

## About 'Dead Serious - Experimental comics from Belgium and France'

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Comics, or similar genres, already have a long history in China. One of the ancestors of the Chinese comics are the *lianhuantu* 連環圖, small picture books of sequential drawings that have existed for centuries. Made of series of pictures with brief captions above or underneath them, they entered the Hong Kong market in the 1920s. Usually imported from Shanghai, they were sold at street kiosks and rented for a small fee. These kiosks did not completely disappear until the 1970s. But the foundation for the development of Chinese comics as a form of narrative expression, *manhua* 漫畫, was not laid before the 1920s. Although the term *manhua* had existed before, it became more widely used after the famous writer and painter Feng Zikai 豐子愷 (1898-1975) published in 1925 his first collection of cartoons titled *Zikai Manhua* 子愷漫畫. As surprising as this may seem, this kind of Chinese *manhua*, as well as the kind of fine line traditional Chinese painting called *Gongbi* 工筆, had an influence on European BD culture. It inspired directly one of the most famous and influential comics of all times: the work of Georges Rémi, better known as Hergé and the father of Tintin. In the 1930s, he met Zhang Zhongren 張仲仁, a Chinese student living in Belgium who introduced him to the realities of China under the Japanese occupation (which allowed Hergé to create the 1936 album *Le Lotus Bleu* – The Blue Lotus – whose action takes place in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation). An art student, Zhang gave to Hergé a set of the *Mustard-seed Garden Manual of Painting* (芥子園畫傳) where he found the inspiration to develop its graphic style known as 'la ligne claire' (the clear line).

Comic books and graphic novels in Hong Kong have recently been given a much more prominent position in the cultural production of the SAR with the creation of the Comix Home Base, managed by the Arts Center (hopefully for many more years to come). This center has already created a number of connections with European institutions dedicated to the promotion of this art form over the last few years. As a result, a new interest for comic books is emerging in the tertiary art educational field in Hong Kong. One of the most popular comics artists of Hong Kong, famous for his beautifully paired-down style and his intelligent and often extremely funny comments on local politics, Justin Wong Chiu Tat 黃照達 has taught comics and illustration at the Academy of Visual Arts, Baptist University, for many years already. With its interest in animation, comics' culture has also occupied an important place in the teaching offered at the School of Creative Media, City University. But this interest for comics still suffers from a problem of perception and needs to be nurtured here with the help of a larger number of mature professionals. This problem of perception persists though and is rooted probably in the Anglo-Saxon colonial past of Hong Kong.

The English term 'comics' comes from the expression 'comic strip', which describes the way this kind of sequential story-telling first appeared in North American newspapers: three or four squares side by side telling a little story every day. The French language equivalent being 'bande dessinée' (literally 'drawn strip'), it was given around the 1960s the name 'BD' which is still how it is called in French-speaking countries today. This very popular form of story telling became more and more sophisticated and ambitious over the decades in Europe, and soon gave way to longer narratives often published in albums after appearing in specialized magazines. Growing up in France in the 1970s and 1980s, I witnessed an extraordinary expansion of the domain of BD in terms of the ambitions of the genre and its

audience. Now as much part of high culture as of more 'popular' culture – in fact, it was its transformations during those decades that partly helped blur the lines between these two domains – BD has become a medium of expression with an extraordinary range of possibilities and is read by all social classes and all age groups in most countries around the world. It is important to insist, however, on the very different perception BD has had in English-speaking countries where it is still generally considered to be part of the 'comics' industry of super hero stories now made even more popular by the films of Marvel and DC Comics. Whereas a French or an Italian adult will normally take BD very seriously, an English or an American adult will often see this as an occupation reserved to children, adolescents or 'geeks'.

This exhibition of experimental comics from Belgian and French authors is an ideal occasion to show in Hong Kong some of the most innovative arrays made recently in the genre.