From *The Beano* to *Old Master Q*: British and British Hong Kong Comics

As James Chapman points out in his *British Comics: A Cultural History*, "*Work of Martin Barker and Roger Sabin represents the only sustained academic engagement with comics in Britain ... the British comic has never achieved the cultural cachet of the* bande dessinée*, but nor has it found a popular mythology equivalent to the American superhero tradition*."[1] This remark reveals the long-neglected situation of British comics in western art historian academia. However, comics in general, no matter in which nation or period they are made, have never attracted a deserving amount of academic attention until recent years. This analysis will present a comparative study of British comics and Hong Kong comics. By showcasing important comic works across two cultures, this study strives to compare and identify the artistic elements between the modern (including early modern) British comics and its Hong Kong counterparts. The display of images and comic strips will serve to illustrate the British and Hong Kong comic culture and more importantly, to expose the influence of British comics on Hong Kong comics.

Specifically, my discussion will include works from both Britain and Hong Kong to provide a comparative perspective with a greater focus on the late 19th century, early 20th century and the1950s. For British works, I will concentrate on the two famous works, *The Beano*, and *The Dandy*, along with other comics. For their Hong Kong counterparts,

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[1] James Chapman, introduction to *British Comics A Cultural History* (Islington, London: Reaktion Books, 2011), I.

my discussion will mainly revolve around *Lao Fuzi* or *Old Master Q,* although other minor works will be covered as well.

Before the rise of comics in the 20th century, Britain has a long history of satirical (mainly political) prints. One notable artist is James Gillray (1757 – 1815), who was most famous for his political prints or illustrations, especially those for the French Revolution. Gillray's skeletal treatment of figures became a mockery device in political comics later and more significantly, this exaggerative rendering of a specific physical attribute was almost established as a foundational tool for later comics. The anti-authoritarian attitude, eroticism, and violence, the three major themes of political prints, have also taken different forms in the development of comics in various cultures in subtle yet reasonable ways. The contents of these comics, similar to James Gillray's cartoon, are unexceptionally reflective of the contemporaneous events and society. This reflective quality can be attributed to two factors, one is what we have discussed to be the political print culture, and accordingly the harsh anti-authoritarian political critique is evident in Fig. 1 about English parliament and the Queen and Fig. 2 about the Terror of the French Revolution. While the other factor, the rise of the modern printing industry and the resulting popularity of newspapers and magazines, takes us to *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, the first comic book which features a regular character, and claimed-to-be first comic in the world in the late 19th century. The two factors mentioned above contribute to the different aspects of this work—the political critique remains in Ally Sloper's story while the modern printing industry made it possible the immense exposure of this work directly to its middle-class audiences/readers, which had never been seen before with the epic record of over 30'000 copies sold for this comic serial.

It is essential to point out that the early British comics is caught between the heredity/tradition and change, between its printmaking past and its more standardized and industrialized future. Curiously, the earliest British comics still preserve some of the predominant features of prints. From Fig. 3, especially from the section of *May! A Prose Poem*, we see the dwarfed, frog-like soldiers who share a striking similarity with James Gillray's portray of French soldiers, and this treatment, in two different contexts, is to highlight the fragile/fake authority of the soldier figure or figures. More apparently in the upper section of Fig. 3, the early stereotypical representation of obese capitalists might have taken inspirations from the traditional representations of greedy politicians in political prints, for example, in Fig. 4, the judges in the background.

More strikingly, the black and white color scheme is directly inherited from the political print tradition and a colorful comic scene only emerged after the 1930s seen in the first editions of the long-standing British comics, *The Dandy* and *The Beano* featuring elementary color schemes with dark red and blue, a small spin-off from the original black-and-white schema. Another interesting point about early British comics is the dominant role of realism in the treatment of figures and other details. In the background of the image with the two capitalists from Fig. 3, the rendering of the figures' hats and clothes, along with the furniture details speak to us with great light contrasts and dramatic realism. While the never-out-of-date "painting within a painting" detail shows the strong influence from the fine art tradition. The artist's preference for crosshatching technique is another borrowing from printmaking.

However, some of our familiar features of todays' comics have made their debut in the early British comics as well, for example, the highly stylized and simplified figures in Fig. 3 (the image right below the upper right corner image) featuring a higher level of exaggeration and abstraction based on lines and sharp geometric shapes. The first appearance of animals, in this case, cats, is another new feature that will be enriched and elaborated in the later development of British comics. The last point goes to the formatting. Although the magazine pages were still dominated by large-scale print-like comics with high realism, exciting details, and various drama, we start to see the grid-like formatting of four or six or more equal-sized rectangles of other ways of fragmenting the page with rectangle or square boxes. The window visual order is changing towards a linear order organized by more rational logics, or grids. I believe this was not an isolated invention just by British comics, and the new formatting might have served other functions or mediums in other mass medias like magazines and newspapers already before comics. With this new kind of formatting, the plots of the comics start to be adapted to follow the fragmented nature of this formatting with one rectangle capturing only one plot, or only one point of the entire timeline, in the horizontal or vertical reading order, instead of squeezing all the details and scenarios into one frame or one window.

This grid organization of stories might have originated from mural paintings in the churches or more reasonably, the sculpture of biblical stories (Book of Genesis and the life of Jesus) on the door of Hildesheim Cathedral in Germany (Fig. 26). However, I also suspect the unavoidable influence of the newly-invented movies (moving picture) on the formatting of those early comics. In movie-making, each movie frame must be of the same size and is a freeze-frame picture capturing only one moment of the whole story,

requiring the concentrated attention of audiences on this single one plot without any distraction when the film is not moving, by principle.

Fig. 5, entitled *Ally's little Game* is a great example demonstrating this movie-frame quality in the formatting and plot organization. Found inside a contemporary comic magazine, *Judy,* Ally is represented in a downplayed manner interacting with fewer figures. Attention should also be drawn to a new change: coarser drawing techniques, simpler plots and backgrounds, and a black-and-white color scheme.

The Legacies of the features mentioned above are later extended to Hong Kong comics, and it is reasonable to argue that Hong Kong comics, especially *Old Master Q* shows a stronger influence of earlier British comics combined with some universal western comic traditions and more subtle borrowing from later mid-20th-century British comics, including the Beano and the Dandy. If we compare Fig. 5 with any of the comic strips (especially the early black-and-white ones) from *Old Master Q*, we can find an astonishing commonality between the two regarding the formatting, colors, figures and even the senses of humor. The pure everyday-life humor, sometimes childish, is already existent in the early British comics. The wig joke, now a cliché joke in today's media or even everyday life, appeared as funny in Fig. 5 and Fig. 6 and Fig. 7. The laughable points are all based on revealing the baldness of the figure after purposely or accidentally taking off his/her wig. The revelation instantly blows the cover of the pretentious performance of the figures, the bourgeoise or middle-class hypocrisy in the late 19th century London, while in the case of Old Master Q, the snobbish and ostentatious

personality of the middle-class women of the 60s Hong Kong, but they all reflect the middle-class life of the societies the artists were living in.

To offer more insight into the relationship between British comics and Hong Kong comics, we will need some background knowledge about Hong Kong history. Excluding the Japanese Occupation during the Second World War, Hong Kong was under British rule from 1847 to 1997. Hong Kong as the British colony began with the British occupation of the Hong Kong Island in 1841 after the First Opium War following the Nanjing Treaty, and the territory was expanded the first time when Britain obtained the Kowloon Peninsula in 1860 after the Second Opium War and then further expanded when Britain got a 99-year lease of the New Territories in 1898. Around the 1960s, under British rule, Hong Kong economics started to take off and soon became one of the centers of international trade in Asia and finally joined the "Four Asian Tigers" (including Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Korea) which were the leading four countries of Asian economy starting from the 1960s. The first issue of *Old Master Q* emerged precisely in this period, and many of the plots and senses of humor reflect the vivid characteristics of this era of Hong Kong. Generally, British influences are profound in every aspect of Hong Kong modern life, for example, the double-decker bus in Fig. 8 and the red phone booth in Fig. 9. The English tea culture even blended with Cantonese food, forming a Hong-Kong-style afternoon tea (Fig. 10).

However, the influence of British popular culture and British comics on Hong Kong comics are much more subtle. This influence permeates following the British-modelled TV media and British-Sino education system. Hong Kong comics, especially

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Old Master Q is an intriguing combination of Asian manga/manhua culture and early British comics. There are instances of *Old Master Q* which are not bound by my argument above, but I am confident that my argument is sufficient to capture the general tendencies of *Old Master Q.*

Before we move on to visual comparisons between *Old Master Q* and *The Beano* and *The Dandy*, some historical information about the development of Chinese comics might be helpful. The historical development of Hong Kong comics took quite a different direction from British comics. The word, "manga" or "manhua" is introduced from Japan. The ground-breaking Chinese comic artist, Feng Zikai, who was influenced by Japanese comics and educated in Japan, introduced this genre of art to Chinese audiences and readers by publishing a serial of his comic works in Weekly Literature in 1925. In terms of his techniques, his subject matters stem from the mundane life of urban China of the 1920s, featuring stick figures and black-and-white color scheme, sometimes a simple palette of primary colors. His figures share substantial similarity with those in traditional Chinese landscape paintings with simple but lively contours, for example, the scholarly figure in Fig. 11 painted by a Southern Song Chinese painter, Mayuan if we juxtapose it with Fig. 12. His borrowing for depicting the mountain is even more evident in Fig. 13. However, the earliest example of manga or manhua is claimed to be *The Picture of Harmony* or *Yituanheqi Tu* (Fig. 14), painted in 1465 by Jianshen Zhu, a Ming-Dynasty emperor. Although the subject matter was to promote general and religious harmony throughout China, the representations of round-shape stocky monkish figures have long been perceived as the personifications of wisdom, harmony, and humor. The representation of Big Potato shares some similarity with the stocky old man in Fig. 14

and curiously, the personality of Big Potato in *Old Master Q* is also very peaceful, tolerant and humorous.

Since *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, British comics have established a preference for using and creating socially marginalized figures as the protagonists of their stories. As a result, these figures are neither evil nor righteous, never binary, but only a general model whom every audience can identify himself/herself with. In *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, star Ally Sloper is a lazy schemer often found "sloping through" to avoid his landlords or other creditors. In Fig. 15, we can find Ally Sloper as a stealthy figure trying to sneak out without being caught by the chaser behind. Visually, we see Ally Sloper as a somewhat isolated figure from the background and other figures, moving from one frame to another. Likewise, *The Dandy* and *The Beano* also feature many of the chasing scenes and socially marginalized characters such as Bash Street Kids pranking others and being chased after. Especially in *The Beano*, Korky the Cat is always this anthropomorphic figure playing socially marginalized roles, as in Fig. 16.

This preference for choosing socially marginalized characters entices the audiences to side with the week based on sympathy and self-recognition. They will willingly follow the "miserable' protagonist to prank and ridicule the authority, usually the wealthy or the powerful (policeman…), which is impossible to realize in their personal lives, thus providing escapism for the readers. This system also unconsciously and sometimes consciously critiques the politics and economics of the time, which is consistent with the function of the original political prints of the 17th and 18th century.

In parallel, *Old Master Q* also has many chasing scenes and the main character, Old Master Q or Lao Fuzi always pranks others for no reason. In Fig. 17 entitled *Different Tricks*, Old Master Q revenges his stingy friend who gives him a small gift hidden under a large cover/wrapping by putting a balloon in the wrapping box as the return gift. In Fig. 18 entitled *Switching Days*, Old Master Q pranks the same stingy friend when his friend appreciates the full moon with a coffee and cake. Old Master Q cuts the moon into a crescent shape as the stingy friend is eating his cake. When the work is done, his friend is astonished by the changed shape of the moon. Fig. 18 is powerful and imaginative ridicule about the newly-wealthy class of the 60s and their pretentious lifestyle in Hong Kong. It also borrows from the Chinese mythology that the constant change of the moon shape is due to the biting of a heavenly dog, but differently in this comic, Old Master Q acts as the shape cutter using a scissor instead of a divine dog biting the moon. However, in other cases, the protagonist's pranks are always punished later which can be traced back to the old Chinese/Buddhist saying, "reap what you sow" or "Wickedness does not go altogether requited." Interestingly, in *The Beano*, the prank is also revenged by who the protagonist's prank was on, as in Fig. 19. This humor of mutual prank or a backfired prank is curiously universal across British comics and Hong Kong comics.

Another similarity between British comics and Hong Kong comics is the anarchic humor, which can be altogether traced back to their root of political prints. James Gillray does not only ridicule the authoritarian French Revolutionist government, but also the later Napoleon government and the British government of his own country. His ideology

is more about being against any authoritarian regime than a specific patriotism.[2] One

century and a half later, "*When it comes to The Beano, anarchic humor reigns free. Look*

at Dennis, the despicable and disrespectful rogue with a distaste for authority." [3] In Fig.

20 entitled *Monopolizing at their Expense*, the "justice"-looking policeman catches Old

Master Q peeking into a door. The policeman interrogates him, asks him if he is looking

at women. Out of curiosity, the policeman himself peeks through the door and finally

inside the room discovers and catches two people eating dog meat. This is another joke

about Chinese diet and amusing reflection upon the conflicts between Chinese and British

culture, while the climax comes when the policeman escorts the two dog-eating people

out, leaving Old Master Q alone by the table, so he starts to enjoy the leftover food on the

table all by himself. The final panel critiques the corrupt police system and the

government of the time as they always monopolize at the people's expense. This powerful

critique comes from the flexibility of the *Old Master Q*'s format and themes. "*The overall*

theme of the comics centers around humor, with characters usually portrayed in a variety

of social statuses, professions and periods, … which allows for a wide variety of

scenarios to explore." *The Dandy* also shares this kind of flexibility by playing different

roles, sometimes a teacher, and sometimes a superhero and many other roles. *The Dandy*

reflects the social problems of 20th century Dundee or England. Likewise, *Old Master Q*

also mirrors the social problems of Hong Kong including poverty, decline of moral

[2] John Cooper, "5. James Gillray and the French Revolution," *RSA Journal* 137, no. 5398 (1989): 646-51,

http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.rice.edu/stable/41375006.

[3] Tori Chalmers, "A Brief History of 'The Beano,' Scotland's beloved Comic," *Culture Trip*, last modified January 23, 2017, https://theculturetrip.com/europe/united-kingdom/scotland/articles/a-brief-history-of-the-beano-scotlands-beloved-comic/.

values, the increasing gaps among different social classes, thefts, and secret societies. It also pokes fun at contemporary art as a pretentious money-laundry industry as in Fig. 20 and Fig. 24. Analogically, *The Beano* also makes fun of fine art by using the childish talk: "Some old ship, I think," in Minnie's Art Attack (Fig. 21). Both of *Old Master Q* and *The Beano* target modern culture and related social problems.

More importantly, *Old Master Q* expressed serious views on major political changes taking place in Hong Kong during the 1960s-1980s.[4] It had previously criticized overly Westernized Hong-Kongese. In the mid-1980s, the handover of Hong Kong to China following the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 also became a point of interest for Alfonso Wong in the 80s and early 1990s strips displaying the characters' fear of the handover and the Communist occupation.

The last point to examine between British comics and Hong Kong comics is the travel of images and stuck motifs. Just like another famous Hong Kong comic book of the same period, *Longhu Men* or *Oriental Heroes* borrowing from Japanese Samurai manga for the facial features of the Chinese heroes, *Old Master Q* borrowed from British comics. The lovely facial features, especially the round-shape nose and the connected round-shape eyes of Old Master Q and Big Potato are likely to have been borrowed from the characters of *The Beano*, for example, Minnie the Minx for Big Potato. However, the borrowing might have gone through a much more complicated process than a direct one,

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[4] "Old Master Q," *Old Master Q Wiki*, last modified March 19, 2018, https://old-master-q.fandom.com/wiki/Old_Master_Q.

because the similar facial features also appear in *Doraemon* and *Astro Boy*, two famous Japanese manga series of the 1960s.

The paring of slender and stocky figures is another characteristic that not only plays an indispensable role in *Old Master Q* (the pairing of Old Master Q and Big Potato) but already appeared in old political prints. For example, both the *Plumb-pudding in Danger* (Fig. 22) and *A Peep at Christies* (Fig. 23*)* feature this dramatic paring which focuses on the contrast between the body shapes of the paring figures. The analogy between cutting a food and politically partitioning a country/territory in is extended to another comic work one century later showing the colonized China of the early 20th century (Fig. 24) and this work obtained immense exposure to the literate class of China at the time to reiterate the immediacy and importance of creating a new independent uncolonized government. This is how far an image can travel across time and different cultures.

Finally, it is important to emphasize again that *Old Master Q* relies more on the aesthetics of the earlier British comics for the 4-grid, 6-grid or 9-grid panel formats and black-and-white color scheme as I have mentioned at the beginning. Most significantly, *Old Master Q* has a Chinese core despite the considerable influence of British comics. The font and the placement of the Chinese characters show the influence of Feng Zikai's comics, and Feng's simple stick figure has another strong impact on the figuration of the main characters especially their sharp stylized contours. Additionally, it would be a pity if we forget to discuss the traditional clothing of Big Potato and Old Master Q. This intentional element is a silent protest against the over-Westernized Hong Kong under

British rule. This "unnatural" traditional Chinese clothing mocks the xenocentric worship of western culture, and simultaneously ridicules both the conservative apologists of the out-of-date elements of the traditional Chinese culture (the Qing-Dynasty law lasted until the 1970s in actual practices in many communities in Hong Kong) and the blind-minded followers of British culture. Accordingly, many stories in *Old Master Q* show the difficulty of Old Master Q in communicating with foreigners as the increasing cultural conflicts between the Chinese populace and the British officials. An interesting parallel is the leftist 1967 riots against the colonial government and Anti-British Struggle Committee during the riots.

As Kent Worcester thinks of British comics as a cultural history of Britain, [5]Hong Kong comics is likewise a cultural chronical of British Hong Kong. Just like the cultural identity of Hong Kong, Hong Kong comics is a half-blood prince born with a Chinese body but with a British appearance. This cultural identity is what renders this unique city neither British nor Chinese, but that is exactly what Hong Kong is, not Chinese London, nor British Chinatown, but a worldly town of freedom, complexity, and diversity.

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[5] Kent Worcester, "British Comics: A Cultural History," last modified April 19, 2018, http://www.europecomics.com/british-comics-cultural-history/.

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Image List:

Fig. 1:

James Gillray (British, 1757 – 1815). *Sin, Death and the Devil*. Vide Milton, 1792. San Marino,

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Fig. 2:

The Dagger Scene: — or The Plot discover'd.

James Gillray (British, 1757 – 1815). *The Dagger Scene; or the Plot Discovered, 1792.* San Marino, The Huntington Library.

Fig. 3:

William Giles Baxter (British, 1856-1888). First issue of *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, 1884.

https://britishcomics.fandom.com/wiki/Ally_Sloper%27s_Half_Holiday

Fig. 4:

Marie Anne Charlotte Corday d'Armont ('*The heroic Charlotte la Cordé, upon her trial...*') by James Gillray, published by Hannah Humphrey hand-colored etching, published 29 July 1793, National Portrait Gallery

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ALLY'S LITTLE GAME.
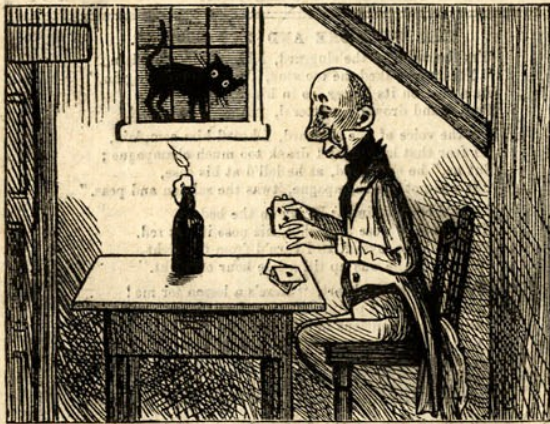
For some time past dear old ALLY has spent his "off" evenings, when not superintending BODGER's back garden, learning a little trick with the cards.

And, having learnt it, he thought he would take a little trip to Brighton. Curiously enough, on the way he met with a Strange Gentleman who wanted to have a "little flutter."

Dishonourable behaviour of the Strange Gentleman when SLOPER wasn't looking.
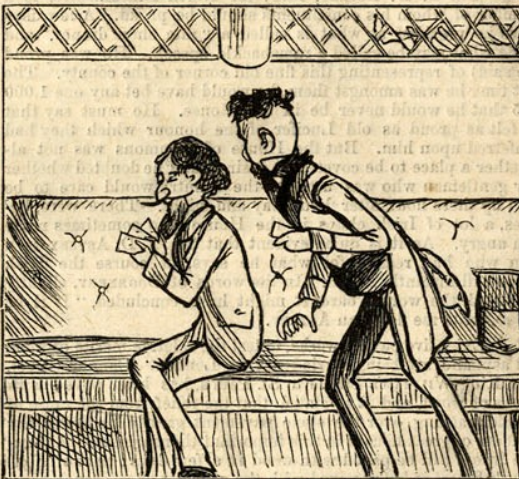
Retort courteous on the part of ALLY when the Strange Gentleman wasn't looking.
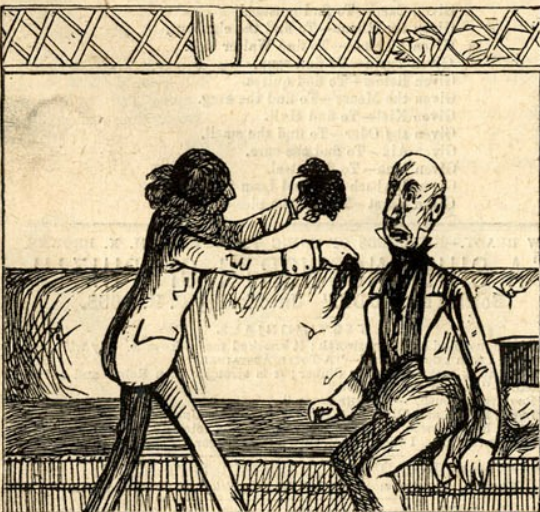
ALLY, caught at it, comes to grief. "Why, you old vagabond!"

ALLY "goes for" the Strange Gentleman. "MOSES, by all that's horrible!"

N.B.—MOSES says he knew all along that it was SLOPER. "If he did," says ALLY, "it was very uncommercial of him—wasting my time and my railway fare that way."

(French, married to British artist, Charles Henry Ross, 1847 – 1890), *Ally's Little Game, 1874,*

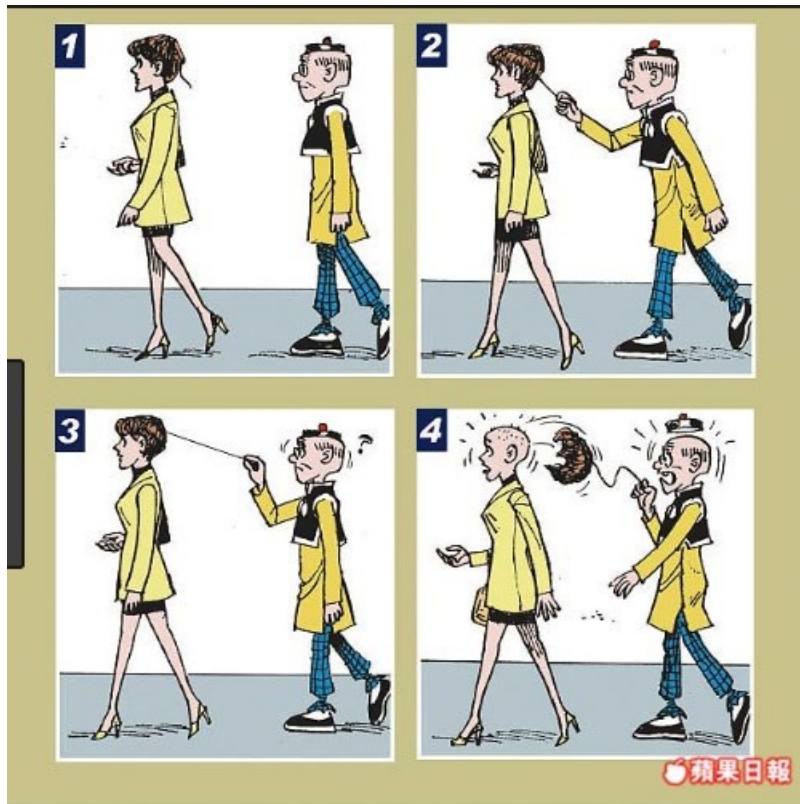https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Marie_Duval,_Ally_Sloper,_Ally%27s_Little_Game_(Judy,_September_23,_1874).jpg

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Alfonso Wong or Ze Wong (Republic of China, then British Hong Kong, then Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of People's Republic of China, 1923 - 2017), *New Wig,* 1970s

Fig. 7:

Alfonso Wong or Ze Wong (Republic of China, then British Hong Kong, then Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of People's Republic of China, 1923 - 2017), *Wig Accident,* 1970s

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"古老的香港雙層巴士 一個城市的記憶，" last modified November 15, 2014, accessed May 1,

2019, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_c0ba60a10102v588.html

Fig. 9:

"電話亭買少見少剩 1600 個，" 明報專訊，港聞，last modified March 2, 2015, accessed May

1, 2019, https://www.e123.hk/ElderlyEasy/details/384467/71/

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Yuan Ma (Chinese, Southern Song Dynasty, 1160 – 1225). *Scholar by a Waterfall. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; C.C. Wang Family, gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973. (accession no. 1973.120.9);* www.metmuseum.org

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Zikai Feng 豐子愷 (Chinese, The Empire of Qing, then Republic of China and later People's

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Jianshen Zhu (Chinese, Emperor Chenghua of Ming Dynasty, 1447 – 1487*). 一團和氣圖 *Yituan*

Heqi Tu or Picture of Unified Harmony, 1465. Peking, the Palace Museum (Peking).
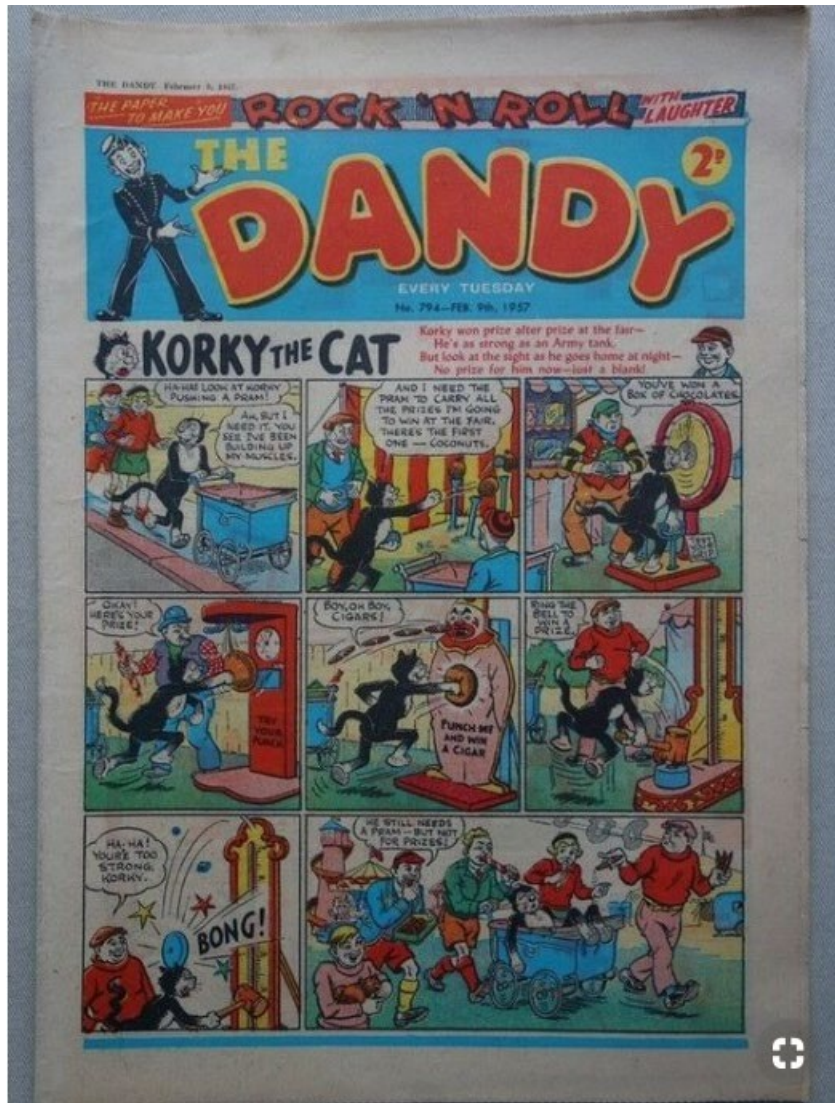
Fig. 15:
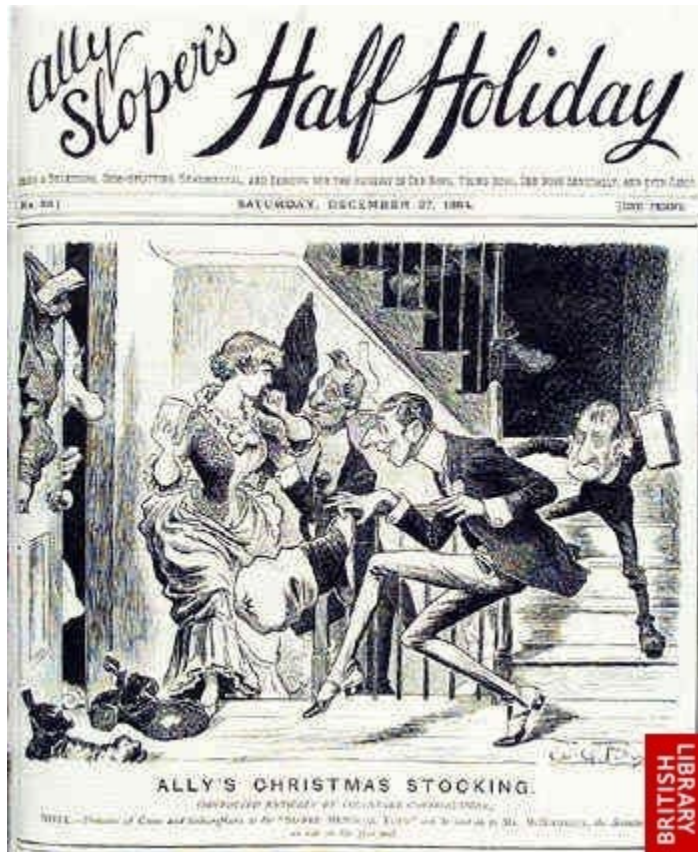
William Giles Baxter (British, 1856-1888). *Ally's Christmas Stocking*, 1896. London, British

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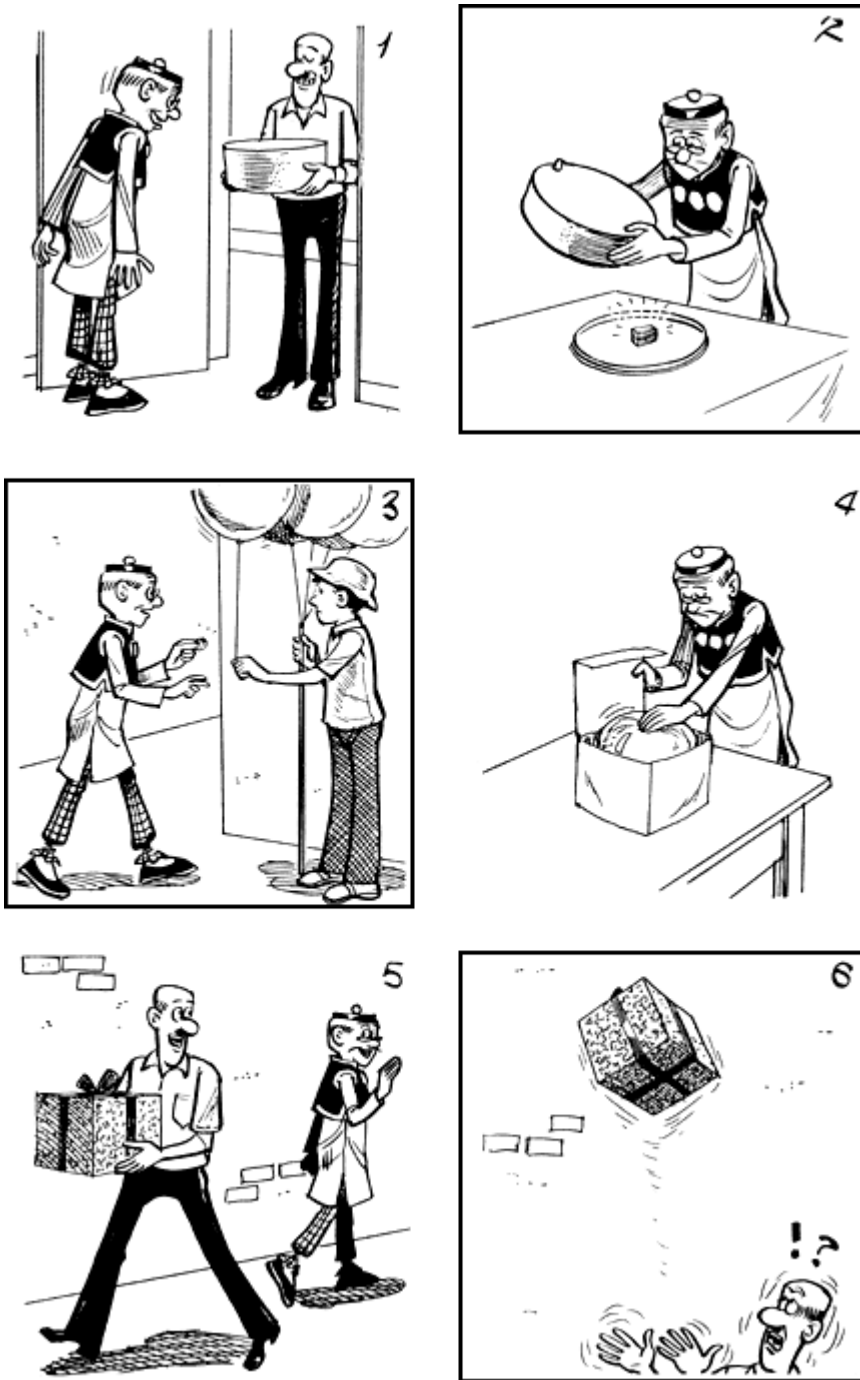
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Unknown Author. *Korky the Cat.* The Dandy. Issue of 1957. UK, private collection.

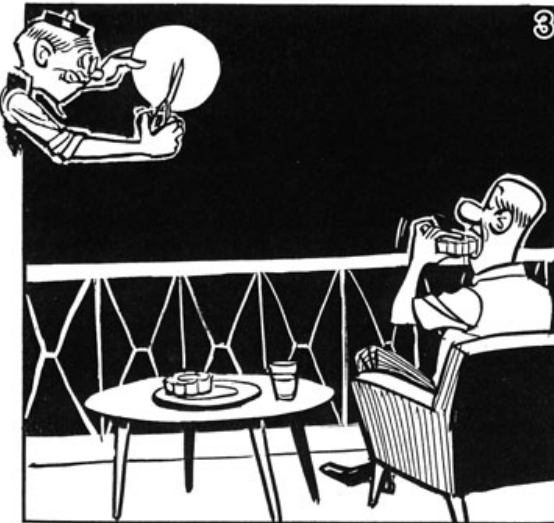https://www.pinterest.com/pin/336221928429824347/

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James Gillray (British, 1757 – 1815). *The Plumb-pudding in Danger*, 1805. London, British

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James Gillray (British, 1757 – 1815). *A Peep at Christies*, 1796. Houston, Museum of Fine Arts,

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https://www.mfah.org/art/detail/38239?returnUrl=%2Fart%2Fsearch%3Fartist%3DJames%2BGi

llray

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Unknown author (Chinese or French). Imperialist Powers Partitioning China (列强瓜分中國),

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