

**The 13th Fukuoka Asian Culture Prizes 2002
PUBLIC FORUM**

**Asia in Cartoons
“Lat Sketches Asia’s Yesterday and Today”**

Lat

Date: 15:30 - 17:30 Sunday, September 22, 2002

Place: IMS Hall (Tenjin, Chuo-ku, Fukuoka city)

Program:

Outline of Forum and Introduction of speakers

Mr. Yasunaga Koichi (Director, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum)

Speech

Mr. Sato Sanpei (Cartoonist)

Keynote Speech

Mr. Lat (Arts and Culture Prize Laureate)

Talk

Mr. Lat

Mr. Sato Sanpei

Mr. Yasunaga Koichi

Q&A



Keynote Speech by Mr. Lat

Konnichiwa, I am very happy to be here in Fukuoka. My topic today is “Sketching Asia’s Yesterday and Today”; in other words, I would like to talk about the passage of time. Bob Dylan once wrote in a song “Time is like a jet plane. It moves too fast.” I always tell children and young people that “time passes before you know it, so if you have a dream you need to act on it.”



I have been drawing comics for a long time now. A publisher in Penang published my first comic book when I was thirteen years old. Later I will show some of my drawings to you. But first I would like to talk about Mr. Sato Sanpei.

My first trip to Japan was in 1981 when I was thirty years old. It is often said that first impressions are very important and can be very strong. My case was no exception; I found this place and these people very strange. In restaurants, for example, the waiters and waitresses constantly ran around helping the customers. In Malaysia, on the other hand, service is very slow. And you are often very lucky to even see a waiter. I believe this is because the pace of life in Malaysia is measurably slower than some of the places that I have been to, for example America, Europe, India, and Japan.

I first met Mr. Sato Sanpei in 1984 during my second visit to Japan. We met at a conference in Hiroshima. I was also fortunate to meet many other great cartoonists such as Tezuka Osamu, Baba Noboru, and others from the Philippines, South Korea, China, and Thailand who were attending the conference as well. We developed a relationship that would last for a long time. In 1990, invited by the Malaysian government, Mr. Sato Sanpei and many other foreign cartoonists came to Malaysia to attend a gathering that I had helped to organize. It was called the “International Cartoonists Gathering 1990” in conjunction with “Visit Malaysia Year”.



I would like to show you a drawing I did of that visit. The above drawing shows a group of visiting artists from various countries, and that is me out in front. I was young then and had plenty of hair. Mr. Sato Sanpei is one of the members. They had a very good time traveling around in a group and learning about Malaysia. But I must say that cartoonists, especially a group of cartoonists like that one, are not always easy to handle. They are not like a group of tourists because each person is an individual, and each person is an artist. Artists are a different kind of person; they can be very temperamental. To tell the truth, I have never actually met a cartoonist who was nice. Because I, on the other hand, am so easy going, I might be the only nice cartoonist. Almost all cartoonists are grumpy - always complaining and always asking questions. For example, when we were standing in front of a four hundred year old building, one of the cartoonists said, "I want to go back to the hotel. I don't feel like looking at this building." I think the reason for their grumpiness results from the fact that they always work up to the last minute.

In 1984, I found out from Mr. Sato Sanpei that he worked at home and drew for the Asahi Shimbun. Everyday he would work on the cartoon for the following day's paper. The cartoon would be delivered to the company by a dispatch rider that would arrive by motorcycle at Sanpei's home in the afternoon. Typically by the time Mr. Sato Sanpei heard the motorcycle coming, he would not have anything drawn. At such moments, a cartoonist's expression is very sour because they are desperately thinking of what to draw. Whenever I have a sour facial expression in the afternoon, my family knows that I am thinking about what to draw for tomorrow. I also found out from Mr. Sato Sanpei that most of the cartoonists in Japan worked freelance. That is when I decided to become a freelancer as well. In 1984, I left the newspaper that I was working at and began working on my own as a free-lance cartoonist. In a way, I copied the work style of a Japanese cartoonist.



The above is the cover of a book called *Kampung Boy: Yesterday and Today*; it tells about the kampung – village – that I came from. I had lived in Kuala Lumpur – a place totally different from the kampung – and I wanted to tell the young Malaysians and my own children about our origins – where my parents came from, what sort of background we had, who our parents and grandparents were, and what kind of houses they lived in. When I was small and living in the village, there was plenty of space. But now, living in Kuala Lumpur, it is very different. People in Kuala Lumpur all gather together in very

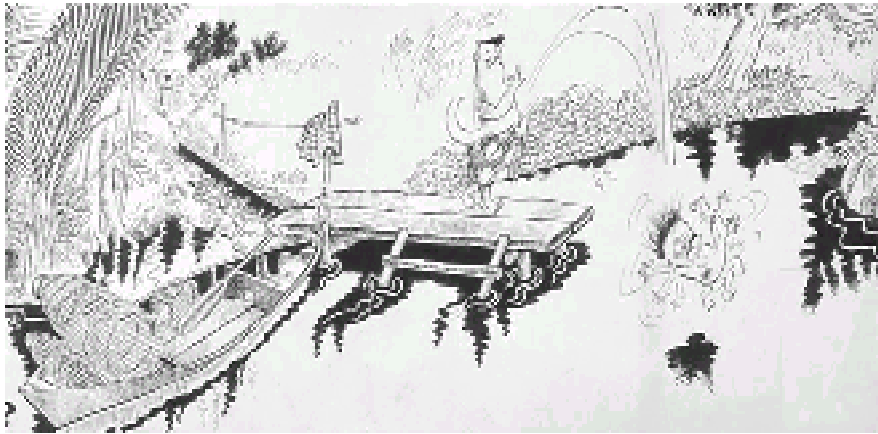
crowded houses. The house that I grew up in was made of wood, surrounded by trees, and built on stilts. The kitchen where I spent a lot of my time was built on the ground level and used firewood. We also used to draw water from a well. My children do not understand what using a well is like; they simply say, “It’s just like in old movies.”



I also talk about the traditions and customs of Malaysia in this book. The above cartoon shows the Bersunat, a Malay circumcision ceremony. When boys reach the ages of eight or nine, they have to undergo circumcision, which is a minor surgery, done in a traditional way. I myself went through this. Before the operation, I had to go to the river, remove my clothes, and take a dip. The whole village followed me while beating on drums and singing religious songs. And you know what happens when you submerge your body in cold water - parts of your body shrink.



In Subang Jaya, where I once lived, I used to take my children to the public swimming pool. Today's children, of course, are never alone in the pool. This is a scene of today. In the book *Kampung Boy, Yesterday and Today*, there is an illustration of two parents taking their child to a public pool. At the pool there is an instructor, a lifeguard, and a helper, the housemaid, as well. Everybody is trying to teach the boy how to swim; all eyes are on him. That is how over-cautious we are.



You can see in the above picture how, when I was a child, my father taught me to swim. He just threw me into the water. I had to struggle in order to learn how to swim. Of course, the water was not very deep; my father could have jumped in at any time to help me. That was the way of the village. Today, because the water is no longer clean, villagers cannot just go into the water. During the 1950's, however, it was very clean.



We used to create things to play with. In this picture you can see a type of popgun that we would make out of bamboo. I'm sure children in Japan must have done something similar. The games that children would play depended on the season. For example, during the bamboo season, we would make bamboo popguns and use them to shoot bullets made out of wet paper. We also played with tops that we would make ourselves out of the stems of trees. The tops were then held together with nails. Today however, children do not make such things because parents say that playing with nails is dangerous.

I also made a book called *Town Boy*; it is a story based on my experience of moving to Ipoh from kampung with my family in 1963. This story is about a friendship between a Malay Malaysian boy and a Chinese Malaysian boy. After moving to Ipoh, I made friends with a guy called Frankie through our mutual interest in music. He had a record player and one day invited me over to his house to listen to it. In order to get to his house, we had to ride our bikes straight through town. All of these drawings are based on my memories. At Frankie's house, we listened to rock and roll. Here is a picture of a typical Chinese house; notice how the living room is lined with family photos – photos of fathers, grandfathers, sisters, etc.



When I was twelve and thirteen, I drew a lot of cartoons and sent them to entertainment and movie magazines that were published in Singapore. In those days, if your cartoons were included in the magazine, you would receive free cinema tickets. I would use these to go see films with my father.

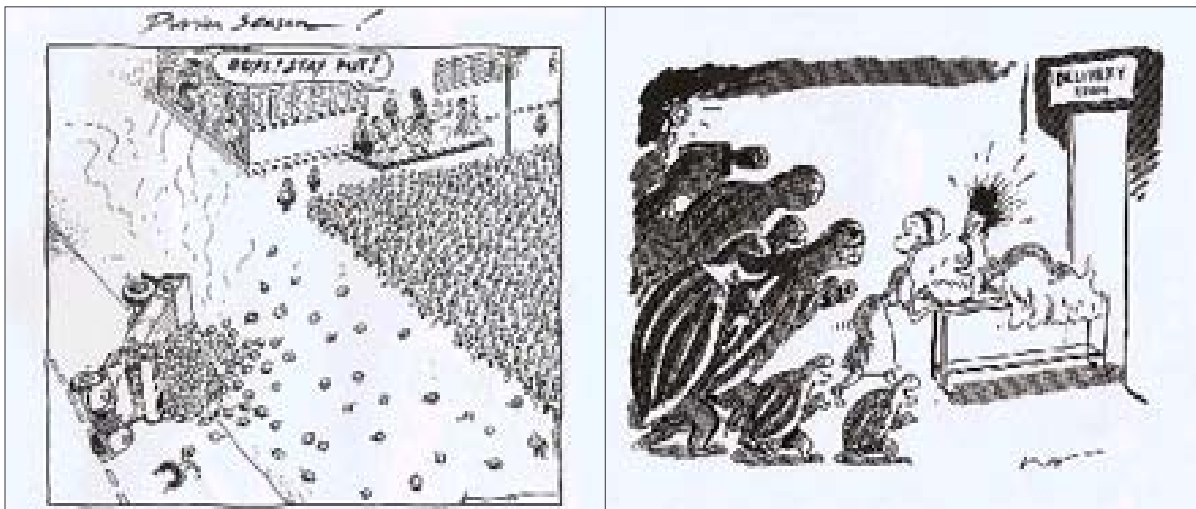


This is my first comic book; it came out when I was thirteen. The title is *Tiga Sekawan*, which means ‘three friends.’ The story revolves around a group of friends that catch a thief. You can see on the cover that it says, “written by Lat, Ipoh.” But on the

bottom right of my last page I wrote, “drawn and written by Mohamad Nor Khalid,” which is my real name, and my whole address in Ipoh. I was so proud of origins that I wanted everyone to know that I was from a small town and not from Kuala Lumpur. For my first comic I received twenty-five ringgits. I remember that my mother, my brother and I went to collect the check from the publisher’s branch office and then went to cash it at the bank. I gave my mother ten ringgits and kept fifteen for myself. I then told my mother to head home without us, and my little brother and I wandered around town spending the money. We bought Beatles records and went to the cinema to see movies.

After that particular comic book, I continued to make more. From the ages of thirteen to seventeen, I drew a lot of comics. Many of these cartoons appeared in newspapers and magazines. My first series came out when I was seventeen. That meant that as a teenager I was making about 100 to 120 ringgits per month; about the same amount that a government clerk would have earned. Every month I gave money to my parents. Which is why my parents did not complain when I performed badly in school. In school, my favorite subjects were Art, English, and Malay. I knew that one day I would find a job that involved art, but I did not even think of becoming a cartoonist. In those days, artist, illustrator, and layout artist were all recognized positions, but there was no such term in Malaysia as ‘cartoonist’. I became the first one.

In 1974, after four years as a reporter for the New Straits Times, a newspaper in Kuala Lumpur, I decided to become a full-time cartoonist.



Here is a typical example of the type of drawing that I did. The left one depicts the Durian Season; it appeared on the editorial page of the New Straits Times. The durian is a favorite fruit of Malaysians; because of its thorny exterior, we refer to it as, “Hell outside, Heaven inside.” Many foreigners do not like it, but to Malaysians it is pure heaven.

The right side of the above is another typical drawing; in it, turtles walk into a labor room. In Malaysia, people always go to watch turtles lay their eggs. So I wondered what it would be like if turtles came to see a human giving birth.

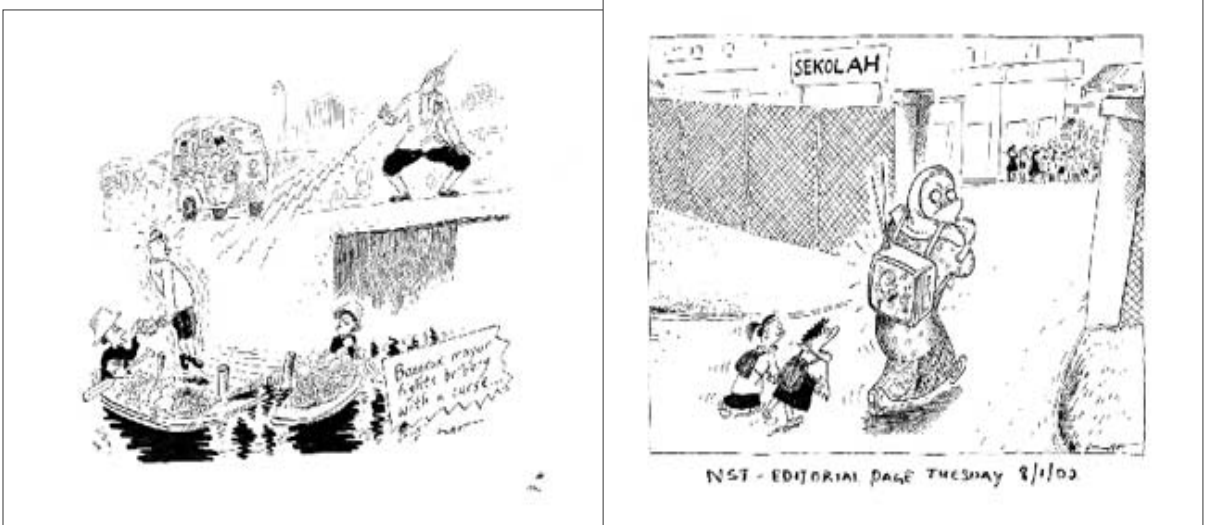
The following is that I drew of policemen guarding the door to the Penang State Assembly. I depicted them as laughing because inside the assembly, the assemblymen behave like clowns – talking like clowns, debating like clowns, and quarrelling like clowns.

Another picture is of someone taking a driver's test; it depicts typical behavior of Malaysian people in traffic. In Malaysia, people feel perfectly fine driving along the side of the road as long as they do not get caught.



The next two drawings are I did on subjects outside of Malaysia. In Bangkok, the mayor uses curses to fight against bribery; the mayor, so tired of hearing about rampant bribery, resorts to traditional means to fight it. This cartoons shows that in our modern society, people in Asia still retain their customs and traditions. While nobody in today's society really believes in curses anymore, many still retain aspects – such as superstition – indicative of an old Asian mentality.

The right one shows how hard it can be to get children back into school after vacations that they have spent watching television. You can see that the children are so glued to the television set that their mother has to drag it around in order to get them to follow her to school.

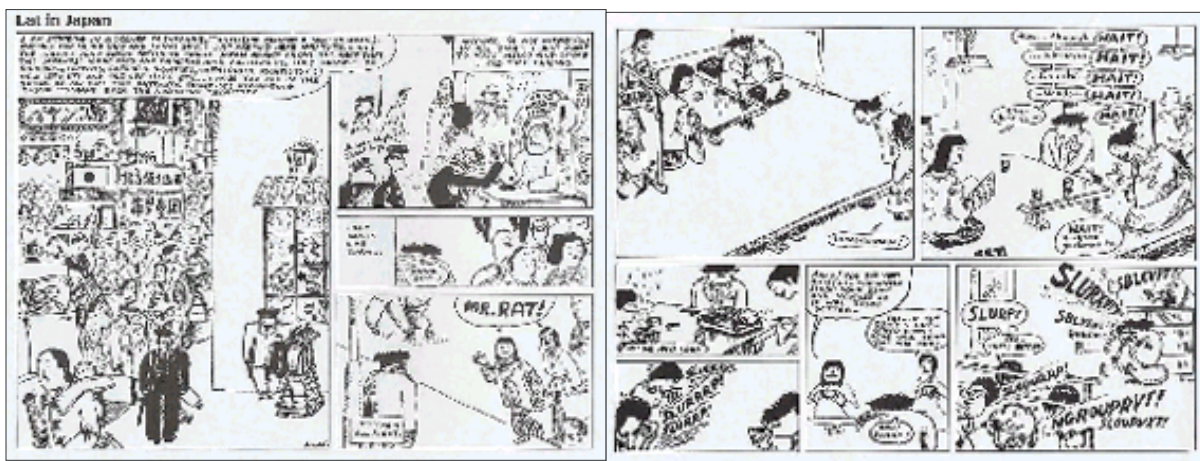


Another cartoon shown below depicts soccer fever as well as the current mixing of tradition with modernity. Here you can see women in kampung making mats and a girl making a ball while they all watch the World Cup on television.

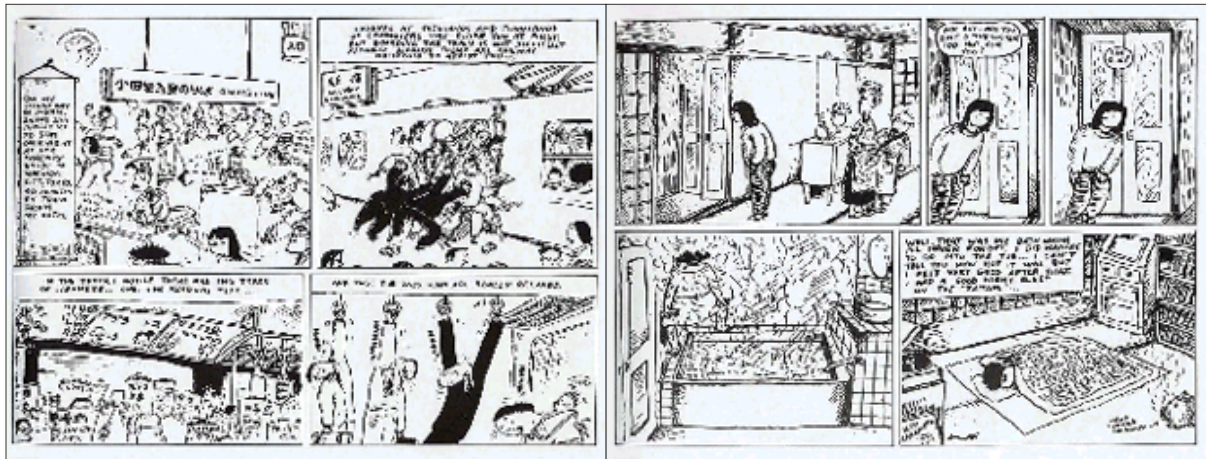
This one depicts the current proliferation of security checks. As you can see, they are also doing security checks for people going into a cave. This cartoon was published in America as well.



These are drawings I did based on my first trip to Japan in 1981. I drew this comic in the style of Japanese manga. Two friends that I became acquainted with in Malaysia met me and took me to a Japanese restaurant. That was the first time that I ever ate raw fish. It was also there that I saw waiters rushing around and learned to make a lot of noise while eating soup.



The next one is a picture of a commuter train. When I visited, I spent some time at my friend's house. It turned out to be the first time that her parents had ever met a Malaysian; too bad the first one they met had to be a cartoonist. While I was there, I spent the night sleeping on tatami mats. Since then I have been to Japan twenty-five times over the past twenty-one years.



I recently did this cartoon on the theme of 'Yesterday and Today'. People from Japan, Java, Sumatra, and the Malay Peninsula are all similar; our ancestors all came from villages. Through cartoons like this one, I want young people to know this. If we know where we come from, we will not be so arrogant. Many people think of a hospital in a big city when they think about where they were born. But that is not where we really come from. When I was young, children were born at home no matter how small the house was. Today, golf has become very popular. I myself do not play, but there is a golf course very close to my home. I can even sometimes overhear the golfers cursing themselves.



This is the kind of house that I was born in. Today these kinds of houses are disappearing because space is becoming so limited. In place of these houses we build concrete blocks - creating ugly concrete jungles. This contrast is probably why tourists seek out the traditional Malaysian homes when they visit my country.



I drew the following cartoon two days ago in a hotel here in Fukuoka. In this cartoon, Prime Minister Koizumi has returned from a trip to North Korea. I drew US President Bush observing the scene from the bushes behind the Prime Minister. Because the United States does not have a close relationship with North Korea, the President is interested in the results of the trip. I think that Prime Minister Koizumi is easy to draw because he is good looking and has a distinctive hairstyle. On the other hand, President Bush is not so easy to draw – unlike his father George Bush Sr.



I was seventeen when my drawings first appeared in the newspaper. I drew the attention of my relatives and neighbors and became famous in Malaysia. I have been drawing cartoons for many years, and now I am over fifty. In my country, especially among Malays like me, when you are over fifty, you are considered old. They wonder why such an old man like me is still drawing cartoons. The Malaysian King gave me the title 'Dato'. Today, people from my village come up to me and ask, "Dato, what business are you in now? Any big projects?" and "Where's your Mercedes Benz?" I reply to them by saying, "I don't own a Mercedes Benz." and "No, no new projects. I still draw cartoons." When they find out that I still draw cartoons, the villagers usually become troubled.

I am determined to prove that ‘cartoonist’ is a very noble profession. I believe the purpose of drawing cartoons and providing commentary is to be positive. In other words, anything you say should at its core be honest and sincere. Cartoonists should not try to bring down anybody or promote anybody – for example, politicians. We all need to laugh and have fun, and this is what I hope to provide through my cartoons. I have never had bad intentions while drawing cartoons. Maybe that’s why I’ve survived for a long time as a cartoonist.

It goes without saying that a cartoonist, like everyone else, needs to earn a living. For me, taking care of my family, my neighbors, and my neighborhood is more important than my cartoons. But it is through my cartoons that I can reach out to the world. Everywhere I go I manage to make friends. That is what I love about being a cartoonist.

It has been a great pleasure to be here today. Thank you very much.

* The above text summarizes the lecture given by Mr. Lat, the Arts and Culture Prize Laureate of the 13th Fukuoka Asian Culture Prizes 2002.