the sensitivity to graphic style trends is evident in the use of the hairstyle and flowered costume clearly identifiable as 1970s style. In addition to the Chinese elements of calligraphy and seals (**Figure 6**), other common elements can be found in the cover designs. Lee would often add ready-made elements such as pieces from stickers, catalogues, magazines, wrapping paper, color photos, and small scraps of colored paper to form collages of contemporary visual images (**Figure 7**). The cover design of *13-Dot* definitely created a new modern image easily distinguishable from other old-fashioned comics available at that time and attracted an avid audience of young women looking for new image references.

### The Image of Fashions

*13-Dot* received a great deal of attention because of its depiction of fashion. Lee used women's fashion magazines like *Mademoiselle* as a reference. The main character was both beautiful and thin, with colorless hair (often interpreted as blond hair), providing a perfect model for the fashions drawn by Lee. The visual look of the characters can be partly attributed to Western rather than Japanese influences. American comics such as *Richie Rich* and *MAD* were available in Hong Kong in the 1950s, before Japanese examples could be obtained locally and just before *13-Dot* began publication. Thus, even though big-eyed, long-legged Japanese cartoon characters were commonly seen in Hong Kong after *13-Dot* began, they were not available as potential influences on Lee's work prior to 1966. The constantly changing fashion show of *13-Dot* provided a model of Western modernization for Hong Kong's young women, who would sometimes take the books to their tailor to serve as a model for new made-to-order clothes. Lee kept up with the latest fashions, and clear changes can be seen from year to year: the Indonesian president suit of 1967, street girl dress of 1968, hippie costume of 1969 (**Figure 8**), and 1971 transparent miniskirt (**Figure 9**) are a few examples.

Lee Wai-chun's *13-Dot Cartoons* provided a good fit not only with the improving social and economic environment of Hong Kong, but also with the rise of local popular culture led by popular films featuring stars such as Chan Po-chu and Siao Fong-fong who represented modern young women at that time, replacing the old-fashioned traditional images of Chinese women



Figure 5: Cover of *13-Dot Cartoons* issue #53, 1969.



Figure 6: Cover of 13-Dot Cartoons issue #61, 1970.

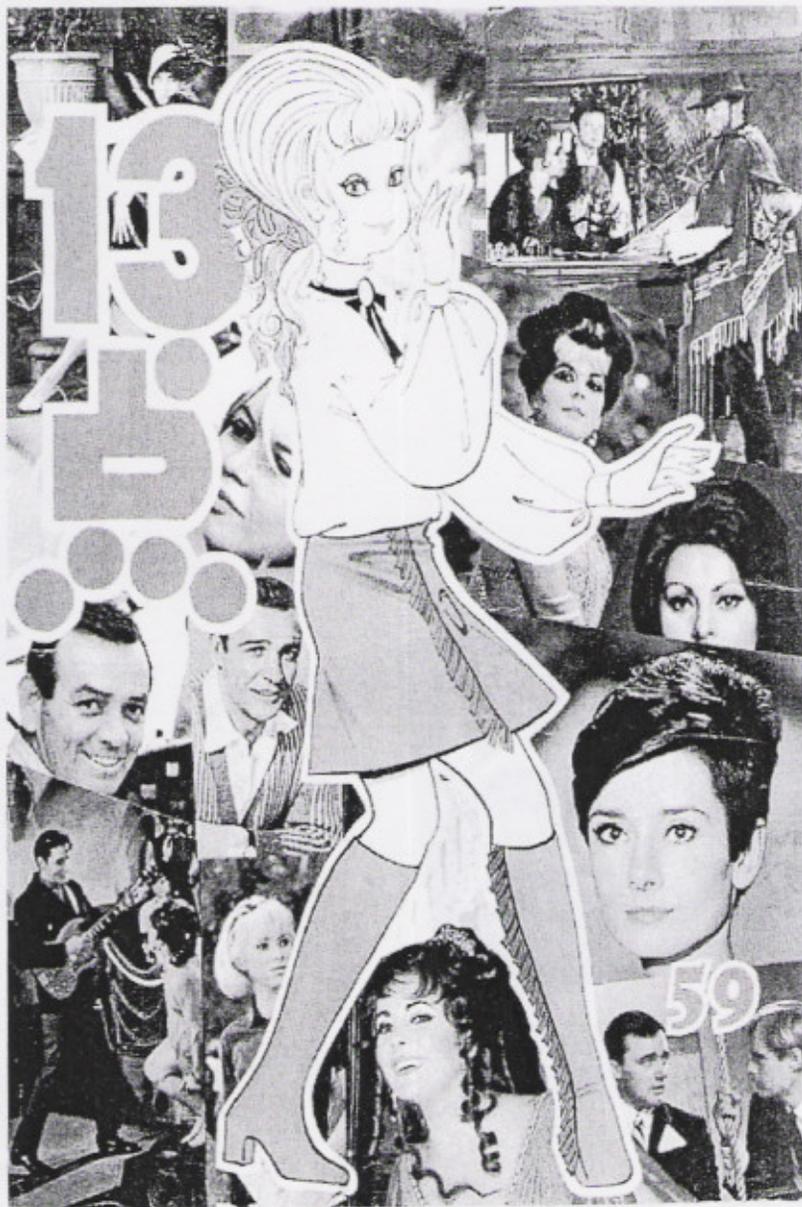


Figure 7: Cover of *13-Dot Cartoons* issue #59, 1970.

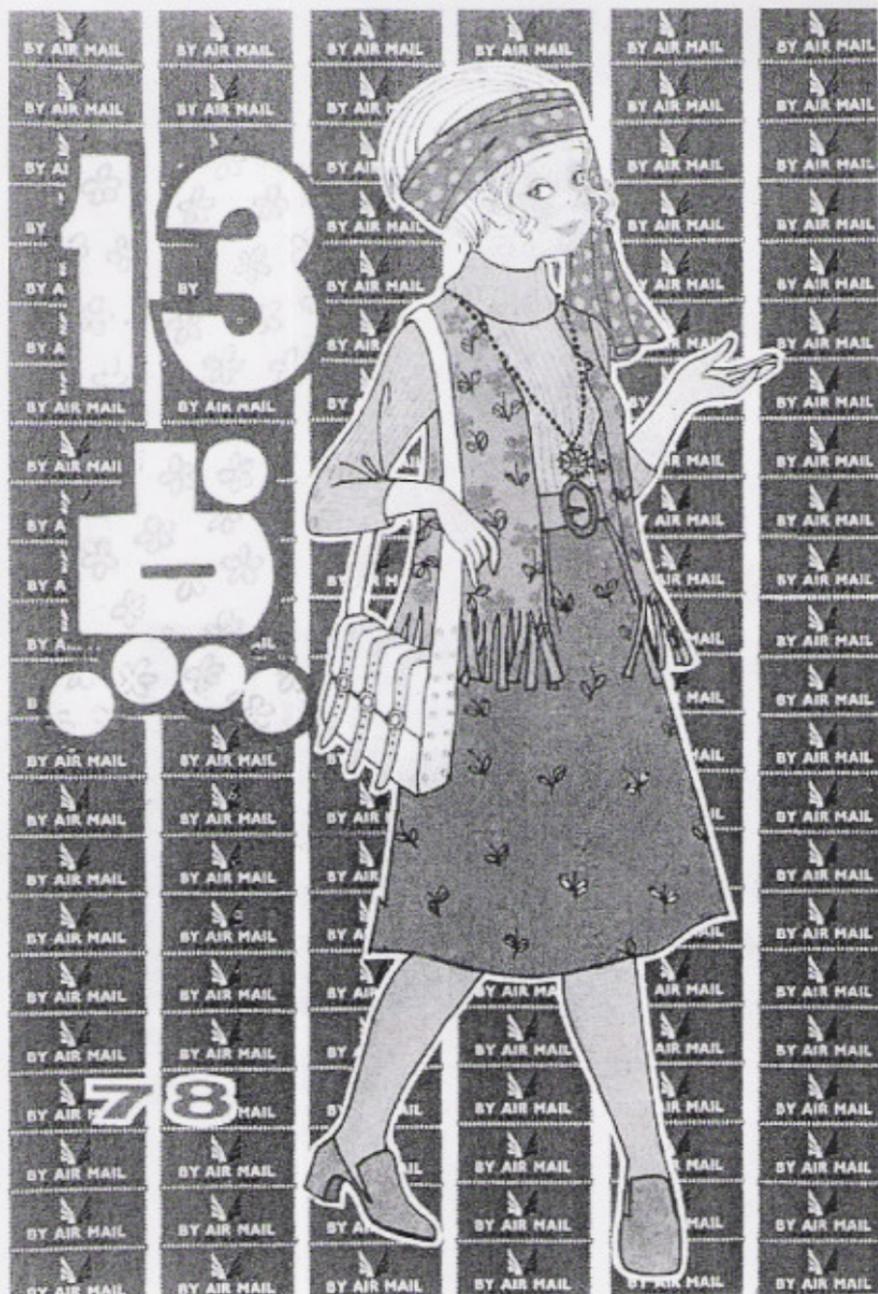


Figure 8: Cover of *13-Dot Cartoons* issue #78, 1970.



Figure 9: Cover of *13-Dot Cartoons* issue #91, 1971.

represented by Pak Yin, one of the popular film stars of the 1950s. The modern image of Chan and Siao's Western ready-to-wear outfits replaced the hand-made Chinese style clothing which had been worn by most Chinese women in the past. With the influence of these two film stars and the new influence of popular culture, Western ready-to-wear garments gradually replaced the old style Chinese clothing such as Cheung Sam and Chi Po. The mass-mediated images of Westernized women projected by Chan and Siao thus became the model of reference for young people growing up in Hong Kong in the 1960s (Ku, 1998).

The countless fashion styles worn by the main character, Miss 13-Dot, and drawn meticulously in every issue are the most established achievement and most easily recognizable characteristic of *13-Dot Cartoons*. Lee's readers were known to carefully count the number of fashionable outfits worn by Miss 13-Dot. For example, a letter from a reader published in issue #32 counts a total of 1,728 pieces of fashionable clothing depicted from issues #1 to 28, an average of 62 pieces of clothing in every 56-page issue. These comic books printed on the paper were more tangible than the silver screen images as a reference material for modern life, and they included stories along with the beautiful outfits that made the comics worth buying and keeping. It was the first time that women of Hong Kong borrowed the western modern outfits to establish their images and legitimize their social status in the relationship network of the society, and this modern western image became the symbol of social progress (Ku, 1998). *13-Dot Cartoons* certainly did not single-handedly create this trend toward Western fashions among young Hong Kong women in the 1960s, but the cartoon's focus on fashion and meticulous detail in fashion drawing was well timed to be enthusiastically received by the cartoon's target audience.

The focus on fashions and modern material life in the *13-Dot Cartoons* played an important role in educating readers how to dress like and live like a modern woman. In fact, *13-Dot Cartoons* can be criticized as silly and materialistic because it was mostly about a fantasy world of changing different outfits, playing with new and advanced products such as cars and mobile phones, and enjoying a life of luxury including activities like taking a helicopter to a mountaintop restaurant for lunch. The depiction of the life of the carefree millionaire's daughter, 13-Dot, revolves around the unrealistic settings and scenarios which were out of reach for the majority at that time, when most people were still struggling for a daily living. However, *13-Dot Cartoons* did provide a new positive image for young female readers, very different from the usual women characters in Hong Kong comics by male artists. Such images include those found in the *Master Q* or *Ah Lang and Dummy Seven* by Hang San Ah Wong first published in 1964, where the main women characters were usually thin and flat chested, nasty women rather

than energetic, healthy, and young woman as Lee created in the *13-Dot Cartoons*. This positive image of women not only brought a modern reference for its women readers at that time, but also provided a confident and adventuresome heroine with whom to identify.

### The Production of Cultural Values of Gender

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

In the 1960s in Hong Kong, the social environment was still not very favorable for women in general, and not until the 1970s did women begin to receive more legal protection and equal educational opportunity. These improvements can be considered as results of the women's movement in Hong Kong which had its first formal expression in the equal pay policy for men and women in 1962. *13-Dot Cartoons*, created by Lee in the mid-1960s,

were situated at the crossroads of the pressure of traditional values on women and the social expectations of women within a newly emerging, Western-influenced culture of work outside the home and a small degree of financial independence. Many of the *13-Dot* story lines involved the main character in adventures that were quite uncommon for a young girl to experience, and that allowed her to show her strong and generous character.

In issue #21, "The Unlimited Supply of Gold" 13-Dot finds a gold mine. Since she is a generous person, she gives away the money from the gold mine to charities including a donation of a golden tusk to an elephant whose original tusk was cut off by poachers. She donates a gold wheel chair to a group of amputees, and they sell it for a huge profit. Eventually she discovers that a statue has been made to honor her work, but refuses to take it. Her father compliments her for "doing the right thing" in not losing her head because of the unlimited wealth that came into her hands. In this story, then, 13-Dot is generous, independent, and honorable, and is appreciated and praised by her father. She makes her own decisions according to her own principles, but all in a story line that is more like fantasy than real life, full of money, style, and glamour. *13-Dot* comics promoted materialism and were in some ways impractical and unrealistic. However, this comic to a certain extent did refuse to accept the assigned duty and stereotyped roles for women in the society of the 1960s, going beyond the traditional values to provide an image of new gender roles of women, and to construct positive women's images that accommodate the cultural and social changes in Hong Kong.

### Conclusion

Women comic artists in Hong Kong have been few and far between over the last three decades. This article has examined the earliest and most prolific of these, Lee Wai-chun, and her *13-Dot Cartoons*. The article investigated the construction of the image of modern woman in Hong Kong through the depiction of fashion and story elements. The representation of such images that made a radical departure from traditional images of women as supportive, passive, and dependent did not arrive accidentally. Rather, the new image of independence, self-expression and adventure was the result of the emerging educational, social, cultural, and economic opportunities available in Hong Kong society at that time. *13-Dot* exemplified the new opportunities for women, capturing new possibilities on paper in the fashionable image of 13-Dot. It may be difficult or impossible to evaluate how many undereducated working women at the time were influenced and motivated to make their own lifestyle choices following the inspiration of 13-Dot. However, the contents, representations, stories and characters of *13-Dot* worked

together to push the contemporary reader in the direction of these new possibilities, making the cartoon serve as a frame of reference in the real lives of its readers.

In terms of gender values, *13-Dot Cartoons* offered a combination of elements of social change with more mainstream or conservative elements that undercut or softened the impact of its more radical dimensions, allowing it to gain commercial success while including some elements of progressive or even radical content in relation to gender. Lee Wai-chun was able to project an image of the modern woman without breaking away from many of the elements of dominant ideology related to women of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the association of women with consumption, glamour, and silly or fantastic stories. However, her work did provide a model for a modern woman who had some degree of independence, sense of style, and self-reliance.

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