

Asian Political Cartoon Book Review by John Lent  
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John Lent, a senior researcher and lecturer in media and communication studies, especially in the field of cartoons and comics from the University of Mississippi. He is one of the pioneers of communication education in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in Malaysia, the Philippines and China. He was coordinator of the mass communications program at Science University of Malaysia in the early 1970s and has been involved in teaching, writing, and communication studies (and particularly research on comics and cartoons) for more than 50 years.

John Lent, who often conducts direct research on Asia, wrote another book entitled Asian Political Cartoons, having previously completed the book Asian Comics in 2017. The Asian Political Cartoons book contains discussions on interesting political cartoon works from various countries in Asia. Lent really believes in the research method using interview techniques because that way he will get accurate data and information directly from the cartoon creator. Lent combines hundreds of interviews, as well as textual analysis of cartoons; observation of workplaces, companies, and cartoonists at work; and historical research.

It was stated that the Asian Political Cartoons book was indeed designed to be a companion to the Asian Comics book. The focus of Asian Comics' books is "comics" (comic strips, comic books, and humorous cartoons) this time focusing on "political cartoons". These two books complement each other's description of how cartoon artists deal with various aspects in their respective countries. In this book, which discusses political cartoons, the "seriousness" of the problems faced by artists will be more apparent. If gag cartoons and comics are more "entertainment" oriented, then political cartoons deal with "bigger" issues, related to the policies of the authorities, and of course politics. When dealing with these problems, cartoonists must be more careful in conveying their message. Some cartoonists even act as "watchdogs" for the government. Zunar, a cartoonist from Malaysia who heavily criticized the government (especially the government of Najib Rajak) is one of the cartoonists whose books have often been prosecuted, imprisoned, and confiscated.

One of the chapters in the Asian Political cartoons book is about Indonesian cartoons. Discussion about cartoons in Indonesia is very valuable considering the scarcity of literature from Indonesia itself about Indonesian cartoons. One of John Lent's journeys that might be interesting is when he came directly to do research in Indonesia, meeting cartoonists and cartoon observers in Indonesia such as GM Sudarta and Dwi Koendoro. From the two cartoonists who are now gone, Lent gained

insight into how Indonesian cartoons had started through the story of wayang characters such as Petruk and other Punakawan. The desire to mention or find the "roots" of cartoon culture in various countries is also interesting to examine in this book. Some countries have long been known for having a tradition of "cartooning" like Japan's known as choju-giga (cute pictures of animals and birds). Also, in China there is a kind of cartoon shape called nianhua. As a form of visual art, the name "cartoon" obviously started in the West. However, "cartoon" as a medium that uses distorted images in a humorous way (which perhaps aims to soften the form of criticism), has been carried out in many Asian countries since pre-modern times which are rooted in the traditions of each nation.

In discussing cartoons in Indonesia, Lent also mentioned that Sukarno, the first president of the Republic of Indonesia, was the first indigenous (native Indonesian) political cartoonist. The cartoon, which Sukarno depicted in the daily *Fikiran Rakjat* in 1935, shows opposition to Dutch colonial attitudes: an Indonesian accuses Dutch colonialism and orders them to leave (page 110). There is an interesting fact raised by Lent, namely that in Asean (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam) it is noted that there are national leaders who also make cartoons.

In discussing cartoons in Indonesia, Lent also mentioned Augustin Sibarani, one of the strongest cartoonists of his time, but it is rarely discussed in Indonesian literature. Sukarno, who at one time prohibited himself from being depicted in cartoons, tolerated Sibarani's work, which was often seen as controversial. He even included Sibarani in cultural delegations and involved him in government projects. Sukarno's presidential period then shifted to Suharto's presidency and the political situation became different. During Sukarno's time, there was what was called "freedom to cartoon", the impact of the "freedom of opinion" policy. Then from interviews Lent caught that the Suharto period was very restrictive, forcing cartoonists to avoid taboo topics, not mentioning aspects of the existence of personal interests between newspapers and the government, there were censorship practices both from the government and by himself. After the fall of Sukarno, Augustin Sibarani was also detained by the New Order government. The *Eastern Star* newspaper, where he published his cartoons, has been closed. He is suspected of being connected to the Communist party which was banned since Suharto's rule. Interesting aspects like the example above, the depiction of how cartoons and cartoonists relate to government politics and the environment, we will also find in discussions of political cartoons in other countries.

For those of us who want to study cartoons academically, the introductory text of this book is quite important reading. Here Lent outlines the function and definition of "Political Cartoons". This book starts with a discussion of pictures, but from the cartoons we can see how political issues are from various perspectives in the Asian region. Each cartoon presents a unique point of view and invites readers to think more deeply about issues faced by Asia such as corruption, interstate conflict, human rights, and people's struggles. The discussion on the history of cartoons in Indonesia is just one example of how deep and broad Lent's approach is when approaching cartoon-related subjects in an Asian country. It will always be discovered how the state and politics relate to cartoonists and how cartoonists manipulate their works so that they can always appear, be published in the media, in the midst of an unfavorable media

industry situation in order to continue their profession. Including how new (digital) media influences the work patterns of cartoonists.

The writing in this book then covers topics such as political and social satire on ancient Asia, humor/cartoon magazines founded by Western colonialists (one of the areas that tend to be discussed when we talk about the birth of countries in Asia). In that case, propaganda cartoons were also used in the campaign for independence. In addition to issues of aesthetics, communication and political issues, this book also explores the problem side of the distribution of cartoons: what obstacles must contemporary cartoonists face, including government regulations, reduced "lots" for cartoons in the mass media and other publications, the existence of controlling interests that all must be addressed wisely by cartoonists.

John conveyed several important final notes, namely about the typical characteristics or common threads that can be drawn from all political cartoons in Asia (1) The history of "cartoons" had started in Asia since before the arrival of colonialism (2) almost all Asian countries were colonies of European countries, America or Japan then publish cartoons with models from their country of origin, and are usually intended for expatriate readers (3) In almost all countries, political cartoon is used as propaganda for independence (4) The policy of "freedom (to make) cartoons" goes on "fluctuating" in almost all countries, depending on who is in power (5) Political cartoonists are increasingly marked with prestigious awards by the state, and museums (6) The practice of self-censorship by editors as well as cartoonists themselves is spreading across the region. The future of cartooning will be greatly influenced by media technology, which is now being seen towards the Internet and Social Media.

### **Conclusion:**

From the different problems of these cartoonists, if we are observant, we can see a parallel pattern. The cartoonists share their solutions in dealing with these obstacles through messages in the cartoons, whose meaning must be sought more carefully because there are many layers formed from the images.

This English-language book will broaden international readers' horizons about cartoons in Asia, a theme that art critics rarely pursue.

From the Asian Political Cartoons book, we can also see common threads from various countries as well as the unique style and approach in political cartoons. Cartoon-themed books, especially in Asia, are not too many. By reading this book, we will get the historical side of the development of cartoons in that country as well as the concepts and socio-political context behind the occurrence of these cartoons.

Just as a political cartoon indirectly provides an overview of a country's political situation, this book in general provides insight to readers on the political attitudes of governments in Asia. And, of course, it gives us knowledge about the patterns of creative approaches from cartoonists to be able to survive, for example, in the midst of government repression, they have a strategy to convey criticism in language that is acceptable to the current situation. The political condition of a country will definitely greatly influence the creativity and visual language approach used in creating cartoons, especially those with political themes.

John Lent as a communication and media expert is very fluent in processing data and information. Coupled with his focus on cartoons and comics as well as direct experience in Asian countries, including Indonesia, this book is very valuable, especially for those who want to seriously study the art of visual narrative.