



COMIC BOOK PERSPECTIVES

European and Asian comic artists gathered in Singapore to collaborate on a comic book about migration. **CHIA MING CHIEN** reports

PHOTOS BY MUHAMAD CHALIF ZAMZAMI, MARNIX VERDUYN, SOH LAI YEE & CAHYADI INDRANANTO

Migration—both within and across borders—has become one of the most powerful socio-political forces shaping our globalised world, raising both opportunities and challenges for societies everywhere. And how better to communicate these serious issues to a mass audience than through a comic book, via an art form readily understood across cultures?

To achieve this, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) gathered 12 established comic artists, six from Europe and six from Asia, for two weeks of intensive brainstorming sessions and workshops to explore the topic of migration and come up with a book.

The notion of using a comic book for this Asia Europe collaboration came from ASEF's Executive Director, Ambassador Cho Wonil from Korea. He was inspired by a

young girl who could tell him the history of many countries because she had been voraciously reading comic books.

Comics are a wonderful medium for story telling. They are reader-friendly, entertaining and, as importantly, accessible to a young audience. Taken to an art form, comics can communicate sensitive, even complex issues with cogency, emotion, and clarity and accomplish all this with disarming ease because the medium can lend itself to satirical, dark or witty humour.

The organisers had no expectations of the outcome; the project was treated as an experiment. ASEF simply set up the mechanism for the artists to produce work in keeping with their artistic integrity, leaving wide open the possibility of failure—and hence the opportunity for something truly creative emerging.

The ASEF Comics Project was deftly facilitated by Johnny Lau from Singapore, best known as the originator of the Mr Kiasu comic strip and Belgian comic artist Nix, Professor at Sint-Lukas Art School, Brussels, Comics Section.

In the first week, participants were given multi-dimensional perspectives on migration—counter-urbanisation, networks and webs, chaos theory, artificial languages and more. Eric Khoo, Singapore's most well known filmmaker (and a comic artist himself), gave participants a sneak preview of his latest movie *No Day Off* about foreign domestic workers in Singapore, a poignant slice-of-life take on life in a foreign country through the eyes of a migrant worker.

After ingesting and digesting, it was time for a marathon session to regurgitate the week-long feast of information. Artists were left to their



ONE OF MANY BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS.

COMIC COMINGS & GOINGS



TUTORIALS ON DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF MIGRATION WERE RUN.



MIGRANT WORKERS GET NO DAY OFF, Y'KNOW.

FILM-MAKER ERIC KHOO DISCUSSING HIS MOVIE *NO DAY OFF*.



PRELIMINARY SKETCHES...



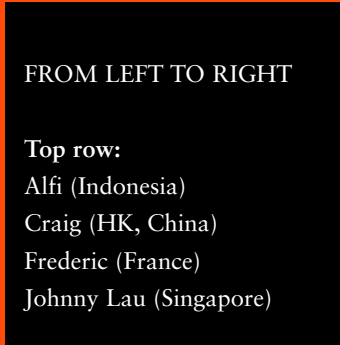
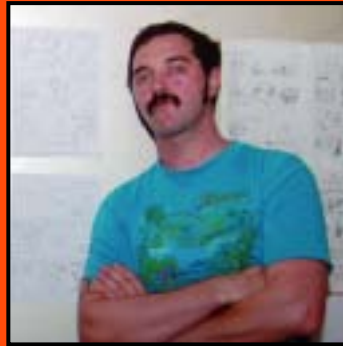
WHICH PLANET DID HE MIGRATE FROM?!



ARTISTS DISPLAYED THEIR STORYBOARDS FOR FEEDBACK.



THE COMIC ARTISTS WERE ONE TIGHT BUNCH.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Top row:

- Alfi (Indonesia)
- Craig (HK, China)
- Frederic (France)
- Johnny Lau (Singapore)

2nd row:

- Kwon Yong Deuk (Korea)
- Le Phuong (Vietnam)
- Little Fish (Japan)
- Lyra Garcellano (Philippines)

3rd row:

- Maaïke Hartjes (Netherlands)
- Nix (Belgium)
- Rafal (Poland)

4th row:

- Tomas (Czech Republic)

5th row:

- Tommi (Finland)

ASEF facts & figures

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), established in February 1997 by the members of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), is the only permanent physical institution of ASEM. It is a not-for-profit foundation based in Singapore, and seeks to promote better mutual understanding between the peoples of Asia and Europe through greater intellectual, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges. ASEF reports to a board of 39 governors representing the 38 ASEM countries and the European Commission.

own devices for about 36 hours to cook up a storyboard of their take on migration. Some locked themselves in their rooms to work alone, others met intermittently to work in small groups.

Post-marathon the artists gathered for peer review. Each displayed their sketches and storyline for feedback. Were egos pricked? Project executive Ms Soh Lai Yee says, "Actually not really, I thought they were all very polite to each other; I wished they would have been more direct with each other."

Given the iconoclastic nature of comic artists, was there any need or temptation to censor content? Perhaps to a collective sigh of relief among the organisers, this was a non-issue as none of the stories were inflammatory.

Before the marathon session, the artists voted for an anthology of separate stories by each artist, rather than a collaborative effort producing a single story comprising collective input. An anthology of self-contained stories allowed for the artists to develop a unique perspective and avoided any dilution of individual flair.

Each story was to be 10 to 12 pages long. As a connecting motif, a bird would appear in every story.

French artist Frederic played with the notion of East meets West. A tiger from France travelling to Asia meets a bird who explains things Asian to the tiger. When the tiger is offered a pair of chopsticks, he asks, "Why do you give me toothpicks that are so huge?"

On one level the story may appear naive, on another, it's deep because eventually the artist makes the point about taking the effort to understand each other: to see the East through Eastern eyes rather than superimpose Western views on things Asian, and vice versa.

Vietnamese artist Le Phuong explored the journey of an eyeball migrating to different parts of the body only to realize it couldn't fit anywhere else. It eventually went back to the socket which still had the best fit. The motto: The place where one was born and grew up in will always be home. Tommi from Finland also explored the idea of home and found it to be wherever he placed his blanket.

Maaïke from the Netherlands, one of two female participants, had her bird trying to find ways to fit in among different species of birds and then coming to realize that

gained a reputation among the other artists for his love of food, used food as a key metaphor.

Inspired by news reports, Nix's story was about how the Chinese Mafia controlled the Belgian football scene. He poked fun at how absurd the situation had become. It was his take on some of the totally unexpected and unpredictable consequences thrown up by migration.

According to ASEF's project executive, the facilitators and the artists, the comic book will be a work they can be proud of. The 12 comics artists brought with them a high degree of drive, artistic pride

Tomas of the Czech Republic used the bird metaphorically to examine concepts of hope and loneliness among migrants. Japanese artist Little Fish had a futuristic setting and dealt with unemployment...

there was something common linking all birds and they could all live comfortably on the same tree.

Tomas of the Czech Republic used the bird metaphorically to examine concepts of hope and loneliness among migrants.

Polish artist Rafal created an overpopulated futuristic world, polluted and miserable where people were desperately trying to move to another place to create a better future. Japanese artist Little Fish also had a futuristic setting and dealt with unemployment as the compelling motive to migrate.

Alfi of Indonesia looked at migration in terms of the haves and have-nots; including the option some have to leave a country that others do not have.

Craig from China, who quickly

and professionalism. As Ms Soh opined, "You didn't get the impression from anyone they were here for a free ride, a holiday—they really wanted to contribute. It was very impressive."

And what was ASEF most pleased about? She says, "The level of cross-cultural understanding and learning. They were very interested in discovering more. On the last day, many of them were sitting around discussing how they could work with each other on projects apart from this event. So the project has already sparked of some cross-cultural collaborations which is one of our primary goals."

The 12 artists will deliver finished illustrations for their stories in early October. The book will be published in December. 