

Community

Wee's outer space world

A 27-year-old cartoonist is the first Singaporean to have his work serialised in a popular monthly Taiwanese comic magazine. LEONG WENG KAM reports.



Wild Star, Wee's protagonist in Astronautic.

ALIENS with supernatural power flying in UFOs as they fight one another for supremacy in the universe: That is the world of cartoonist Wee Tian Beng.

And characters from his science-fiction world — such as Palencia, Ionia, Rogochov and Wild Star, who already enjoy a growing following of Chinese comics readers here — are going places.

Since April, the 27-year-old's latest story, Astronautic, has been serialised in a monthly comic magazine in Taiwan, a first for a Singaporean cartoonist.

Astronautic is about the adventures of an interplanetary courier, Wild Cat, and how he helps stop a powerful conglomerate of developers from destroying a planet.

The task of producing the monthly instalments, each running up to 32 pages in The Century Boys, which has a circulation of more than 40,000, kept Wee so busy that he quit his graphic artist job earlier this year to draw full-time.

A graduate in graphic design from the former Baharuddin Vocational Institute, he said: "I had to work a 20-hour day before I quit. Now I still need to do 14 hours daily."

Besides drawing for the magazine, since 1989, Wee and his Dream Comics Production team have been publishing science-fiction (SF) comics books which are also enjoying growing popularity in Singapore.

They included the New Frontier series and Dream Allegory, which was translated and published in English last year.

The New Frontier series will be published in English in September.

Wee's break into the

Taiwanese comics publishing world came last year when a friend took his works to the attention of Sharp Point Publishing, publisher of The Century Boys monthly which features works by mainly Taiwanese cartoonists.

Wee said the publisher paid him a visit early this year to sign him up as a long-term contributor.

After his first serialised SF story, Astronautic, which ended in the June edition of The Century Boys, his contributions have been single-episode SF stories.

Though he had to work long hours in his three-room HDB flat in Lower Delta where he lives with his parents, Wee, who loved reading Japanese and Taiwanese comics as a boy, is not complaining.

He explained: "I enjoy my outer space world and I don't even feel I'm working. It's fun because I'm drawing what I like, not what others want me to draw as a graphic artist."

WEE prefers comics to novels because "they are more direct and easy to read".

"There are few words to read. All the descriptions, and even the actions, are told in the drawings."

"I don't have to use words to describe how pretty a girl is or how handsome the protagonist is. Readers can just look at them in the comics."

That, he believed, was the reason for their growing popularity here, after Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong, where comics is a big industry.

He said comics caught on with Singaporeans, especially the young, only during last few years.



Wee Tian Beng works at home: 'I don't even feel I'm working. It's fun because I'm drawing what I like.'

This, he said, can be seen by the rising number of professional cartoonists and bookshops selling comics here today.

He recalled that when he started drawing in 1989, there were only three comics bookshops.

"The number has gone up to 20, with about 13 of

them selling Chinese comics and the rest selling those in English," he added.

Apart from Wee, there are at least three other cartoonists in Singapore who have gone into comics full-time.

He compared this to four years ago, about the

time he published his first book in The New Frontier series, when no one had gone professional yet.

Speaking of his plans for the future, Wee said he would like to try his hand at other subjects, such as romance, suspense or swordfighting.

And his ambition is to

have his comics published in Japan some day.

Why there?

"Japan is where the culture of reading comics as literature and even for information began in this part of the world. And it will be an honour to have my works published there," he said.