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Life

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A Malaysian cartoonist cuts across cultural divides with his irreverent take on reality, writes **Sreerema Banoo**

Funny business

The trademark mop of hair may have gone but, with his ebullient smile and glasses, cartoonist Mohammad Nor Khalid (better known as Lat) is one of the

most recognisable faces in Malaysia.

His drawings capture the idiosyncrasies of Malaysia's multiracial mix with warmth, humour and a keen insight. And in a career spanning more than three decades, Lat has fans ranging from local security guards and tycoons to expat executives and Simpsons creator Matt Groening.

A prolific artist of 22 books, two of which were recently released in the US, Lat made Malaysians laugh at themselves and with each other. Everyone seems to have a favourite scene or story, whether it's his take on the Aussie accent ("bet two hairs" for "about two hours"), his impressions of the public baths in Tokyo or deeply personal memoirs of growing up in a rural village in northern Malaysia.

Fans never tire of hearing him talk about his childhood experiences or first forays into cartooning, which is why, despite being in semi-retirement - he relocated from the bustling capital Kuala Lumpur to Ipoh, a quiet town in northern Perak state, a decade ago - the 56-year-old still receives requests for speaking engagements.

Lat (short for *bulat*, a nickname given by his grandmother to describe his round head) displayed a talent for drawing as a child. "I've always drawn things that are funny, whether they were of my teachers or friends," he says. His father encouraged his drawing, and the teenage Lat would submit his cartoons to local movie magazines.

He still recalls vividly the first time his work was published in 1964. He was 13 and payment was in cinema tickets. "I was shivering as I held the page, looking at my



cartoon," he says. "The accolades I received years later paled in comparison to the feeling I had seeing that first cartoon in print."

That year also marked the publication of his first comic book, *Tiga Sekawan*, about three friends who band together to catch robbers. That effort earned him M\$25 (HK\$59).

By the age of 17, Lat was earning M\$100 a month supplying cartoons to local newspapers and magazines. After leaving school, he moved to Kuala Lumpur hoping to become a full-time cartoonist only to find the post he applied for was filled.

He joined the English-language *New Straits Times* as a crime reporter instead. But after three years of chasing stories at hospitals and police stations, Lat took up cartooning full-time.

Still, the reporting stint provided rich material for his art: "Once I was assigned the night shift at the General Hospital [in KL] and it was

there that I had the inspiration for the series on circumcision."

Lat later became the editorial cartoonist at *New Straits Times*, which provided a platform for his satire (often lampooning politicians as well as major government policies), and observations on life abroad and the shifting relationships between Malaysia's different ethnic groups, when he mixed social commentary with humour.

Kampung Boy, an affectionate sketchbook of his childhood in a *kampung* (village), is perhaps his biggest success. Peppered with brief, witty explanations of events and local customs, the cartoons are infused with Lat's pride in his rural roots. First published in 1979, it sold 70,000 copies within three months and has remained in print since.

Japanese, French and Portuguese versions have also appeared, a Korean translation is in the works and talks are underway to publish it in Italian, Spanish and Dutch.

Town Boy, an account of his teenage years growing up in Ipoh, followed and he has continued to publish other books, mainly compilations of his editorial cartoons.

Lat says his work is based on what he sees around him and he never sets out to impress. "I draw for myself and I never mull over what to draw."

He can doodle wherever



inspiration strikes. "In the car, car park, on the dining table, anywhere," he says, although he prefers to have music on when he works, especially Broadway tunes.

He's a storyteller at heart, the cartoonist's goal should be to tell the story and not worry about whether it will work."

Although Lat's early fans are entering middle age, he's constantly winning new ones through reprints (*Kampung Boy* is in its 14th edition in Malaysia) and the US release of *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy*.

First Second Books, his US publisher, says both books have been warmly received by readers of all ages. "They're being embraced not only by comics fans but also

readers who don't necessarily read comics at all, and by librarians all over America," says First Second editorial director Mark Siegel.

The timing of the US release is fortuitous because graphic novels or literary comics are the fastest growing segment in US publishing, Siegel says. "There is also the fact that it offers a window into a young Muslim's life in a way that is universally accessible, cutting through cultural and political divides with art, humour and great humanity."

What is the appeal of this genial cartoonist's work? For Andrew Abel, a British software engineer living in the US, Lat's cartoons gave a quick guide to the country and its people. "My girlfriend, Angela, was

Like a storyteller, the cartoonist's goal should be to tell the story and not worry about whether it will work

Mohammad Nor Khalid

Mohammad Nor Khalid (left) whose *Kampung Boy* (below) is in its 14th edition. Photo: Choen Lee

Malaysian, and she used his comics to introduce me to Malaysian culture long before I visited the country. We have now been married for 18 years and have two daughters.

"Lat's comics provided a wonderful way of seeing how Malaysians see themselves. They gave me a quick insight into Malaysian life, culture and values, and gave me an appreciation for its cultural diversity," he says.

Abel had no problem identifying with most of the material. "People are the same all over the world," he says.

Property consultant Christopher Boyd, a long-time resident of Malaysia, agrees. "Expats working in an environment where they may not understand the language develop an enhanced ability to read facial expression and body language.

"Lat's illustrations capture this body language with unerring accuracy and they make his cartoons legible to an expat at a level which is independent of the lingo," he says.

"I grew up enjoying the dry humour of the English cartoonist, Giles. To me, Lat has his same fine qualities - the ability to pack a powerful social comment into a fine, stylised drawing and a humorous punchline."

Lenard Cheong, a human resources executive in Kuala Lumpur, attributes the cartoonist's following to his ability to capture typical Malaysian behaviour in one panel. "And he taught us to laugh at ourselves," he says.

Former *New Straits Times* colleague Zaharah Othman is also a fan. "He's very sharp and spots things we don't, but when we see his cartoons, we recognise it as something that you cannot verbalise or visualise. Everyone recognises the scenarios he paints."

Despite being revered as a national hero, the genial cartoonist doesn't see himself as a star. "That his four children were oblivious to his fame for many years - 'I'm just dad at home,' he says - probably helped keep him grounded.

Besides, the tributes he has received in recent years can't compare to his celebrity status in the 70s and 80s when busloads of schoolchildren would turn up at the offices of the *New Straits Times*, hoping to meet the cartoonist.

Zaharah, then an intern at the newspaper, recalls how Lat would dash across the newsroom to avoid visitors.

Not one to bathe in the spotlight, Lat still cringes at the memory. "It came to a point when I was just fed up, I wanted to tell people 'please don't look at me'," he says. "I even grew my hair long so people wouldn't recognise me."

But Lat says he's bidding a slow farewell to cartooning and making room for a new generation of artists. He enjoys travelling and a less hectic schedule will give him the chance to take more trips with his wife and children, none of whom are interested in cartooning.

"I'm not ready for retirement but I am ready for the quiet life which is why, after 30 years in KL, I decided to move back to Ipoh... but work followed," he says.

Wheels of industry transform Laos

Thomas Fuller

The pineapples that grow on the steep hills of Long Lao Gao above the Mekong River are especially sweet, the red and orange chillies unusually spicy, and the spring onions and watercress retain the freshness of the mountain dew.

For years, getting this prized produce to market meant someone had to carry a giant basket on a back-breaking, day-long trek down narrow mountain trails cutting through the Laotian jungle.

That is changing, thanks in large part to China.

Villagers ride their cheap Chinese motorcycles, which sell for as little as US\$440, down a dirt road to the markets of Luang Prabang, a charming city of Buddhist temples along the Mekong that draws lots of foreign tourists. The trip takes 90 minutes.

"No one had a motorcycle before," says Khamphao Janphasid, 43, a teacher in the local school whose extended family now has

three of them. "The only motorcycles that used to be available were Japanese and poor people couldn't afford them."

Inexpensive Chinese products are flooding China's southern neighbours - Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. The products are transforming the lives of some of the poorest people in Asia, whose worldly possessions a few years ago typically consisted of not much more than one or two sets of clothes, cooking utensils and a thatched-roofed house built by hand.

The concerns in the west about the safety of Chinese toys and pet food are largely moot for the people in the remote villages here. As an introduction to global capitalism, Chinese products are deeply appreciated. "Life is better because prices are cheaper," says Janphasid.

Chinese television sets and satellite dishes connect villagers to the world. Stereos fill their houses with music. And the Chinese motorcycles often serve as transportation for families.

The vehicles, typically with small but adequate 110cc engines, save lives, says Saidao Wu, the village leader of Long Lao Mai, in a valley at the end of the dirt road adjacent to Long Lao Gao.

"Now when we have a sick person we can get to the hospital in time," says Wu, 43.

The improvised bamboo stretchers villagers used a decade ago to carry the gravely ill have been made redundant. In a village of 150 families, Wu counts 44 Chinese motorcycles. There were none five years ago.

Chinese motorbikes fill the streets of Hanoi, Vientiane, Mandalay and other large cities in Southeast Asia. Thirty-nine per cent of the two million motorcycles sold annually in Vietnam are Chinese brands, according to Honda, which has a 34 per cent market share.

Chinese exports to Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam amounted to US\$8.3 billion in the first eight months of the year, up about 50 per cent from the same period in 2006.

About seven years ago, residents here say, Chinese salesmen began arriving with suitcases filled with smuggled watches, tools and small radios; they would close up and move on when the police arrived.

More recently, Chinese merchants, who speak only passable Lao, received permission to open permanent stalls in the towns and small cities across the region. In Laos, these are *talad jin*, or Chinese markets.

Janphasid and his neighbours all have US\$100 Chinese-made television sets connected to Chinese-made satellite dishes and decoders, causing both joy and occasional tension among family members sitting on the bare concrete or dirt floors of their living rooms. "I like watching the news," Janphasid says. "My children love to watch movies."

A two-hour interview with Janphasid was interrupted twice: once when his buffalo in the adjoining field gave birth and a second time when a cable television



Laotian teacher Khamphao Janphasid rides his Chinese motorbike from Long Lao Gao to Luang Prabang. His family now owns three of them. Photo: IHT

channel was showing *Lost in Translation*, and the actor Bill Murray sang an off-key rendition of Roxy Music's *More Than This*.

Janphasid's children, whose daily lives are largely confined to the mountain village, have picked up Thai from television, and they sing along to commercials broadcast from Thailand.

The enthusiasm for Chinese goods here is tempered by one commonly heard complaint: maintenance problems.

"The quality of the Japanese brands is much better," says Gu Silibapaan, a 31-year-old motorcycle mechanic in Luang Prabang. People with money buy Honda, Yamaha and Suzuki motorcycles. People with lots of money buy cars, he says.

Silibapaan says he could tell a Japanese brand, made in Thailand, just by listening to the engine.

"It sounds more firm, and the engine noise is softer," he says.

Some Thai-made Japanese motorcycles can go 10 years without

an engine overhaul. Chinese bikes usually need big repairs within three to four years, he says.

"I want a motorcycle from Thailand, but I don't have the money," says Kon Panlachat, a police officer who brought his Jinlong 110cc motorcycle to Silibapaan's shop for repairs recently.

"When I ride it, it makes a noise - dap, dap, dap," he says. "It's the second time I've brought it here for this problem."

The cheapest Thai-made Honda costs about US\$1,670 - four times the price of the cheapest Chinese bikes, sold under many brands.

The influx of Chinese motorcycles is keeping mechanics busy in Luang Prabang. A decade ago there were only two or three repair shops in the city, Silibapaan says. Now he counts 20.

Silibapaan doesn't worry about maintenance for his own motorcycle. "I have a Honda," he says.

The New York Times