

a Subtle satirist

BY SAMUEL CHAN CHE-CHUNG

Justin Wong Chiu-tat's studio is spacious and minimalist – there is a white table, a Macintosh computer on a dark desk and two red armchairs. The style echoes the look of his cartoons and matches his personality. Simplicity is at the core of his style.

Wong is a political cartoonist with a difference. His strip, in the features section of *Ming Pao* stands apart from other political cartoons. Like his studio, the drawings are in black and white, with only the occasional shock of red. The background is left blank every time.

“Political cartoons can be plain since aesthetic elements are not that important,” the down-to-earth 35-year-old cartoonist says.

The strip looks like the frames of a roll of film from the analogue age.

Within each frame, the characters are often faceless individuals, ordinary citizens. The visuals are more or less the same in each panel, only the captions are different.

For Wong, there are moments when individuals feel discontented with society. But there is not much an ordinary citizen can do to change it except to make noises like a “crane by the pond”, an onlooker who comments on what is happening. He uses his column to express his own discontent.

“My principal driving force to draw comics comes from my dissatisfaction with politics and society,” he says. “I often feel angry inside.”

The name of his column, *Gei Gei Gaak Gaak*, is a Cantonese expression describing someone moaning about certain public issues from the periphery.

Political cartoons usually prompt readers to see current events in a comical, humorous way. Getting laughs from readers is important for Wong, since irony is a powerful tool for criticising people or things, but laughter alone is not enough. “My goal is to make readers think more and deeper about issues after reading my column. That’s why I try to convey the message with subtlety,” he adds.

The subtlety is what sets Wong apart from other local political cartoonists. In most political cartoons, real-life personalities are usually drawn in a way that is immediately recognisable to readers. Wong’s difference is that he does not rely on caricatures of political figures to express his ideas.

Nowadays, Wong uses a computer



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Wong shows *Varsity* his previous cartoon.

read my stuff," he says. "It's not that they don't support me, it's just that they're not the kind of people who pay attention to current affairs or read *Ming Pao*." His parents, long-time readers of *Oriental Daily*, switched to *Ming Pao* to show their support for his cartoons. "But I know they sometimes still buy *Oriental Daily* secretly," he says, chuckling.

Few can find their true passion but Wong has found his. Drawing political cartoons is such a rewarding job that not even the satisfaction of getting his work exhibited is comparable. Wong does not need praise or awards, or even social influence to carry on with his work. "The satisfaction I get from drawing political cartoons alone gives me enough reason to keep doing it," he says. ■

business," he says. Even if his readers disagree, then at least that proves his work encourages discussion.

"This column is not my own diary," he says. "My viewpoint should not prevent readers from reaching their own conclusions." That is why the endings of his strips are generally open to interpretation.

It may seem a paradox that he is seeking openness within the grid of the cartoon strip. "I am like the one who holds a frame of the grid, deciding how to frame and retell the story."

Openness is something that he has been searching for, whether in his comics or in life. In his non-political comic series, *Lonely Planet*, the main character explores other possible lifestyles after quitting his job. "Same as my political comics, my motivation comes from dissatisfaction with modern city life and the desire to start a 'revolution'."

Wong majored in fine arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He feels he and his peers are frequently misunderstood. He suggests this could be because their education trains them to look at things from other perspectives, which makes their thinking a bit unfamiliar to outsiders.

"Many of my friends, including even my wife, don't

Varsity one of his cartoons. It shows a group of protesters meeting Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen to express their views. Instead of talking directly to them, Tsang just gives them a form to be handed in to the relevant government departments.

"The incident alone is trivial," he says. "What the incident reflects and the reasons why it happened are important." This is the reasoning that is usually behind his work.

He acknowledges his column can influence the opinion of others. A former colleague joked that Wong was partly responsible for the decline in Tsang's approval rating. But swaying and pleasing readers has never been his purpose.

"If readers share my views after reading my comic strips, it's their



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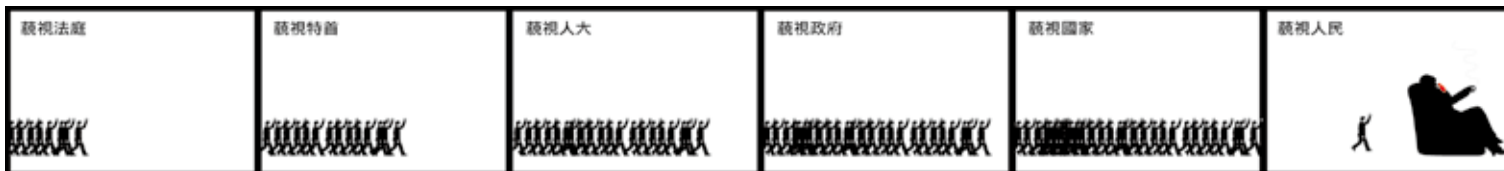
says he does not laugh from the bottom of his heart. "I've grown accustomed to living in exasperation," he sighs. "What else can you do but give a wry smile when you feel dissatisfied?"

What he fears most is that Hong Kong people will shy away from upholding what is right. He cites the dwindling support in Hong Kong for the rehabilitation of the 1989 pro-democracy movement as an example. "Fact should not be any different, regardless of how many years have passed," he says.

No matter how good an activist or a political cartoonist may be, they still need successors. Wong says there is an "empty space" in political comics and the same applies to local political activists. He believes the emergence of politically aware young people is beneficial to society as their presence can help to monitor the government.

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To Wong, bureaucracy and government's fear of communicating directly with the people are the root causes of many problems. He shows



to draw his cartoons. He finds the unemotional and inhuman feel of computer graphics matches his strip perfectly. Most characters wear suits and have the same appearance. "To me, Hong Kong is a city where everything looks similar and everyone seems to lack individuality," he says.

Normally, cartoon strips are presented in a format of three to four panels. Wong's column has six. The *Ming Pao* editor gives him a long horizontal strip in the middle of the page for his cartoon strip. "Each grid would be too wide if it is in four grids so I make it six," he explains. "Adding two more grids gives me more room for story development." He says the absence of colours in his strip is designed to remove elements that may distract readers and to make the theme stand out.

Wong's career as a political cartoonist started with an invitation from a *Ming Pao* editor asking him to try drawing comics for the newspaper's Sunday feature section. Later, he was offered a spot on the opinion page. Knowing that he was being offered a not-to-be-missed opportunity to publish his work regularly, he agreed straightaway.

What he likes the most about the job is the creative freedom he enjoys. There has never been any censorship or restrictions on the subject matter. "This platform means a lot to me," he says. "I'm not going to give it up."

Turning in original political cartoons day in, day out is tough. "Can you imagine how it feels doing the same thing every single day for more than 10 years apart from eating or bathing?" he jokes.

But no matter how hard it is, Wong says he will go on until the day *Ming Pao* starts to interfere with his work. If that happens, he will quit.

Wong punctuates his conversation with frequent laughs, but he

