

Condor Heroes on the warpath

But it's still an uphill battle for homegrown cartoonists

By **KARL HO**

MOVE over Sun Goku and Gundam. Make way for Singapore manga.

At a time when interest in comics is growing, *manga* produced by Singaporeans is slowly winning over fans accustomed to those from Japan and Hongkong.

But homegrown comics still have a long way to go.

Comics here come in different forms.

For example, Asiapac Books, a Singaporean publisher and book distributor, prints Chinese and English language ones ranging from martial arts fantasies and detective adventures to comics on Chinese culture and philosophy.

Flame Of The Forest, another publishing firm, published an English political satire titled *Hello, Chok Tong, Goodbye, Kuan Yew* (imprint Angsana Books) in 1991.

Comics with a Singapore flavour, such as on the TCS character Liang Po Po, have also been released.

Despite its variety, the comics industry here is far from stable.

Insiders say that the market for Singaporean *manga* is small and cartoonists here have a hard time wooing these fans, who are already seduced by the Japanese and Hongkong versions.

Mr Cheah Chee Seng, chief editor of Chuang Yi Publishing, one of the few companies that publish Sin-



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Battle lineup of homegrown manga against the rise in imported comics.

gaporean editions of foreign comics, says that homegrown titles do not sell as well as titles from other countries.

"It's just like Singaporean movies compared to foreign movies," he says.

"People prefer to see foreign movies because they think that Singaporean movies are not as good."

This is, of course, bad news for homegrown cartoonists.

Mr Wee Tian Beng, creative director of Asiapac Books and a full-time cartoonist who became famous in *manga* circles for his *Return Of The Condor Heroes* series, says that there have been very few full-time Sin-

gaporean cartoonists since comics artists surfaced in the '80s.

Very few publishing houses wanted cartoonists at that time, and most *manga* artists had to cough up funds to get their works published. Artists who do get published usually fade into obscurity after a title or just a few issues even now.

"It cannot be avoided," Mr Wee says. "If you're a comics artist and you just draw for the Singaporean market, you can't go far."

Singapore currently produces fewer comics than other countries in the region. For example, Hongkong currently publishes new weekly volumes for 38 titles. Japan's

total *manga* titles as of 1996 numbered over 7,000.

Till now, Singapore has had no more than 50 Chinese comics titles. Most of these titles were discontinued after the first few volumes.

English titles are considerably fewer.

Mr Wee also said that Hongkong's and Japan's comic markets are bigger because of their monolingual culture.

The industry here faces a potential consumer base of both English language and Chinese readers.

The target markets therefore shrink considerably and costs increase because of the need to print different trans-

lations.

The late development of the comics culture here also means that homegrown artists have not had time to develop a distinctive style. Mr Wee says artists usually follow the styles of the comics they read.

But things might just turn round for local productions as more people here become exposed to *manga* through the media.

Mr Wee also notes that those who read *Superman* and *Mad Magazine* in the late '70s are now grown up and their continued interest in comics adds a sense of credibility to the medium.

Singapore comics are benefitting from the *manga* craze. His adaptation of Hongkong novelist Louis Cha's *Return Of The Condor Heroes* met with phenomenal success both here and abroad.

It sold 1.5 million copies of different translated versions here and in South-east Asia. A Korean edition is in the works.

His previous works have been showcased in *Previews* magazine, an American comics catalogue. He is currently working on his new comic, *The Celestial Zone*, which is into its fourth volume.

But the rising popularity of *manga* also means homegrown artists will face tougher times ahead as their comics will be compared to others. Ms Lydia Lum, publishing director of Asiapac Books, says that Singapore-produced works can compete against foreign ones by using beautiful stories, good artistic skills and dynamic characters.

"We want to show the aesthetic part of comics," she says. "The healthy, cultural and educational side which can be accepted here."