

PART A

Read Text 1 and answer questions 1-23 in the Question-Answer Book for Part A.

Text 1

Hong Kong's comic industry is proverbially in shreds. The biggest saboteur? The internet

- 1 [1] In recent months, old-school Hong Kong comics appear to be gaining much attention. Alfonso Wong, the genius behind the Old Master Q series that has captivated countless readers since 1962, showcased 128 drawings at an auction. All those pieces were sold at the event, which drew more than 5,000 visitors in 10 days, evidence that fans are still rabid for
- 5 traditional comics.
- [2] Meanwhile, there is an exhibition by another homegrown comic mastermind, Lee Wai Chun Theresa, the artist-author behind the popular Miss 13 Dot series. Her '13-Dot' exhibition at Comix Home Base in Wan Chai is also hotly tipped.
- 10 [3] To the undiscerning observer, it's easy to interpret these signs as evidence of a healthy homegrown industry. In truth, they are rare moments of reprieve from a harsher reality: the traditional comic industry in Hong Kong is dying. Its pains have frequently been reported in the media: years of declining book sales, industry players struggling to make a living. What led to this predicament? Does the highly visual book culture, which has captivated many generations of fans, have a future? It may one day become a relic, only accessible at
- 15 cultural exhibitions and auction houses.
- [4] During the heyday for comics in the 1980s and 1990s, illustrators like Hong Kong artist Lam Cheung Kwan Elphonso could make a living drawing comics exclusively, just as he did while working on titles like 'True Love', 'The Jam' and 'Super Seven'. "Now, if I only drew comics, I wouldn't make enough income," he says.
- 20 [5] Lam's latest comics include 'Seer', which is featured in a local magazine, and the artist also just released 'The Greatest Hits' this month, a collection of short story illustrations he penned from the 1990s to now. Additionally, he has to juggle many jobs, including storyboarding for films, design work for fashion brands, figurine production and artwork for merchandising: many industry veterans like himself who have experienced the heyday for comics have seen their profession dwindle into sidejobs.
- 25 [6] The main culprit behind this predicament? "Free website comics have destroyed the industry," he says. Readers can get shorter four-block strips online, which are updated frequently, at no cost. Like many industries disrupted by the internet revolution – music, newspapers, TV and films – the comic scene is struggling against the tide of free original or pirated content. "In this age, readers think they don't need to pay for comics, like free music," says Lam.
- 30 [7] The threshold to enter the scene has become low. Anyone can become a comic artist; all you need is a website. Traditionally, artists like Lam laboured for years to acquire skills to draw comics and to secure opportunities in the profession. Success back then meant generating quality books that achieved high sales. Now? "If you upload comics to a website and generate many clicks, you can become famous," says Lam. He thinks poor quality digital content by amateurs has contributed to the industry's collapse.
- 35 [8] Official statistics about this sector are difficult to get. Alan Wan, CEO of Anitime Animation Studio and one of the founding directors at the Hong Kong Comics and Animation Federation, reveals educated estimates. He has been in the business since the 1970s in various roles starting first as a writer and then moving into production, licensing, syndication, and management. He recalls the peak between 1995 and 2000 when the market generated around HKD700 million from local comics, Chinese-translated Japanese Manga and more. "By 2010 that figure fell to around HKD300 million, a drop of more than 50 percent," Wan says.
- 40 [9] These numbers were collated from more than 80 companies that were part of the Hong Kong Comics and Animation Federation. The executive agrees that free digital comics have obliterated a significant portion of the market, but stresses that a toxic storm of other factors has also contributed to the current pains. There's the dwindling distribution network. For instance, comic stores are a dying breed. There were around 350 comic stores at the peak of the market, now there are less than 100, he says. Likewise, street news vendors, who comic publishers depended on to stock their print material, are nearing extinction.
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