

Biceps and the Exploration of Hybrid Cultural Identity

by

Jennifer Vun-Wei Zee

B.A. Pomona College, 1999, M.Sc. University of California San Diego, 2003
Certificate of Museum Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2006

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Approved by:

Joe Trumpey, Graduate Committee Chair

Phoebe Gloeckner, Graduate Committee Member

Ray Silverman, Graduate Committee Member

John Klausmeyer, Graduate Committee Member

Brad Smith, Associate Dean for Graduate Education

Bryan Rogers, Dean, School of Art and Design

Date Degree Conferred: May 2006

Abstract

The creative thesis work *Biceps* is a comic based on personal experiences during Jennifer Zee's travel to Beijing in the summer of 2004. Through comics she explored her reactions to the trip, while simultaneously reconsidering the idea of her cultural identity and what it means to be Chinese American. This thesis documents and discusses the integrated process of self-analysis and creative art making.

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My boyfriend Mahru has over the years, spent hundreds and hundreds of hours with me on the phone. Many of those hours have were dedicated to the patient dissection of the many tangled issues surrounding the topic of Asian American identity and comic art. He is my soul mate in all things, especially in ultimate. He introduced me to ultimate five years ago and consequently changed my life. Thank you Mahru.

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Introduction

The subject of my thesis project began with a simple question asked of me almost two years ago: “How was your trip to Beijing?” I had no easy answer. I couldn’t respond with “It was awesome, I wish I could go back!” like so many of my fellow classmates who had also been sent by the University of Michigan School of Art and Design to Beijing for a five-week trip in May of 2004. The trip left me feeling unsettled, and after consideration of my thoughts, I wondered if my negative feelings had anything to do with my being Chinese American.

My ethnic heritage did matter. I had a different set of expectations from my non-Chinese American peers. I was treated differently than my Caucasian American peers. Having lived in academic communities in the United States for so many years has largely reduced my consciousness of my ethnicity. Removed from my comfort zone, and thrown into a new social context, I was suddenly faced with situations that forced me to reconsider my cultural identity.

As much as I wanted to talk about my experiences and thoughts, to articulate my feelings would be to engage any interlocuter in a half hour conversation, a lengthy answer to what was intended to be a simple question. When I talked of my trip to Beijing, I gave some variation of “It was okay, very hot and crowded, and I learned my numbers up to ten in mandarin and the Great Wall was amazing.” I felt very dissatisfied after giving such an answer.

Fortunately, during the summer of 2004, the School of Art and Design hired comic artist Phoebe Gloeckner. The idea of comic art stirred a curiosity in me and I felt immediately drawn to learn more about comics. I pestered her to be one of my advisors, and in the fall I joined her class in comics. Given the task to create a five-page story in comic format, my immediate impulse was to use this opportunity to address my anxiety about the trip by putting my thoughts down in drawings and writing. At that time, I had no idea that I was to spend the next year and a half drawing comics.

I compiled my first three stories into an autobiographical comic book called *Art StudANTS in Beijing* (see Creative Work section), named so because the characters were humans with ant heads. The experiences I related were relatively general, stories that others could relate to if they also traveled to a developing country. In my comic, my stand in interacted only superficially with the people of Beijing, behaving more like a critical observer. For example, I pondered the use of Caucasian models in fashion advertisements aimed at a local audience, and the fascination of local people with my fellow Caucasian peers, most of whom were requested at some point by a local Chinese person to have a photo taken with them, in a manner much like one who requests a photo with Mickey Mouse at Disneyland.

My thesis comic *Biceps* (see Creative Work section) differs substantially from *Art StudANTS*. While the story is still based on my experiences in Beijing, it is much more personal on several levels. I used human heads instead of ant heads, and used myself as a model for the protagonist, Jessica. The story thus depends upon and transmits a unique personal experience. In *Biceps* I extensively interact with people living in Beijing, and thus I address themes of social relationships such as friendship between men and women, interactions between Chinese and Caucasians, and rivalry between women.

This thesis will not so much discuss the subject matter within my comic, but rather the larger themes into which my thesis falls, namely the concept of Chinese American cultural identity, and representation of Asian American voice. I will then detail my process of comic creation, and finally, I will discuss my thoughts as to how my cultural identity has been shaped as I progressed with this comic project.

Contextual information

A Brief Introduction to Asian American Experience

All too familiar to Asian Americans is the question “Where are you from?” To this, I regularly reply with the apparently unsatisfactory response: Los Angeles. The question is often repeated with an emphasis: “No, where are you *really* from?” revealing the assumption that I must be a foreigner. Depending on the situation, I may patiently answer: “I was born in Los Angeles and moved to Hong Kong when I was six, where I attended British schools, and returned to the States to attend college in L.A., but since then I’ve lived in Chicago, D.C., San Diego and Ann Arbor.” Alternatively, I may through gritted teeth, firmly repeat: “I am from Los Angeles” and observe the confusion on the face of my questioner, and I imagine they are thinking: *Why isn’t this Asian girl naming an Asian city?* Other times, I feel a wave of cultural pride to be associated with China, and may generously detail: “Oh, you mean what is my *ethnic heritage*? My father’s side is Shanghainese and my mother’s side is from Toisan. On average, I’m a third generation Chinese American.”

Concerns

I have several concerns that arise from conversations such as those detailed above. For many people, “Where are you from?” is not a loaded question. For myself however, where I am from is not a simple matter. It is much more complicated than recognizing place of birth. It is inextricably linked to questions of ethnic and cultural heritage, and Asian American identity. “Asian American” may be narrowly defined as someone of Asian descent who was either born in the United States or has immigrated there. However, what it is to be Asian American concerns much more interesting issues.

A Stranger in One’s Own Home

Most people require a sense of belonging to feel comfortable. For many Asian Americans, the United States is the only home they have ever known. Yet, non-Asian Americans commonly assume that a person of Asian ethnic heritage is a visitor or immigrant to the United States. This assumption is not only illustrated by questions such as “Where are you *really* from?” but also well meaning comments such as “Your English is so good!” Such comments hint that one is not a natural part of the landscape, and may be discomfiting for those who consider that landscape to be their home (Chow p.231). It isn’t unusual for Asian Americans who have been labeled a stranger in their home country to have at some point, usually during childhood, wished to be Caucasian, to avoid standing out in the crowd (Chow p.188).

In particularly unpleasant cases, Asian Americans have been told to “Go back to where you belong.” Herein illustrates one of the differences in experiences between the descendants of non-Caucasian immigrants, and those of Caucasian

immigrants. No matter how many generations an Asian American's family has been in the United States, Asian Americans are still subject to such admonishments even without opening their mouths, or interacting with the perpetrator. A fourth generation Asian American might be the recipient of such a remark. In contrast, it would be very surprising for *any* Caucasian American to be told to "Go back to where you belong." Recent descendants of such groups are not perceived to be foreign, and thus are not treated as such. This is not to diminish the difficulties that other immigrants or descendants of immigrants of Caucasian ethnicity may have when interacting with American society. I only wish to point out that Asian Americans, no matter how alike in behavior and background they may be to their Caucasian peers, are continued to be viewed as not quite within the American norm. The unchangeable, physical markers of Asian-ness possessed by Asian Americans are what sociologist Robert Park refers to as "racial uniform," which automatically affords its wearers marginal status (Eng p.89). Ideally, people should be able to brush off labels placed upon them by others, and to define their own identity. Unfortunately, the effect of repeatedly being considered a foreigner in one's own homeland has a strong influence on how the identity of some Asian Americans has been shaped (Chow p.235).

Ang in *On Not Speaking Chinese* describes such experiences as "a ... harsh coming into awareness of his own, unchosen, minority status. 'Chineseness' here is a marker of that status, imparting an externally imposed identity given meaning, literally, by practice of discrimination. It is the dominant culture's classificatory practice, operating as a territorializing power highly effective in marginalizing the other, which shapes the meaning of Chineseness here as a curse..." (Ang p. 37)

Ang's description is perhaps a worst-case scenario, for I have never met a Chinese American who considered being ethnically Chinese to be a curse. However, the point remains that as much as an Asian American may feel that he or she is as American as anyone else, external factors from not only from direct interaction with non-Asian Americans but also larger, cultural institutions, will have an effect on his or her identity.

Falling Through the Cracks

As an Asian American, defining one's identity also involves an internal struggle with conflicting thoughts. An Asian American can experience the pull of two cultures without being technically bi-racial, that is having parents of two different ethnicities.

Chow describes what it means to be Asian American as a living with mixed messages and contradictions. "To me, [being Asian American] means ... working to overcome stereotypes. It means sometimes playing stereotypes to my advantage. [It means] Not knowing what to do with my feelings of defensiveness

when ... someone Chinese is criticized, even when I believe they have acted wrongly.... Recognizing a hunger for more knowledge about the land my parents were born in.... Feeling more than a little embarrassed about the fact that I try to distance myself from recent immigrants who don't speak English and wear those mismatched and garish clothes." (Chow p.xii)

The examples that Chow provides represent the types of thoughts that some Asian Americans grapple with daily. It does not take involved conversations, probing questions or even necessarily interaction with others to find myself considering issues of my cultural identity.

Eng summarizes Asian American women's contradictory feelings in her book, *Warrior Lessons*: "Often... American-raised daughters of immigrants [try] hard to resolve their feelings of 'being in limbo'... of the often divergent cultures of East and West." (Eng p.1-2)

Just as East and West are opposites, the cultural norms of some Asian and American cultures are also opposite. For example, western society emphasizes individualism, whereas in eastern cultures such as Chinese societies, each person is considered a small part of the larger picture, the extended family. Thus expectations placed on Asian Americans by their parents weigh very heavily; should you *fail*, you not only disappoint yourself, but also bring shame upon your parents, your siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents (Eng p.18). Chinese women in particular are taught not voice opinion, and in particular, discontent (Eng p.65), whereas western women (in the United States in particular) are more often encouraged to speak their mind. Consequently, choosing between remaining silent and speaking up is not simply a decision, but an act shaped by cultural identity.

Living in a western world with an Asian cultural and ethnic heritage means that Asian Americans may find themselves groping for a middle ground, where both their eastern and western aspects can fit together harmoniously. Having few or no role models to follow, instead of finding a comfortable place, the Asian American may find his or herself, as Eng says, "falling through the cracks." (Eng p.1)

The Homeland Trip

The "homeland trip" is one frequently made by second and third generation Chinese Americans. The expectations of the homeland trip are colored by what Kibria refers to as "primordialist conceptions of what it means to be Chinese... ('a matter of blood')" (Kibria p.296). Chinese Americans thus do not experience a homeland trip simply as a tourist, but in terms of a search for affirmation of Chinese membership, while at the same time, "... homeland trips also worked to highlight to the second generation their marginality, or the ways in which they were not accepted and did not belong in Chinese societies..." (Kirbria p.296) This sentiment

is certainly one that I experienced, and was a theme in both *Art StudANTS in Beijing* as well as *Biceps*.

It is common for second-generation Chinese Americans visiting China or Taiwan, to find that although they were surrounded by people who looked like themselves, “homeland trips were ... prominently marked by experienced of being seen and treated as ‘different’ by the local population...” (Kibria p.305-306) Language, as well as cultural mannerisms distinguished the Chinese American visitors from the local Chinese, causing Chinese Americans to gain a greater sense other their American identity. “If in the United States their racial identity as Asian dominated other’s perception of them, in China... it was their identity as an American that was significant.” (Kibria p.307) Thus, whereas I have already discussed how the Asian American does not necessarily entirely feel at home in the United States, neither does he or she fit in their homeland, leading to a loss of sense of belonging.

New Frames of Thinking ***Inescapable Chineseness***

Given the condition of an Asian American, in which labels and expectations fly from all sides and conflicting thoughts cause confusion, how does one go about constructing cultural identity? The first useful step in the process of defining my identity was to understand the idea of “inescapable Chineseness.”

“The notion of a single center, or a cultural core, from which Chinese civilization has emanated, is so deeply entrenched in the Chinese historical imagination that it is difficult to disentangle our understanding of Chineseness from it.” (Ang p.41) Indeed, the idea of a pure Chinese culture is reflected in the Chinese name for China, which translates roughly to “middle country” or “center country,” which suggests that to literally and figuratively move away from this central point is to become less authentically Chinese. The sentiment goes without saying: the further one moves away from China, the harder one should try to compensate for the lack of cultural roots. “... ‘China’ is presented as the cultural/ geographical core in relation to which the westernized overseas Chinese is forced to take up a humble position of shame and inadequacy over her own ‘impurity...’” (Ang p.32) Ang writes, verbalizing a phenomenon that I have certainly experienced.

There is also a unique and significant historical relationship between China and the West (America and Europe) that does not exist between the West and other countries. “The West’s fascination with China as a great ‘other’ civilization began with Marco Polo and remains to this day... there is... an excess of meaningfulness accorded to ‘China’; China has often been useful for Western thinkers as a symbol negative or positive, for that which the West is not.” (Ang p.32) When this Westernized imagination of China is combined with the “equally strong and persistent tendency within Chinese culture itself to consider itself as central to

the world...” (Ang p.32), this creates what Ang refers to as “self-Orientalization,” the idea that overseas Chinese experience a pressure to feel exclusionist. This situation leaves Chinese Americans “... depriv[ed] of autonomous space to determine their own trajectories for constructing cultural identity.” (Ang p.32)

I appreciate that Ang has articulated the idea of Inescapable Chineseness. It is reassuring to be aware that my uncertainty of my cultural identity is not simply a result of my upbringing, or the people with whom I happened to have interacted. There is a larger force at work: a combination of western imagination and Chinese tradition which affects the subconscious thought of many people and is manifested in the media and in popular culture. Knowing this, I can focus on progressing ideas about my cultural identity, rather than stewing over why I feel uncertain about my identity in the first place.

Cultural Hybridity

Instead of seeing myself as a not-quite-there American, or a diluted form of Chinese, I like the idea that some cultural scholars have put forth: the idea of cultural hybridity. Whereas “assimilation” suggests conforming to the mainstream culture, “hybridity” connotes complexity and a variety of outcomes. Ang sees hybridity as “... a means of bridging and blurring the multiple boundaries which constitute “Asian” and “Western” identities as mutually exclusive and incommensurable.” (Ang p.193) Ang writes of the importance of this point of interpretation of hybridity:

“... by recognizing the inescapable impurity of all cultures and the porousness of all cultural boundaries in an irrevocably globalized, interconnected and interdependent world, we may be able to conceive of our living together in terms of complicated entanglement, not in terms of the apartheid of insurmountable differences.” (Ang p.194)

Chow also emphasizes the importance of recognizing and accepting that both Asian and American aspects of Asian Americans are valid and influential in the shaping of identity. Asian American identity falls in to a middle ground that requires customized definition. She calls herself “a strange new hybrid... walking in uncharted territory without benefit of map or guide.” (Chow p.190)

In the context of hybridity, the term “Asian American” is much more than a description. I wince when I am referred to as an “Asian” because culturally I so differ from those people who were born in and lived in Asian countries all their lives. “American” doesn’t quite right because as Chow describes “... ‘American’ too often means ‘white’, and [Asian American women] do not feel that Asians or other women of color have a place of value in the dominant culture. For these women, the legacy of the internment, the history of repressive legislation against Asians of all origins, cannot be disregarded.” (Chow p.190-191) To label myself simply “American” would be an act too much in the direction of assimilation, that is, the

allowance of Asian American history to be swallowed up into the Anglo-American culture, and to ignore the fact that the Asian American experience is different from the Caucasian American experience.

On both a personal and social scale, hybridity makes acceptable the infinite range of possible identities incorporating as much or as little of any culture to which a particular person feels a relationship, and the resulting cultural identity of that person is as valuable and meaningful as anyone else's.

Cultural Hybridity in Asian American Visual Art

Asian American artists have encouraged discussions about hybrid identity. Maxine Hong Kingston is arguably the first Chinese American author whose work had become canonized by mainstream American audiences, and her book also serves as a landmark for the emergence of Asian American women's voice (Eng p.6). It is interesting to note that when *The Woman Warrior* was released in 1975, it was regarded as a Chinese book about Chinese people, rather than a work of Chinese American literature (Kim p.35). Hong Kingston describes the experience of attempting to define her cultural identity, which of course is a challenge that Asian American women still face. She asks of her readers: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese?" (Hong Kingston p.6) *The Woman Warrior* is a valuable book for it brings Chinese American experience to the forefront of popular culture in a manner both engaging and articulate.

In the visual arts, some Asian American artists believe that ethnic identity is an essential, integral part of their artwork, whereas others prefer to centralize issues of race and to initiate a dialogue to show that like other American artists dealing with identity, sexuality, religion and class, are all equally important. Asian American artists need to strike a balance "between the need for alliance and dialogue and the resistance to cliché and self-ghettoization." (Kim p.32)

In the same way that I might be regarded as a not-quite-there American or a diluted form of Chinese, Asian American art risks being labeled as "soullessly copying 'American' art forms or imperfectly replicating 'real Asian art'." (Kim p.36) Elaine Kim's commentary on Asian American art echoes the idea that to be Asian American is to be a hybrid of cultures, and that conflict and contradictions are a part of Asian American identity-building.

Kim writes: "Located on the untranslatable, incommensurate in-between, in the interstice between mainstream and Asian American (as opposed to Asian) cultural traditions, perhaps Asian American art can be thought of as a site of creation, contradiction, and conflict emerging from the continual collisions and

transformations that comprise Asian American cultural experiences. Perhaps the question to ask is how Asian American art has expressed and continues to express a hybrid or even mutant culture that engages, extends and transforms American art.” (Kim p.36)

The important point that Kim makes is that Asian American identity (as expressed through Asian American art) continuously evolves, and thus is better conceived as a *process* rather than a state of being. A process of, as Chow describes, “the quest to integrate ethnicity and identity.” (Chow p.188)

In my own experience, the hope to find a place in the uncharted territory between cultures *has* been a process of questioning others and myself, taking note of my reactions to interactions or observations of other Asian Americans, and considering how others see me. As an artist, I am also equipped to *share* the experience of this process with others, both Asian American and non-Asian American.

The sharing of Asian American experience whether through writing or visual arts is becoming increasingly important as the Asian American population grows in number and diversity (Han & Hsu p.7). Yet popular American media still rarely portrays Asian Americans, and when they do, Asian Americans usually fall into a limited, mis-representational or stereotypical role as a foreigner (Lee p. xiii). Authentic Asian American voices that speak about their individual and collective identities can not only counteract stereotypes, but can also cast new light on how Asian Americans view each other and how others view Asian Americans. Recently, movies such as *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2003) and *Saving Face* (2005), which concern Asian Americans, and directed by an Asian American, have earned a place on the independent film scene. Self-representation of Asian Americans in the arts is gaining momentum.

An example of Asian American hybridity as expressed in art is Byron Kim’s *Synecdoche* (Figure 1), a series of small rectangular panels that incorporate western art traditions of oil and wax on canvas in an abstract, monochromatic, minimalist style. Yet the subject of this work is the skin tones of all his acquaintances, many of which, judging from the shades, are Asian. *Synecdoche* is a fresh look at multi-cultural communities, without a blatant message. I think that Kim’s work is an example of hybridization because he blends the western and eastern elements together in a way that convinces me, that he is not floating between the two worlds but he has established a solid middle ground for his artistic expression.

I had the opportunity to speak with Byron Kim when he visited the University of Michigan School of Art and Design as a part of the distinguished visitor lecture series. I asked him what part ethnicity played in his current artwork, and his

response was: very little. Kim believes that Asian ethnic heritage is playing less and less of a role in the art of Asian American artists, and that the American art community no longer expects Asian American artists to necessarily discuss their ethnicity in their work.

Figure 1. Bryan Kim's *Synecdoche*, 1992, oil and wax on panels (204 panels, 10 x 8 in. each) from www.chrisashley.net



Perhaps it is the lack of explicit concern about ethnic heritage that makes Kim's work successful to me as hybrid artwork. There is no sign of the forcing together of cultures. Yet he handles the subject matter of diversity of skin tone with a sensitivity and consciousness that I think is likely only to be found in a non-Caucasian American artist.

The Comic Biceps as an Act of Cultural Hybridity

I enjoy artwork that does not tell the viewer what to think, but encourages interpretation and dialogue. My comic, *Biceps*, offers a story based on a personal experience that led me to rethink my cultural identity. The over-riding theme of my thesis work concerns the distinguishing of "in" and "out" groups, and my attempts to find a secure place in the middle, *Biceps* highlights this dynamic by identifying a situation in Beijing where I found myself to relate better to some western Caucasian men visiting China, than to local Chinese women who were my own age.

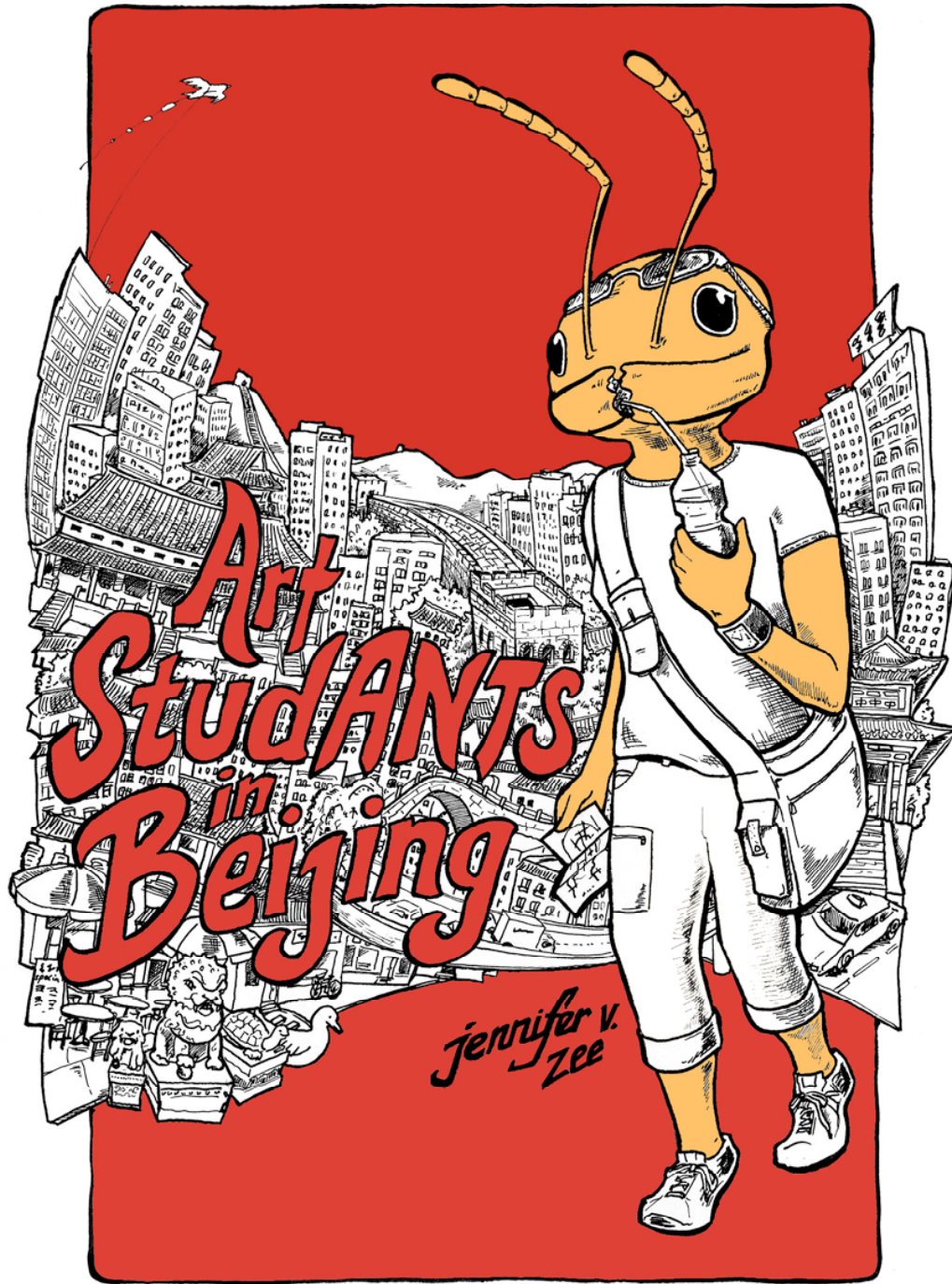
Besides the content of my comic, the act of publishing a semi-autobiographical comic is a statement of my hybrid cultural identity. The *sharing a personal story* is a very western act. In traditional Chinese culture, there is a great

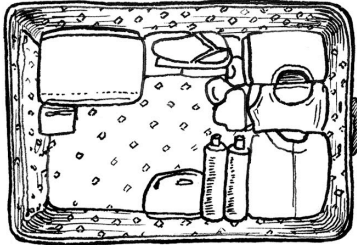
faux pas associated the airing of one's dirty laundry. Chinese families are typically secretive, and the statement "What will our neighbors and friends think!" is frequently raised when one behaves in any extraordinary manner. *Biceps* openly airs my dirty laundry, and in doing so, I almost feel like I am defying a Chinese tradition, or at the very least, my Chinese father, who might feel shame that his daughter had anything to do with such an incident. Many Chinese Americans contend with the tradition of Chinese secrecy, and have expressed their frustrations with choosing between silence and voice in writing (Hong Kingston p.183), and may see their decision at this point as a major fork in their path of discovering their own identity (Eng p.62). The act of making a comic based on autobiographical events was thus very intentional, and every step of the way, I questioned how to reveal aspects of myself that I had previously never shared with the public. Of course, there is no way for a reader to know which parts of the story are true or not, but I know, and so I struggle with the narrative truths I've embedded within fictional constructs.

The role of my comic in the context of Asian American voice is to share yet another experience, to further diversify the range of narratives. While I do want my comic to have a broad multi-cultural audience who will gain an awareness of issues in Asian American cultural identity, I do not want this to be the exclusive function of my comic. The story involves a number of universal themes, such as the friendship between men and women, competition between women, cultural differences, the role of women, and being an outsider and insider. By addressing multiple themes with which many people can empathize, I hope to make my comic more accessible than the many Asian American identity themed books with readership seemingly limited to the Asian Americans. Accessibility to my comic is important, as I feel that it's time to move beyond empowerment by validating one another's stories within an Asian American community. I'd like to instigate conversations about commonalities and differences cross culturally, and to encourage readers to consider what external and internal effects have shaped their own cultural identities.

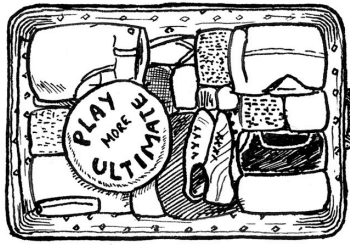
Creative Work

Art StudANTS in Beijing
Biceps

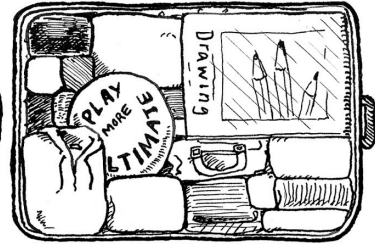




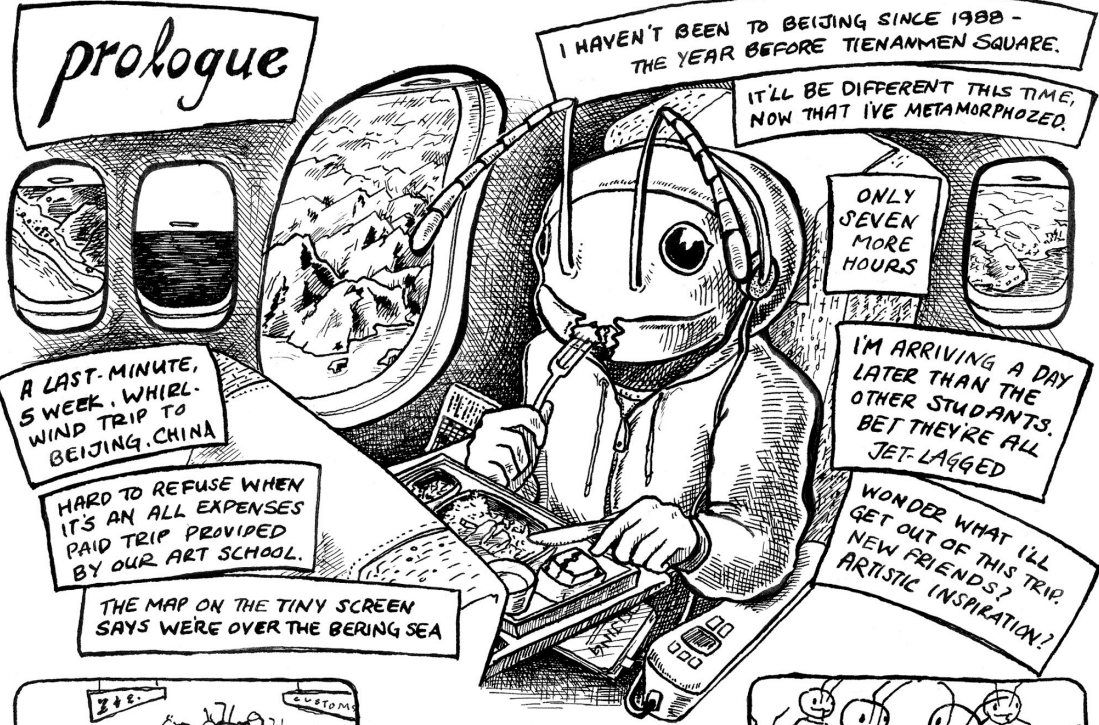
T-SHIRTS, TANK TOPS, JEANS, COMFY SHOES, SOCKS, UNDIES, CAMERA, SLEEPWARE, HAIR STUFF



CLEATS, DISC, RUNNING SHORTS... NEVER KNOW WHEN I'LL GET TO JOIN A GAME OF ULTIMATE...



LEAVE SOME SPACE FOR SHOPPING. EVERYONE SAYS TO BUY PAPER AND BRUSHES WHILE IN BEIJING.



prologue

A LAST-MINUTE, 5 WEEK, WHIRL-WIND TRIP TO BEIJING, CHINA

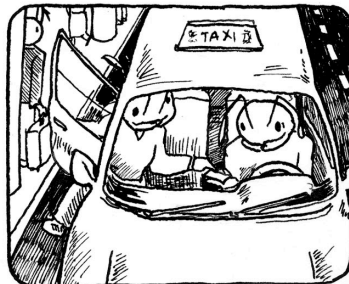
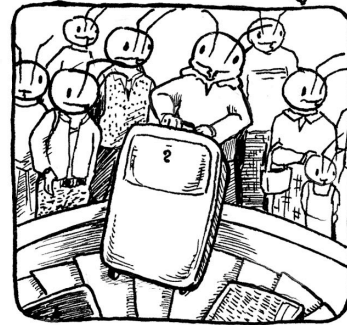
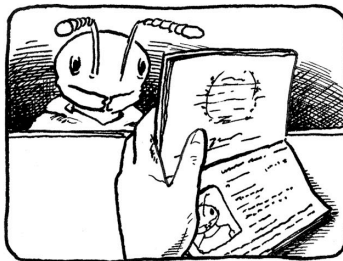
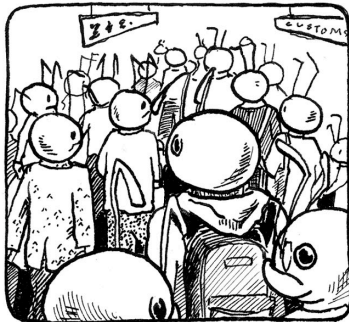
HARD TO REFUSE WHEN IT'S AN ALL EXPENSES PAID TRIP PROVIDED BY OUR ART SCHOOL.

THE MAP ON THE TINY SCREEN SAYS WE'RE OVER THE BERING SEA

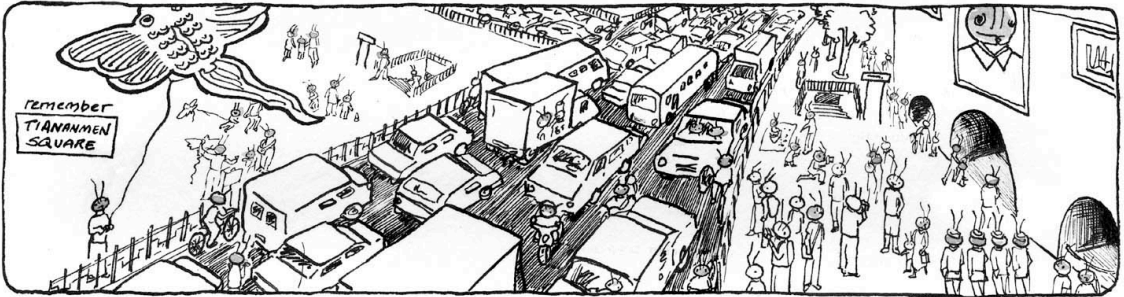
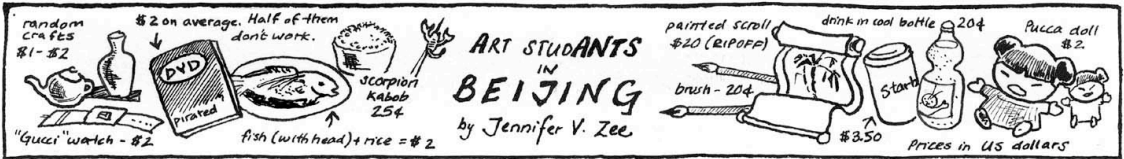
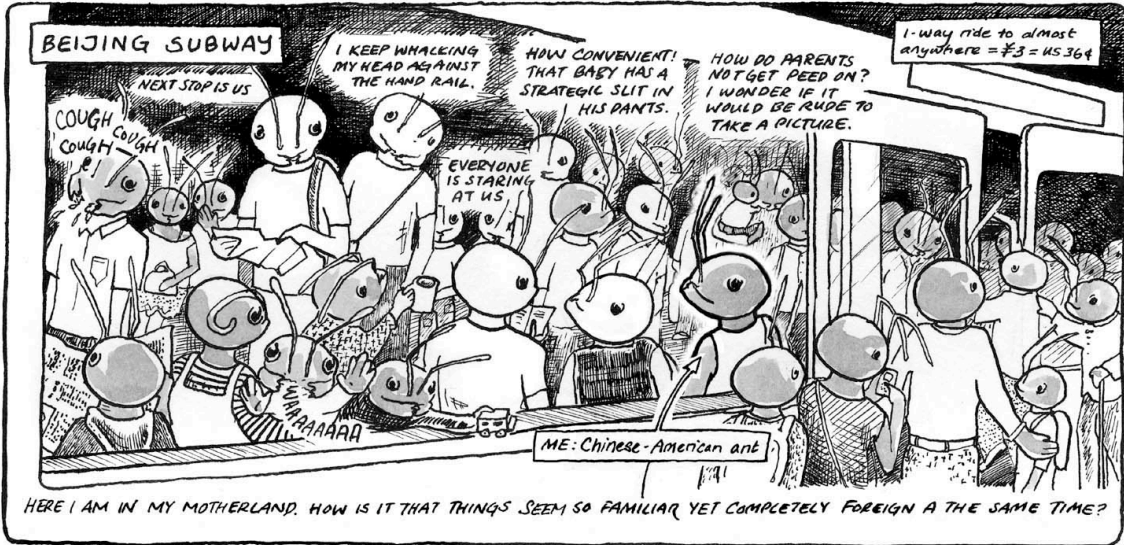
ONLY SEVEN MORE HOURS

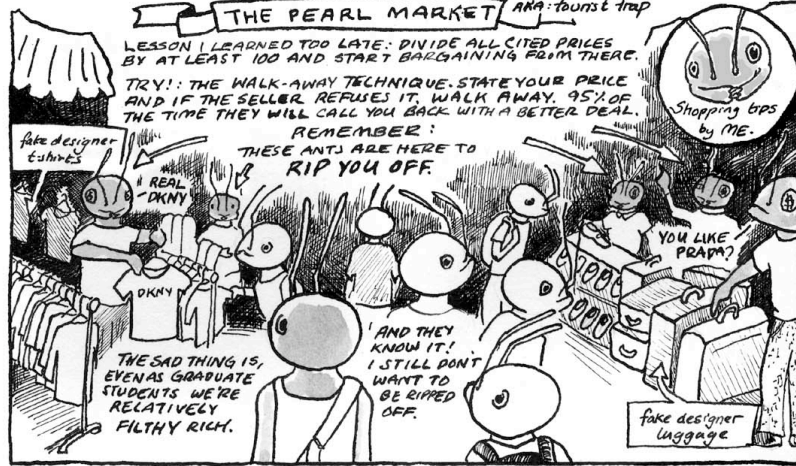
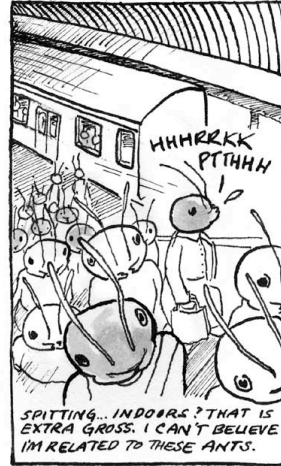
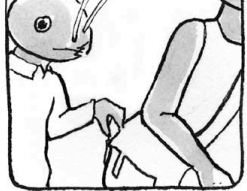
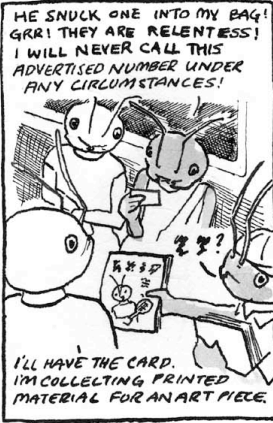
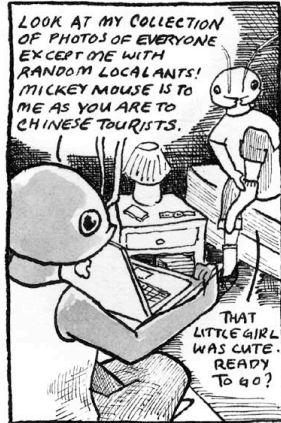
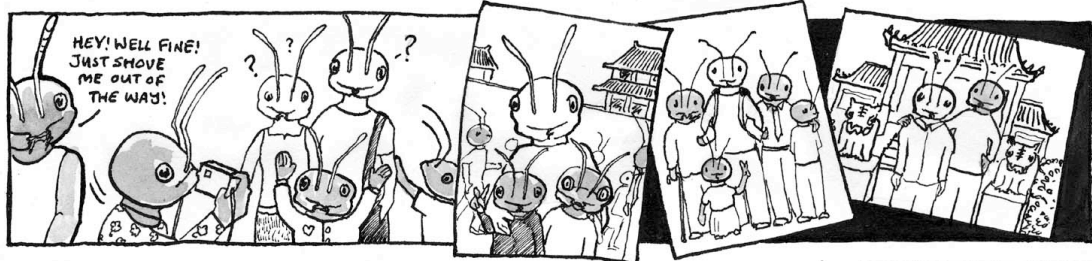
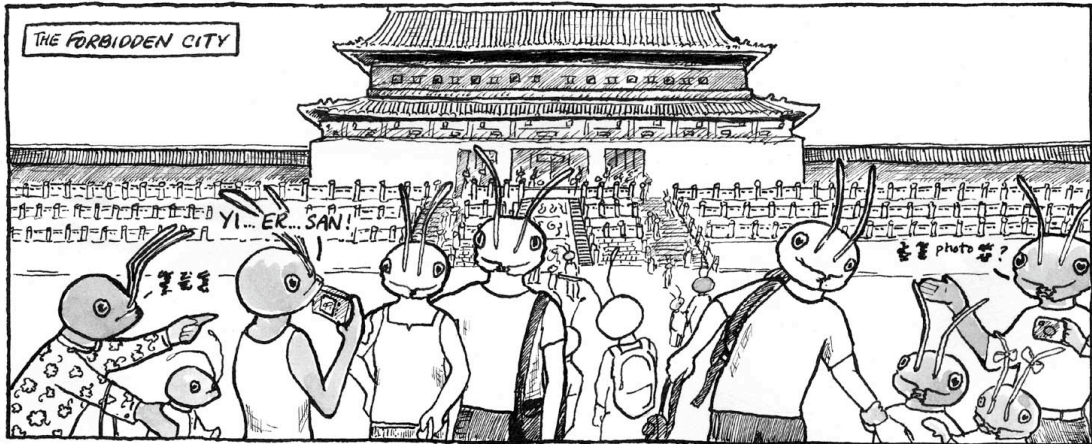
I'M ARRIVING A DAY LATER THAN THE OTHER STUDANTS. BET THEY'RE ALL JET-LAGGED

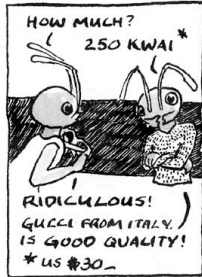
WONDER WHAT I'LL GET OUT OF THIS TRIP. ARTISTIC INSPIRATION?



Jennifer V. Zee

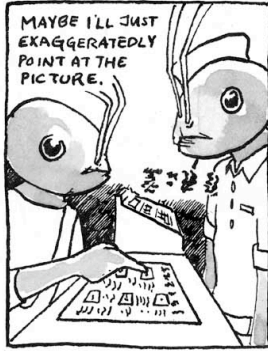








I CAN'T READ THE MENU...



MAYBE I'LL JUST EXAGGERATEDLY POINT AT THE PICTURE.



UM... I DON'T SPEAK MANTARIN... WHERE'S MY PHRASE BOOK? OK, OK, I'M NOT DEAF!

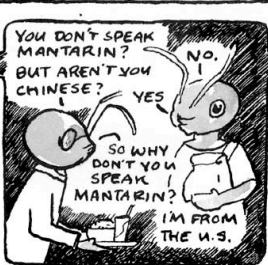


普通话普通话普通话



HE SAYS YOU STAY HERE OR TAKE OUT.

THAT'S ALL? WELL, TAKE OUT! I'M NOT STAYING!



YOU DON'T SPEAK MANTARIN? BUT AREN'T YOU CHINESE? YES

NO!

SO WHY DON'T YOU SPEAK MANTARIN? I'M FROM THE U.S.



YOU'RE CHINESE SO YOU SHOULD SPEAK MANTARIN.

OK! THANKS! BYE!

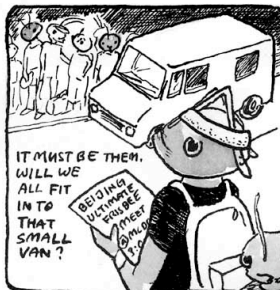
WHAT HAPPENED TO MY INCONSPICUOUSNESS? STOP LOOKING AT ME LIKE I'M A PEEK!



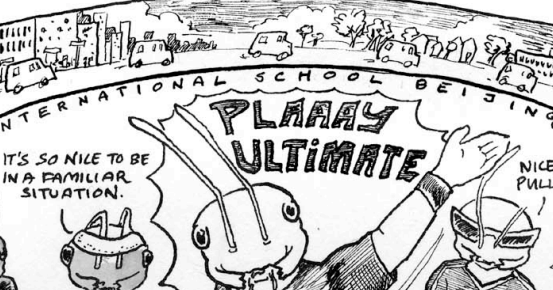
SO I WISH I'D TAKEN MANTARIN LESSONS.

OH, CHEER UP! LOOK AT ALL THESE PIRATED DVDS I GOT!

I NEED TO PLAY ULTIMATE...



IT MUST BE THEM. WILL WE ALL FIT INTO THAT SMALL VAN?



IT'S SO NICE TO BE IN A FAMILIAR SITUATION.

PLAAAAY ULTIMATE

NICE PULL



WE'VE COME A LONG WAY TO PLAY...

WELL, THERE'S NO GRASS IN THE CITY THAT YOU'RE ALLOWED TO STEP ON.



GO DARK

IT'S LIKE A SLICE OF THE U.S. HERE IN BEIJING! EXCEPT EVERYONE IS FLUENT BI-LINGUAL... THESE MANTARIN SPEAKING CAUCASIAN ANTS PUT ME TO SHAME!



PLAY MORE ULTIMATE



NO FIRST PASS

THE CULTURE OF ULTIMATE DISC IS UNIVERSAL. WHAT EVER COUNTRY YOU'RE IN, THE LOCAL PLAYERS ARE ALWAYS MOST WELCOMING!



STACK UP! FIRST CUT, PICK FORCE FLICK NO STRIKE DUMP STALL FOUR UP

AHH. A LANGUAGE THAT I UNDERSTAND! I'M NOT A MISFIT HERE.



I'VE FORGOTTEN THAT I'M IN BEIJING!



PANT... PANT... ACK! I CAN'T BREATHE PROPERLY. MY LUNGS HURT! EVEN 40 MILES OUT OF THE CITY?

YOU'LL GET USED TO IT. IT'S THE AIR POLLUTION. NEXT YOU GET BEIJING COUGH. WHY D'YA THINK EVERYONE SPITS SO MUCH?

I HAD TROUBLE BREATHING TOO, WHILE I WAS RIDING MY BIKE AROUND.
I WONDER IF ALL BEIJING ANTS HAVE RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS.

MAYBE I SHOULD SAY I'M JAPANESE. THEN NO-ONE WOULD EXPECT ME TO SPEAK MANTARIN.

I TELL ANTS I'M KOREAN AND THEY STILL EXPECT ME TO SPEAK MANTARIN! IT'S NO EXCUSE.

PRETENDING TO BE JAPANESE MIGHTN'T BE THE BEST IDEA. I HEAR THERE'S A LINGERING ANTI-JAPANESE SENTIMENT.

STILL?
HEY. I THINK WE'RE LOST.

ARE MY EYES DECEIVING ME? THAT LOOKS LIKE A KOREAN BBQ RESTAURANT ANYONE HUNGRY?

TURN RIGHT?
DOES THAT COUNT AS A LEFT?

THE OLD GUY SAID 2ND LEFT FROM THE T-INTERSECTION

THE HUTONG

I'M HAVING A GREAT TIME IN BEIJING

I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE!

YEAH, I'VE BEEN LEARNING AND EXPLORING A LOT

I'M FULL...

LOOKS LIKE THE CHICKEN IS DONE.

THE PANCAKE IS DELICIOUS!

WHO WANTS MORE DUCK?

I LOVE THE ANTS HERE!

THEY ARE SO CUTE.

BEIJING NEEDS A MAJOR MAKE OVER BEFORE THE 2008 OLYMPICS.

IT'S PERFECT! I'M STARVING.

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HUTONG!

ETAXI

GUO MAO*

* Hotel location

IN THE U.S., I FIT IN 98% OF THE TIME. PERHAPS IT'S LIKE ANY ANT; I EXPECT TO FIND THAT REMAINING 2% OF FIT IN THE COUNTRY OF MY ANCESTORS.

BUT THERE'S NOTHING HERE THAT I IDENTIFY WITH. NOTHING THAT I WANT TO INTEGRATE INTO MY BEING.

THE ANTS HERE DON'T REPRESENT ME IN ANY WAY.

I SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED THIS. WHY SHOULD I BE ANY MORE IN SYNC WITH CHINA CHINESE ANTS THAN THE OTHER STUDENTS?

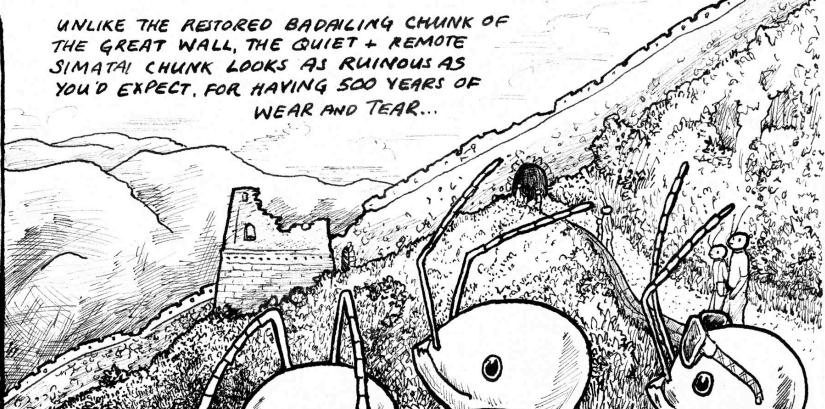
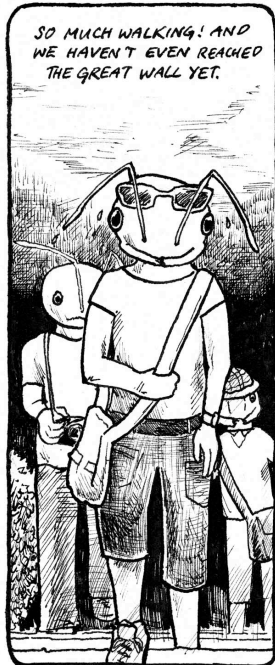
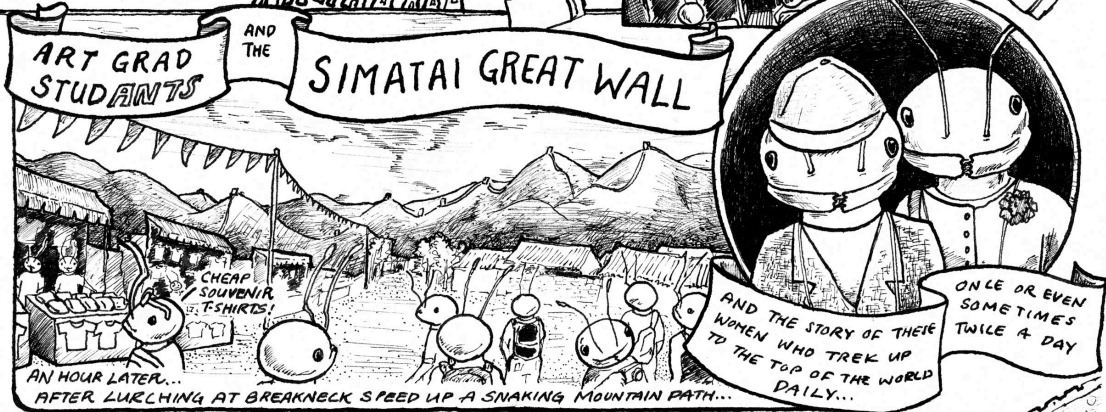
LIKE I'D HAVE SOME INTRINSIC CAPABILITY TO COMMUNICATE VIA COMMON CHINESE BRAIN WAVES THOUGH I COMPLETELY LACK MANTARIN SKILLS. HA.

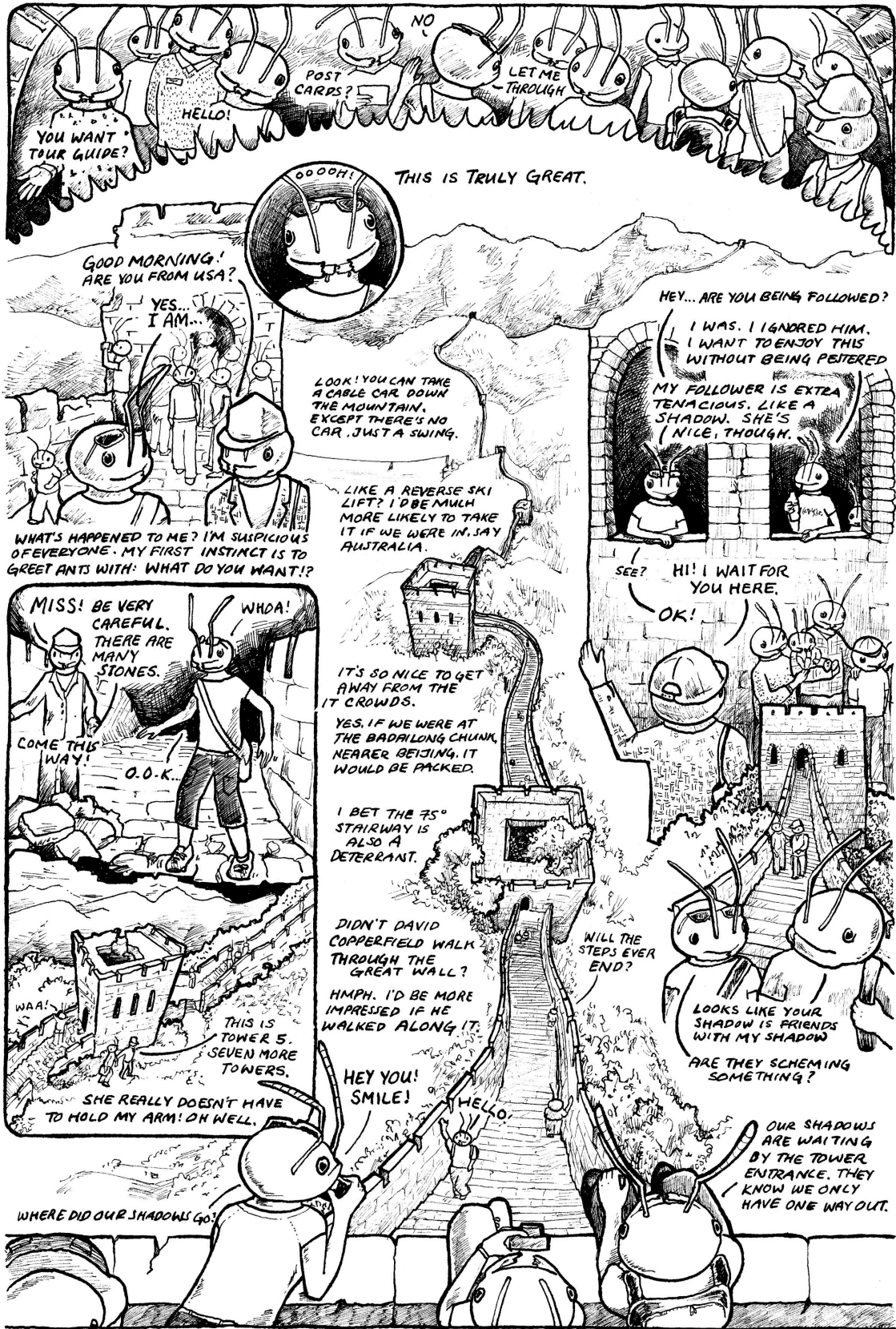
DOES THIS MEAN I'M CULTURALLY AMERICAN WITH CHINESE ETHNICITY AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE VALUES?

IT'S NOT AS IF ANYONE I KNOW OR CARE ABOUT EVER CONNECTS ME TO CHINA CHINESE ANTS ANYWAYS.

SO WHAT DOES ALL THIS MATTER? AT LEAST I HAVE A DEFINED ETHNICITY.

LIFO





YOU WANT TOUR GUIDE?
HELLO!
POST CARDS?
NO
LET ME THROUGH

DOOOH!
THIS IS TRULY GREAT.

GOOD MORNING!
ARE YOU FROM USA?

YES...
I AM...

LOOK! YOU CAN TAKE
A CABLE CAR DOWN
THE MOUNTAIN,
EXCEPT THERE'S NO
CAR. JUST A SWING.

LIKE A REVERSE SKI
LIFT? I'D BE MUCH
MORE LIKELY TO TAKE
IT IF WE WERE IN, SAY
AUSTRALIA.

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO ME? I'M SUSPICIOUS
OF EVERYONE. MY FIRST INSTINCT IS TO
GREET ANTS WITH: WHAT DO YOU WANT!?

HEY... ARE YOU BEING FOLLOWED?

I WAS. I IGNORED HIM.
I WANT TO ENJOY THIS
WITHOUT BEING PEETERED

MY FOLLOWER IS EXTRA
TENACIOUS. LIKE A
SHADOW. SHE'S
NICE, THOUGH.

SEE? HI! I WAIT FOR
YOU HERE.

OK!

MISS! BE VERY
CAREFUL.
THERE ARE
MANY
STONES.

WHOA!

COME THIS
WAY!

O.O.K...

IT'S SO NICE TO GET
AWAY FROM THE
IT CROWDS.

YES. IF WE WERE AT
THE BADFONG CHUNG,
NEARER BEIJING, IT
WOULD BE PACKED.

I BET THE 75°
STAIRWAY IS
ALSO A
DETTERRANT.

DIDN'T DAVID
COOPERFIELD WALK
THROUGH THE
GREAT WALL?

HMPH. I'D BE MORE
IMPRESSED IF HE
WALKED ALONG IT.

WILL THE
STEPS EVER
END?

LOOKS LIKE YOUR
SHADOW IS FRIENDS
WITH MY SHADOW

ARE THEY SCHEMING
SOMETHING?

WAA!
THIS IS
TOWER 5.
SEVEN MORE
TOWERS.

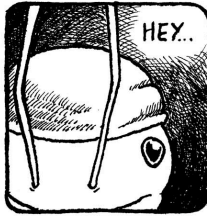
SHE REALLY DOESN'T HAVE
TO HOLD MY ARM! OH WELL.

HEY YOU!
SMILE!

HELLO.

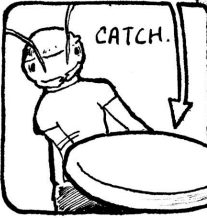
OUR SHADOWS
ARE WAITING
BY THE TOWER
ENTRANCE. THEY
KNOW WE ONLY
HAVE ONE WAY OUT.

WHERE DID OUR SHADOWS GO?



HEY... THE GREAT WALL ULTIMATE DISC MOMENT...

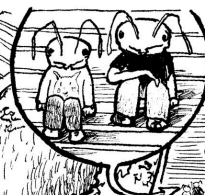
NOT A STANDARD WEIGHT OR DIMENSIONED ULTIMATE DISC - MAKES ME NERVOUS



CATCH.



WHAT?



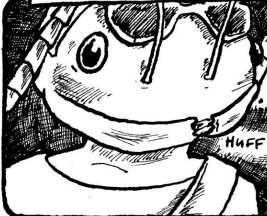
CHILDREN SIT TO CATCH THEIR BREATH DURING A RACE TO THE TOP (GOOD LUCK KIDDOS)



THE STEEPEST IS YET TO COME

BACKPACKING AUSTRALIAN REPORTS THAT THE STEEPEST IS YET TO COME

BACK ON THE ROAD



I MUST KEEP UP WITH THE GUYS! CAN'T LET THEM REACH THE TOP FIRST AND HAVE THEM WONDER WHERE ALL THE WOMEN ARE. NOW I FINALLY APPRECIATE ULTIMATE DISC NAVY SEALS TRAINING. ... AND... HOW IS IT THAT MY SHADOW HAS NO PROBLEM KEEPING UP!

SPRITELY, ELDERLY COUPLE, SURPRISINGLY MOBILE, LIKELY TO BE RETURNING FROM DAILY MOUNTAIN TOP TAI-CHI SESSION



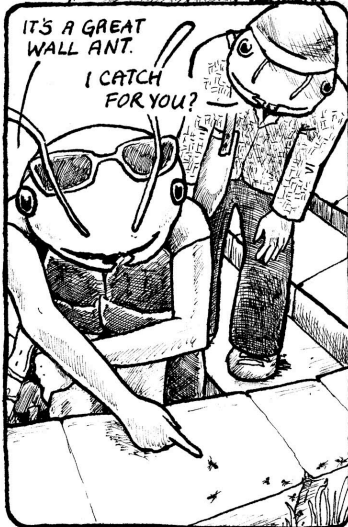
DO YOU CLIMB THE GREAT WALL EVERY DAY?
YOUR ENGLISH IS VERY GOOD.
WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

OH YES, SOME TIMES TWO TIMES IN ONE DAY.
THANK YOU. I TRY TALKING A LOT TO TOURISTS.
I LIVE ON A FARM IN THE VALLEY. MY HUSBAND IS A FARMER.

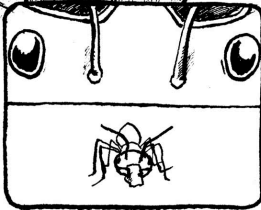
DID YOU SEE THAT? THEY MADE IT THIS FAR IN HEELS.

NOW... LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF ONE OF THE WONDERS OF THE WORLD... WAIT IS SHE MAKING THIS UP? NO... SHE SEEMS GENUINE...

I'VE NOTICED - IT'S A CHARACTERISTIC OF WOMEN IN CHINA - WEAR YOUR BEST FOR EVERY EXCURSION.



IT'S A GREAT WALL ANT.
I CATCH FOR YOU?



NO THANKS

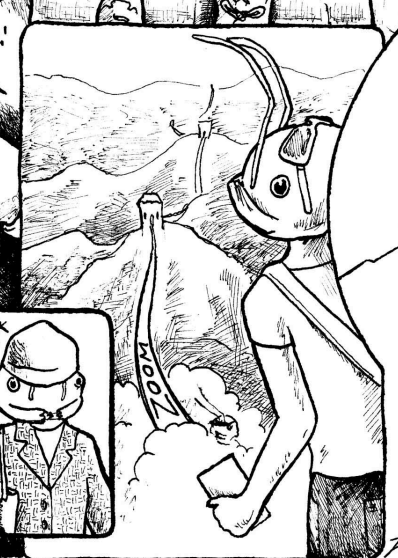
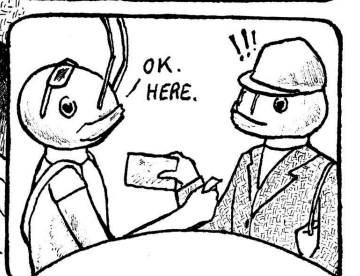
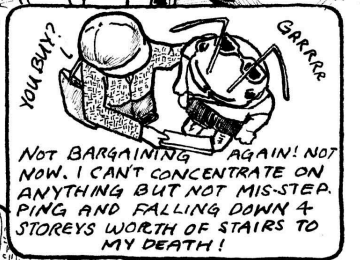
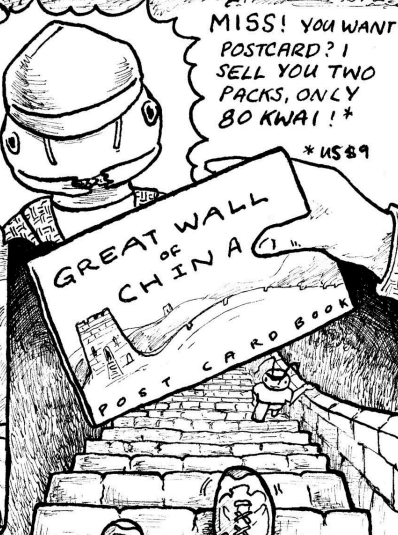
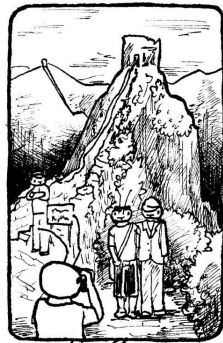
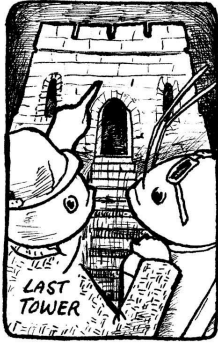
THAT WAS TOO WEIRD.



WAIT A MINUTE! HOW DID HE GET THAT CART UP HERE?

YOU WANT ICE WATER? ICE CREAM?

THE CART DOES HAVE WHEELS.



PRESENTING... YET ANOTHER JUICE BOTTLE TO ADD TO OUR COLLECTION. AMERICAN BOTTLED BEVERAGES AREN'T NEARLY AS FUN AS THOSE IN CHINA!



WHEN I WAS AT THE SUPERMARKET, THERE WAS ONE ATTENDANT PER AISLE...

SHE'D FOLLOW ME AROUND 'TIL I EXITED THE AISLE, WHERE UPON ANOTHER TOOK OVER.

BYE BYE MISS

HELLO MISS

ARE THEY SALES WOMANTS? DO THEY THINK IM GOING TO SHOP LIET? I DON'T LIKE HAVING MY EVERY GROCERY STORE MOVE TO BE WATCHED!

I'VE NOTICED THAT TOO.. EVERYWHERE I GO IN BEIJING, SOME ANT IS KEEPING AN EYE ON ME... HEY, WANT TO GO TO THE PARK?

ENOUGH WITH THE STARING! IT'S HARD TO ADAPT TO A CULTURE WHERE STARING ISN'T RUDE.

SO... HOW DID YOU LEARN TO SPEAK FLUENT MANTARIN?

I TOOK MANTARIN COURSES AS AN UNDERGRAD, AND STUDIED ABROAD IN BEIJING..

I'LL STARE BACK. THAT'S RIGHT, I'M LOOKING IN(OR)HOUSEY AT YOU. HA.

ONCE I STARTED LIVING HERE, I IMPROVED A LOT, I HAVE FUN TALKING TO LOCALS..

NO-ONE EXPECTS A BIG, HAIRY WHITE ANT TO SPEAK MANTARIN. I DO GET TIRED OF BEING MISTAKEN FOR A TOURIST.

WHY DO I FEEL SO VINDICTIVE & OFFENDED? THEY'RE JUST CURIOUS..

AFTERALL, WHAT DO WE TOURISTS DO? GAWK AND STARE AT EVERYTHING.



游园券
RITAN PARK
WELCOME
FARE 1¥

①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

SO... WHAT ARE WE ALLOWED TO DO?

IS THERE AN OPEN SPACE WHERE WE CAN THROW THE DISC AROUND?

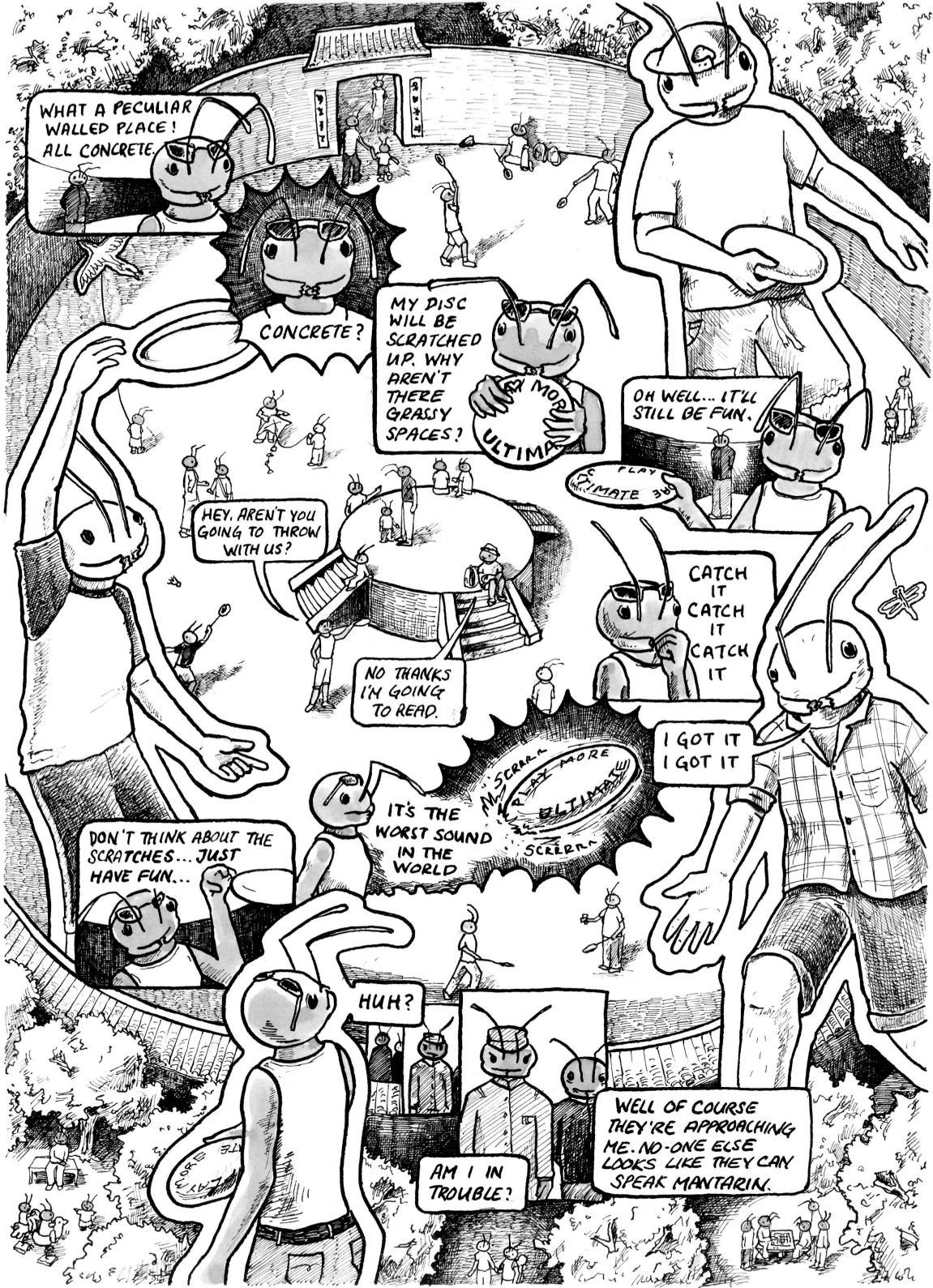
THERE WAS A PLACE WHERE ANTS WERE FLYING KITES OVER THIS WAY...

IT'S MAO'S LITTLE RED BOOK

CONVENIENTLY PRE-PAINTED BADMINTON COURT LINES. THEY'RE EVERYWHERE!

DUCKS ON THE GRASS, WHERE HUMANTS AREN'T ALLOWED. WHAT ARE ALL THOSE

OLD GUYS WATCHING? CHINESE CHESS... PLAYERS DON'T SEEM TO MIND THE ATTENTION.



WHAT A PECULIAR WALLED PLACE! ALL CONCRETE.

CONCRETE?

MY DISC WILL BE SCRATCHED UP. WHY AREN'T THERE GRASSY SPACES?

LET ME SHOW YOU THE ULTIMATE

OH WELL... IT'LL STILL BE FUN.

HEY, AREN'T YOU GOING TO THROW WITH US?

NO THANKS I'M GOING TO READ.

CATCH IT CATCH IT CATCH IT

I GOT IT I GOT IT

DON'T THINK ABOUT THE SCRATCHES... JUST HAVE FUN...

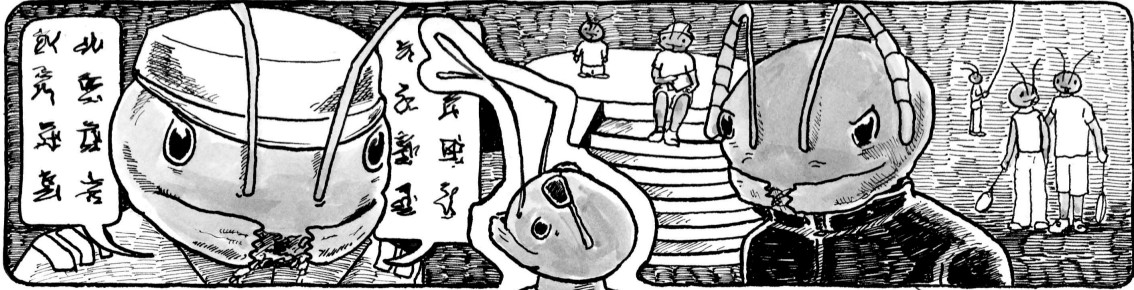
IT'S THE WORST SOUND IN THE WORLD

SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH

HUH?

AM I IN TROUBLE?

WELL OF COURSE THEY'RE APPROACHING ME. NO-ONE ELSE LOOKS LIKE THEY CAN SPEAK MANTARIN.



I DON'T UNDERSTAND A WORD ... BUT SOMETHING

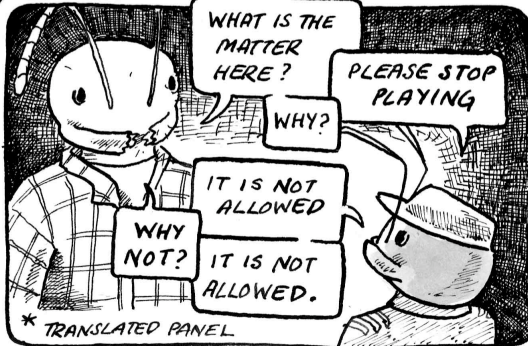
TELLS ME WE WE WON'T BE PLAYING ANY MORE

THIS OLD GUY! IT'S AS IF HE COMPLAINED TO THE GUARD ABOUT US...MAYBE

I'LL TRY PUTTING ON MY CUTE FACE....



到底...?



WHAT IS THE MATTER HERE?

PLEASE STOP PLAYING

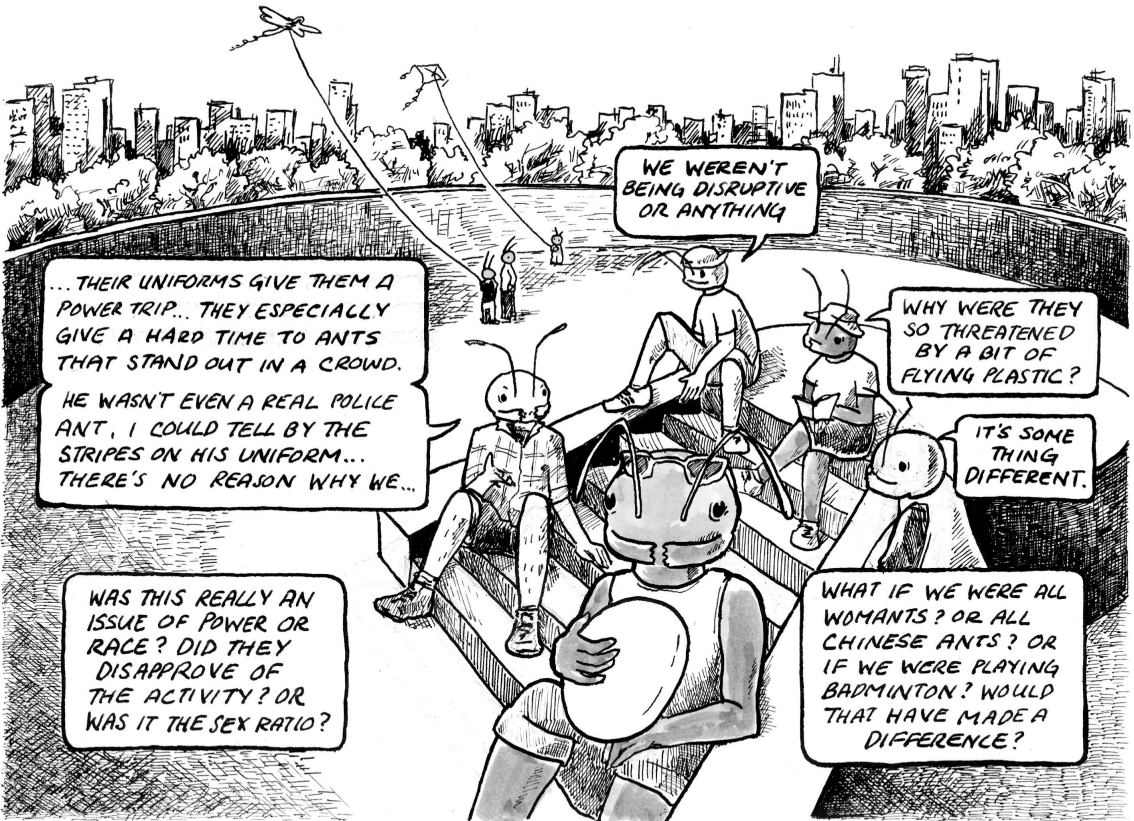
WHY?

IT IS NOT ALLOWED
WHY NOT?
IT IS NOT ALLOWED.

* TRANSLATED PANEL



MAYBE WE SHOULD'VE ASKED THEM TO JOIN US



WE WEREN'T BEING DISRUPTIVE OR ANYTHING

... THEIR UNIFORMS GIVE THEM A POWER TRIP... THEY ESPECIALLY GIVE A HARD TIME TO ANTS THAT STAND OUT IN A CROWD.

HE WASN'T EVEN A REAL POLICE ANT, I COULD TELL BY THE STRIPES ON HIS UNIFORM... THERE'S NO REASON WHY WE...

WHY WERE THEY SO THREATENED BY A BIT OF FLYING PLASTIC?

IT'S SOME THING DIFFERENT.

WAS THIS REALLY AN ISSUE OF POWER OR RACE? DID THEY DISAPPROVE OF THE ACTIVITY? OR WAS IT THE SEX RATIO?

WHAT IF WE WERE ALL WOMANTS? OR ALL CHINESE ANTS? OR IF WE WERE PLAYING BADMINTON? WOULD THAT HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE?

Jeffrey V. Lee © 2005

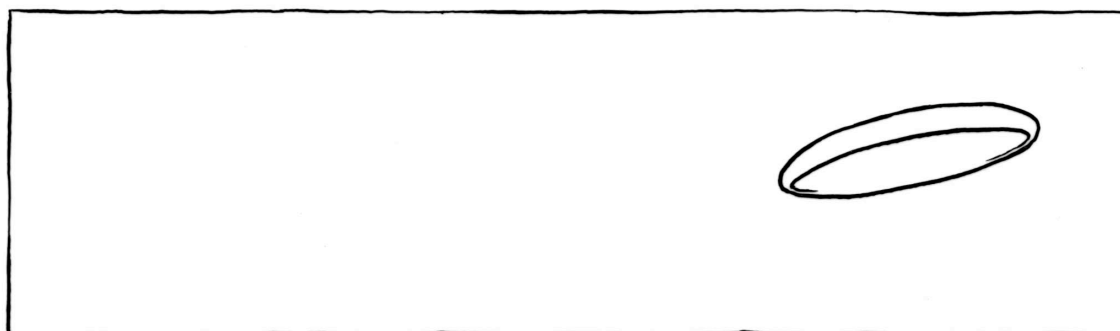


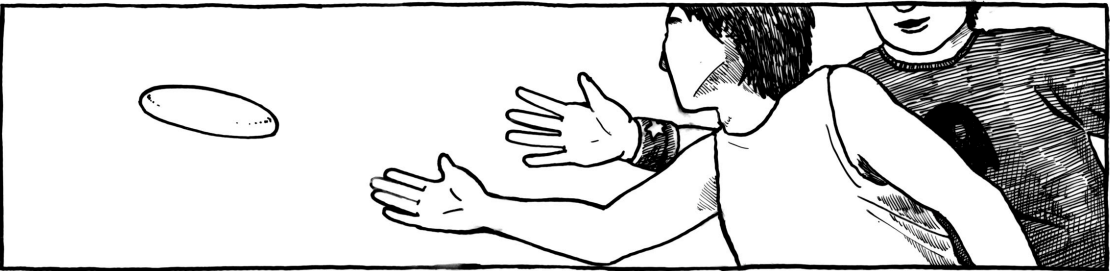
biceps

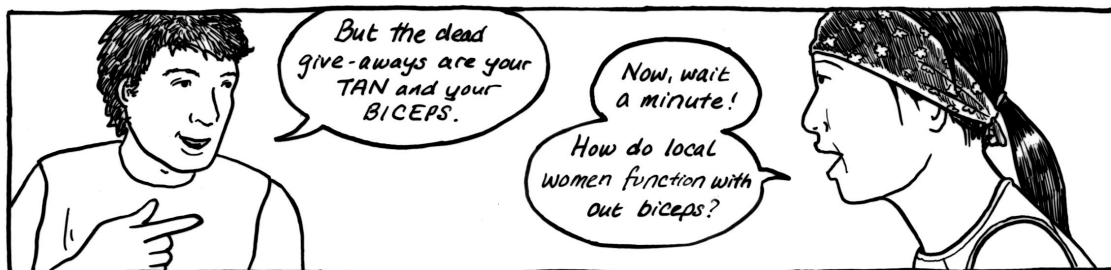
Jennifer V. Zee

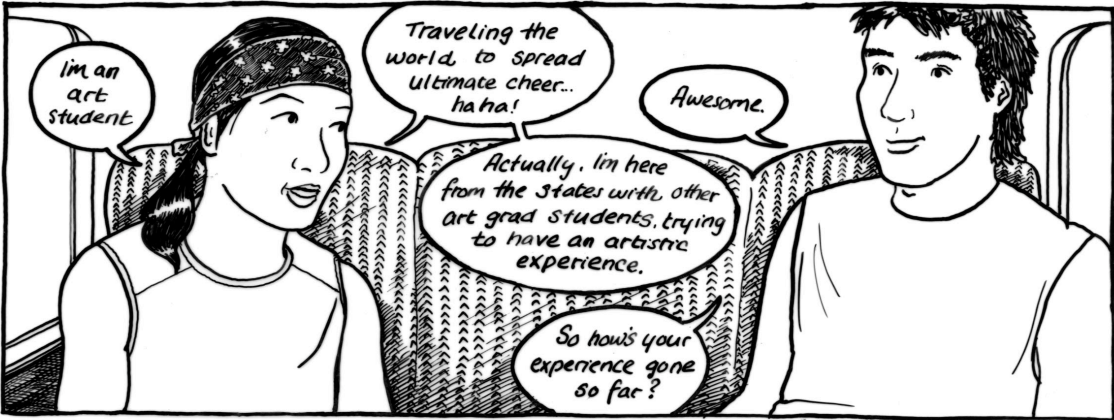


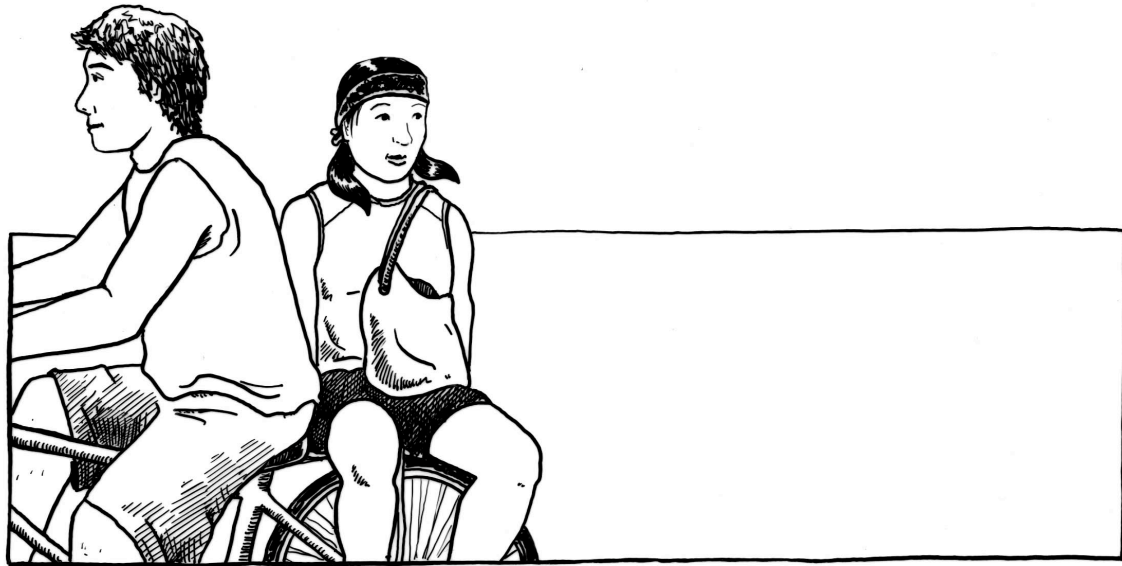
a week earlier

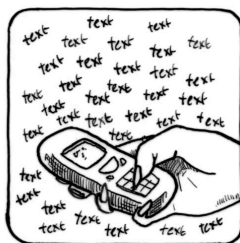
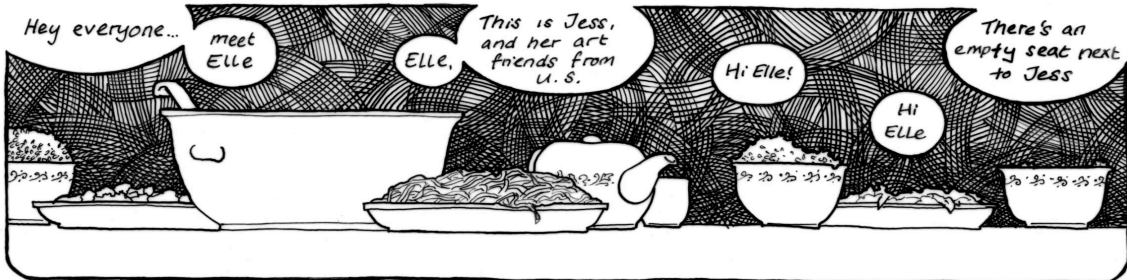


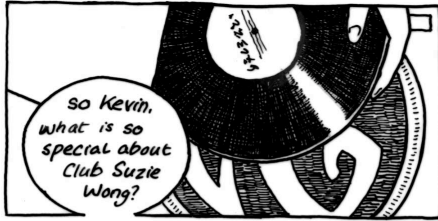








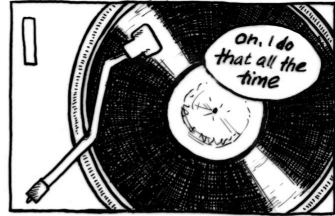




so Kevin, what is so special about Club Suzie Wong?



Last time I was here... the DJ spun such sweet tunes, he had the ladies dancing topless on tables!



Oh, I do that all the time



No.

HELL yeah! Really?



KEFUN!

Whoa! Elle!



Less go dancing!

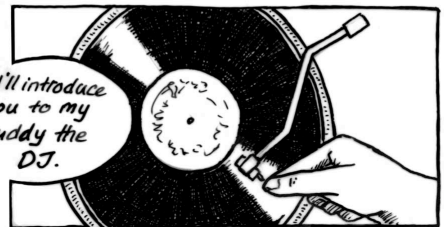
Elle, Do you remember my friend Jess... uh....

No worries. She looks busy... with her friends?



no... she mentioned Portuguese tourists...

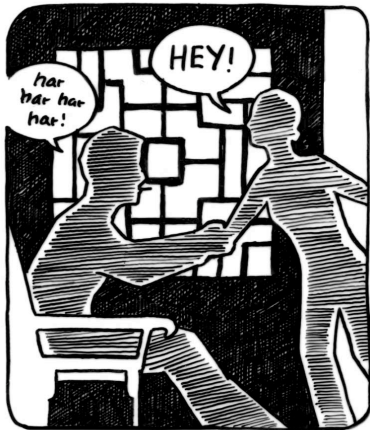
anyways Jess, come're



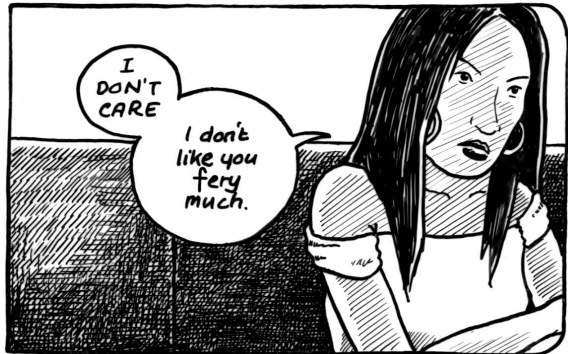
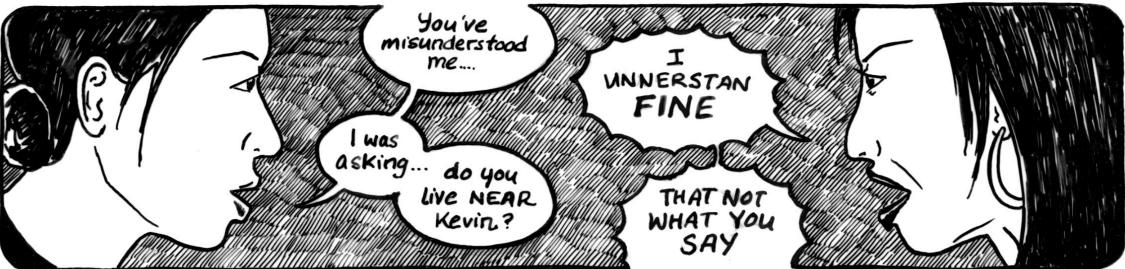
I'll introduce you to my buddy the DJ.

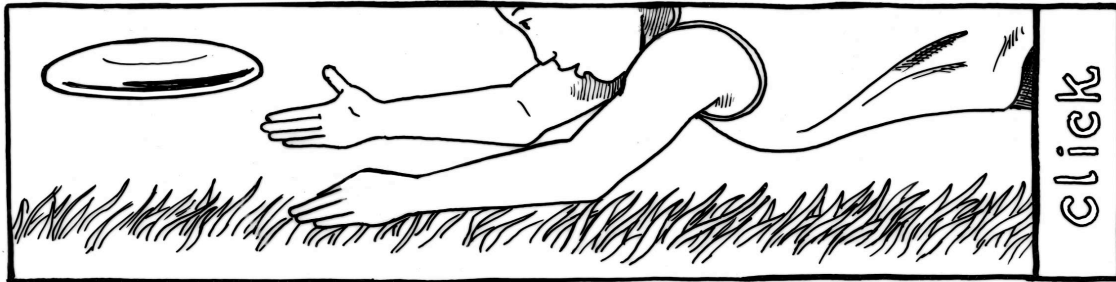




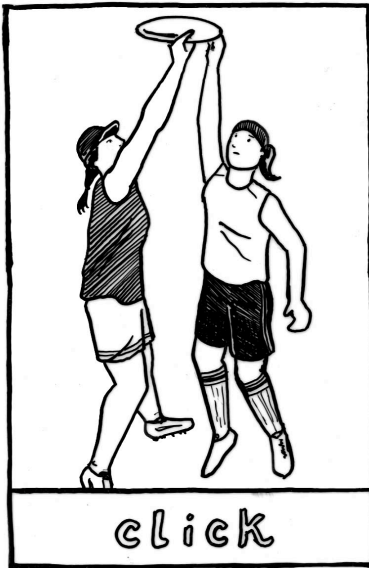








click



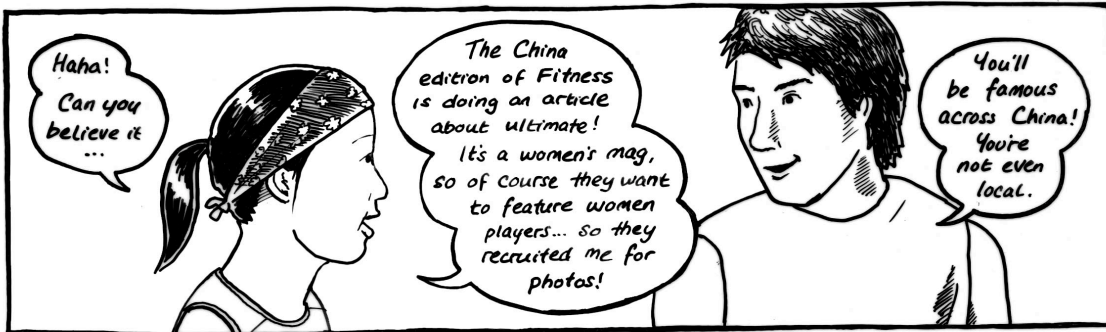
click



你最喜欢
玩什么？

She's asking:
What do
you like best
about
ultimate?

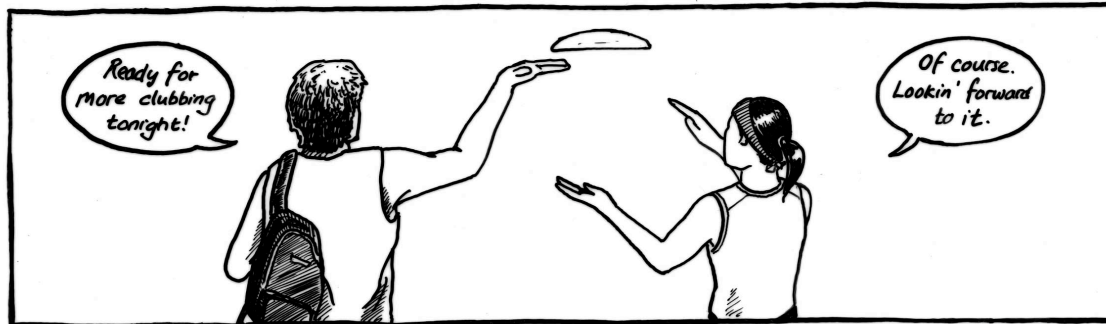
Uh... the positive
energy generated
from the great sense
of fun that all
ultimate players have
universally!



Haha!
Can you
believe it
...

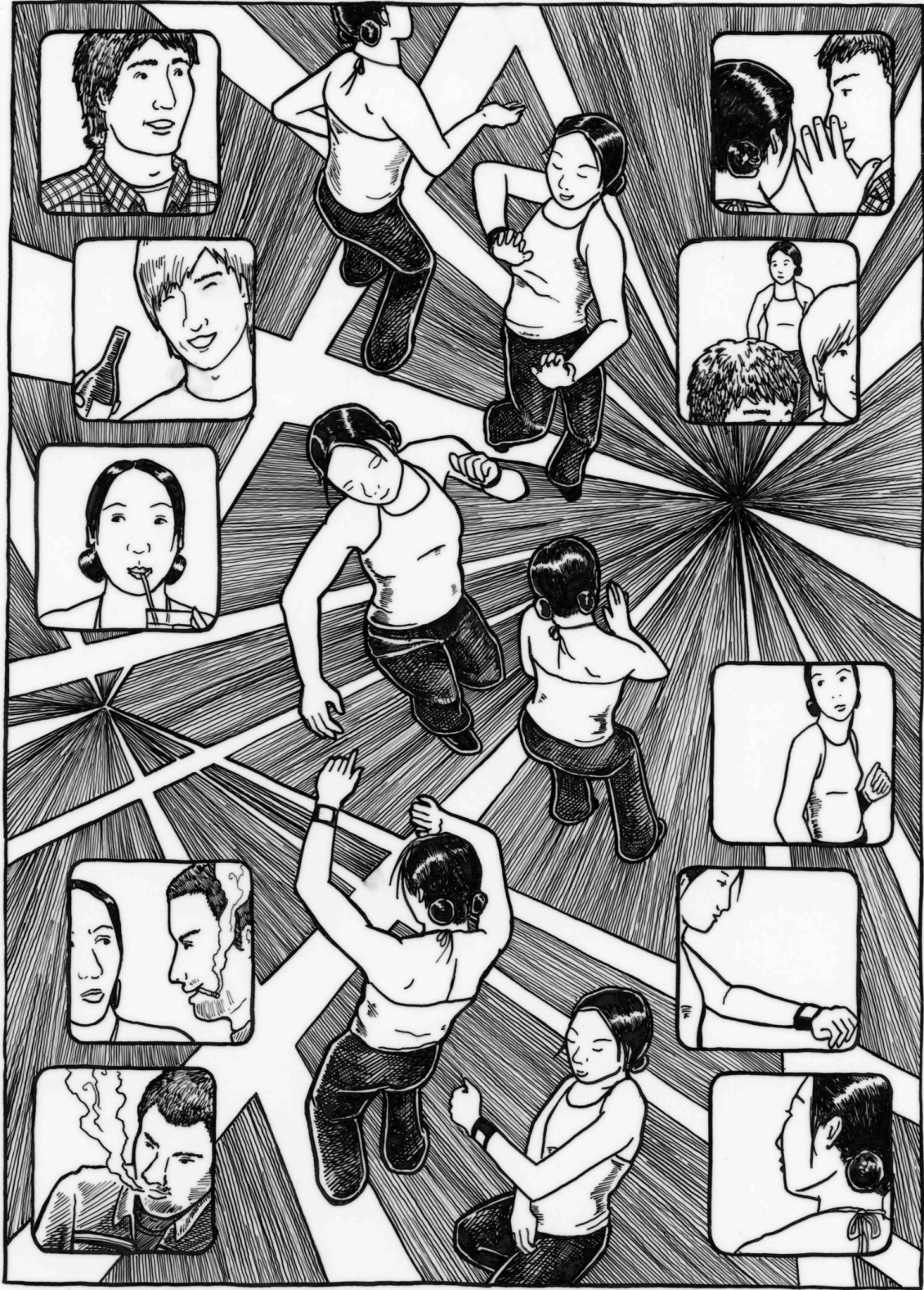
The China
edition of Fitness
is doing an article
about ultimate!
It's a women's mag,
so of course they want
to feature women
players... so they
recruited me for
photos!

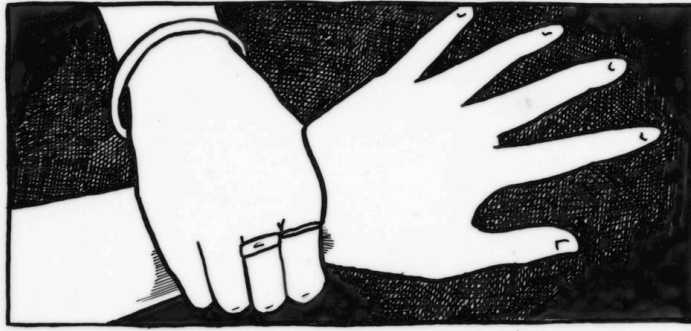
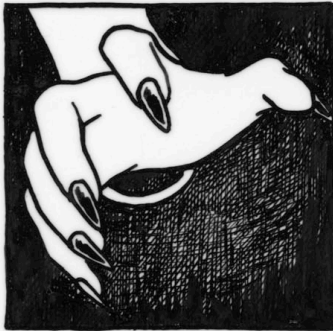
You'll
be famous
across China!
You're
not even
local.

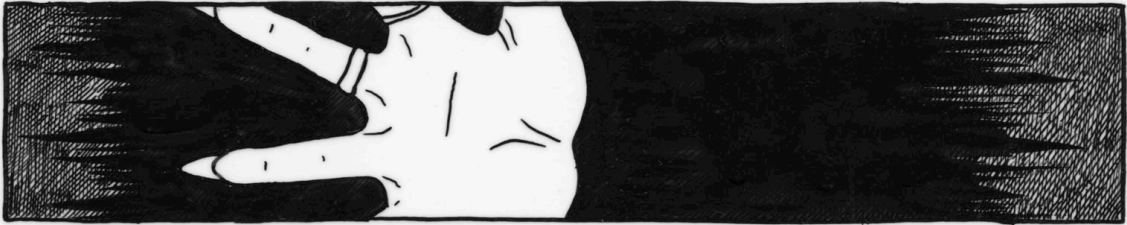


Ready for
more clubbing
tonight!

Of course.
Lookin' forward
to it.

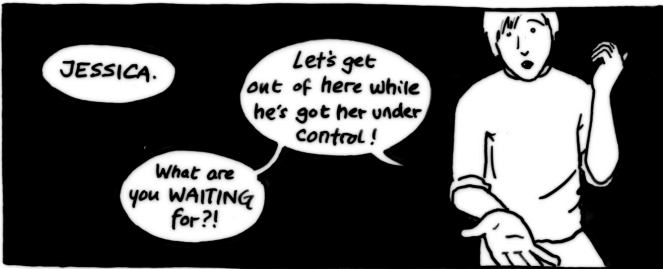
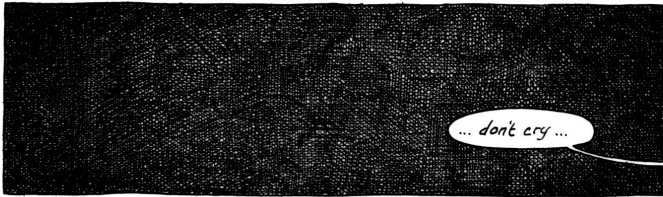




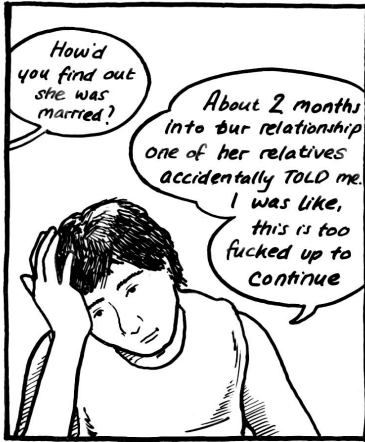












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PLAY MORE ULTIMATE 

Discussion of creative work

Comics are often considered to be a lesser form of visual art or literature: one that is reserved for children or for depicting non-serious matters. Alternatively, comics can be viewed as a hybrid form of visual art and literature. From such a perspective, one can draw parallels of comics to hybrid cultural identities. Both are gaining recognition in their own rights. As hybrid identities are not simply a Frankenstein amalgamation of different cultural parts, comics are not simply a combination of visual art and literature. “Studies have shown that comics are a language: they combine to constitute a weave of writing and art which has its own syntax, grammar and conventions, and which can communicate ideas in a totally unique fashion.” (Sabin p.8) Comics thus possess a complexity that challenges audience interpretation in ways unique from television, books, or film. In my work, I hope to use the refreshingly different language of comics to draw readers into my story. I have tried to embed visual clues in my comic, and to vary composition, to encourage my readers to be observant, and to search out details that help shape the story. I take advantage of the reputation of comics to be concerned with light-hearted matters, to draw readers in to my story that addresses some serious themes.

The Title Biceps

The title *Biceps* pays homage to the light-heartedness that one expects to find in comics. Of course, there are also other reasons for this title. It refers to a comment that Kevin makes to Jessica. He tells her that he could recognize that she was not a China Chinese woman because of her tan and her biceps. Pale skin and thinness are physical attributes valued by modern China Chinese women, as exemplified by Chinese models in advertisements. Muscle bulk and tanned skin are associated with menial labor, and are considered unattractive. While thinness is also a beauty standard in western societies, toned or athletic women are also considered to be attractive, and tans are desirable. Thus “biceps” makes reference to the hybridity of Jessica’s cultural background.

“Chinese” and “women” are not likely to be the first words a person would associate with “biceps.” I wish to forge a new association between these words, in attempt to dispel the stereotype that all Chinese or Chinese American women are unathletic, and physically weak. I am often met with great surprise when someone discovers that I play ultimate disc on a competitive college team. “But... isn’t that a lot of running?” I was once asked, and I couldn’t help but think that some of the surprise is due to my being ethnically Chinese. I like to see other Asian American women on the ultimate field, because they too have worked against the stereotype, and have taken the initiative to pursue a sport.

The word “biceps” suggests strength. Feminism was not intended to be one of my major themes, but I do like the feminist overtone that the title suggests. The

comics world is still largely dominated by Caucasian men. It is unusual for a woman to be creating comics, much less a minority woman. Comics are a medium in which there is a great potential for new voices to be heard. I hope to make a statement with my first impression on to the comics scene. I want the title to let people know that the story is about strong women who refuse to fall silently into the cultural categories into which they are traditionally placed.

At my thesis presentation, it was brought to my attention by Brad Smith that the Latin meaning of “biceps” is “double-headed”. This is in fact, also an appropriate interpretation of the title as it makes reference to dual cultural identities.

Biceps is not simply a story, but I consider it to be my way of being a cultural activist. Socially, I am too much an introvert to seek activism by vocal or behavioral means. However, comics are the means by which I have found my voice.

Self-Representation in Biceps

Art StudANTS featured a main character that was in fact myself in disguise as an ant-headed human. I intentionally made myself anonymous in this case, because although I wanted the stories to be based on my own experiences, I felt reluctant to reveal too much of my actual self to my audience. Prior to my comic work, my art has been relatively impersonal.

In the project *Biceps* I decided to take an extra step, and to use my own image in my comic book. I was relatively new to drawing humans in comic form, and completely new to drawing self-representations. I drew the character that represented myself to appear as I really do, but to maintain some distance from this character, I named her Jessica.

Not surprisingly, I encountered new difficulties, and *Biceps* evolved as I progressed with the project. One of the major changes in project direction was initiated by a critique with Phoebe Gloeckner. Having examined my initial set of nine penciled pages, Professor Gloeckner firmly impressed upon me that this first draft was unsuccessful in that the story was not actually *effectively* about me.

Making My Story about Me

I was overly preoccupied with story accuracy, and included details to a point where the focus of the story was no longer on myself. Jessica fell into the background, as I gave more concern to the representation of my companions who were also on the Beijing trip (Figure 2). In addition to this, the drawings of myself were indistinct and unmemorable. My character’s expressions, poses, gestures and words gave the reader little sense of who the main character was, and less reason still to care about her. Professor Gloeckner strongly recommended that I take photographs of myself, to discover *what I really look like*, and to question myself as to *who I am*. I was to project my identity through my comic character.

Figure 2. A sample penciled page from the first version of Biceps. It is not easy to distinguish who the main character is on this page as she is lost behind the details and conversation of other characters.



Figure 3. A sample sketch from the first version of Biceps. It is not apparent that Jessica (in the third and fourth panel) is ethnically Chinese.



In the meantime, a graduate seminar critique revealed an observation that fell along similar lines. Regarding Jessica, a fellow graduate student, Jim Leija, commented: “She doesn’t look Chinese.” (Figure 3) He went on to point out that Jessica being Chinese was obviously an important detail to my story. Byron Kim commented that the way I drew people made them to appear as generic children’s book illustrations, rather than characters.

It took some time to digest this feedback. I decided to restart my comic, and I began by taking a series of photographs of myself (Figures 4,5). This mini-project turned out to be self-revelatory, as most photographs I had previously seen of myself featured the same unnatural, photo-friendly expression and poses. The photographs allowed me to visually distinguish my unique facial features, which I incorporated into my drawing, thus making my character more distinct looking.

Figure 4. Self-portrait studies using a digital camera.



Figure 5. Self-portrait studies using a digital camera.



I have continually added to this library of images, which has also been useful as a reference when drawing difficult poses or hand gestures. Soon I found myself acting out various characters in my comic for my camera. This theatrical element was unexpected, but very helpful in my drawing (Figure 6).

I excised peripheral characters from the comic altogether, and I focused on bringing to light the personalities of the protagonist, antagonist and a few supportive characters. I also cut tangential events. I accepted that I should not feel egotistical about making myself the main subject.

Figure 6. Digital photographs taken as reference images for difficult figure poses, and the resulting line drawings based on the photos.

(a) Leaping for the disc



(b) Protecting self from attack scene



(c) Club dancing scene



Show, not Tell

I have a tendency to label my drawings, indicative of my biological illustration habits, which involve annotating diagrams. Professor Gloeckner suggested showing, rather than telling the reader, the story. This returns to the subject of reader engagement. By showing a story through well-designed drawing, a reader can make his or her own interpretation of a scene. Adding narration is not necessary, and might cause distraction from the images, should a reader skip from text to text.

The power of image should be maximized in comics. To me, this means that all details included in a panel are deliberate. It means that a character should be as much as possible, described through how he or she looks and behaves, as shown by the image. This means that instead of using a voice bubble to state: “I play ultimate all the time!” I have drawn Jessica with the physique of an ultimate player, and by her actions I show that she knows what she is doing on the ultimate field. In contrast, Elle is depicted as ultra-feminine, with long manicured nails, fussy clothes and plenty of jewelry, suggesting that she is not athletic. Situations can also be described entirely in pictures. Almost half of all the pages in *Biceps* are, in fact, devoid of text.

I use text in conversation bubbles, and I have been careful to avoid using this as a means to describe a situation that a reader can gather by observing the drawings. I therefore use the text to further enhance the reader’s understanding of

character personalities and backgrounds. Text was particularly useful in showing that Elle was not a native English speaker, and that Evan was a creep. Like details in images, the inclusion of text is deliberate and specific to revealing something about the character that is speaking.

Showing, rather than telling, was a constant consideration when I depicted myself. With each image of my character, I questioned: Do these images together show her as a complex, real, human being? I hope that I give readers enough clues to her personality so that eventually one might be able to make an educated guess at what Jessica is thinking just by her facial expression.

Art StudANTS in Beijing versus Biceps

Many of the reactions to *Biceps* were comments of comparison between it and my previous comic, *Art StudANTS*. In terms of composition, the strength of *Art StudANTS* is the building of environment. Dense, detail packed scenes conveyed the crowded, confusing, fast paced cityscape of Beijing. *Biceps* is more cinematic, with attention to use of foreground and background, and large areas of black or white, and focused on characters rather than on the environment. The content of the comics mirrored these differences. Whereas *Art StudANTS* told general stories in a travelogue-like manner, *Biceps* develops specific characters and is a relatively intimate story.

I used a different mental creative path in the production of each of the comics. The making of *Art StudANTS* was deconstructive in that I teased out the details of my stories and experiences, and visually splayed them out for the reader in a raw, unprocessed manner. I consider *Biceps* a constructive work, because at the point of creating this comic, I had spent a year and a half digesting the subject matter, and pulled together the story by melding my memories with larger themes and ideas. The drawings were consequently more planned and intentional, whereas in *Art StudANTS* has a feeling of freer, more spontaneous movement.

My Comic Influences

I have been influenced by other comic art, in terms of both style and content. I keep a small library of comics and graphic novels close at hand so that I can use them as references when I encounter difficulties with drawing. Many drawing problems have already been tackled by other comic artists, and it is a short cut to learn from their work. For example, I envisioned the background of *Biceps* club scenes to be a thick, heavy black, and thus looked to the crosshatching employed by Edward Gorey for the background of many dismal scenes (Figure 7). I sought also to vary background texture, and to achieve different shades of grey. I searched for ways to fill in backgrounds with shades of grey. Osamu Tezuka has a mastery of pen and ink backgrounds (amongst many other comic features), and I searched through *Buddha* to see how he handled textures (Figure 8). When I was stumped by the drawing of head hair, I referred to Adrian Tomine's work, which

features a diversity of everyday people. His drawings have clued me in as to how to draw the reflection of light off of a head of dark hair (Figure 9). Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan the Smartest Kind On Earth* and *The Acme Novelty Library No. 16* use creative composition draw the reader around the comic page, thus delivering information in a unique, sometimes puzzle-like fashion (Figure 10). Ware's work has encouraged me to explore composition beyond left to right, and up to down.

Figure 7. A scene from Edward Gorey's *The Object Lesson in Amphigorey*, demonstrating Gorey's use of cross hatching to create a rich texture.

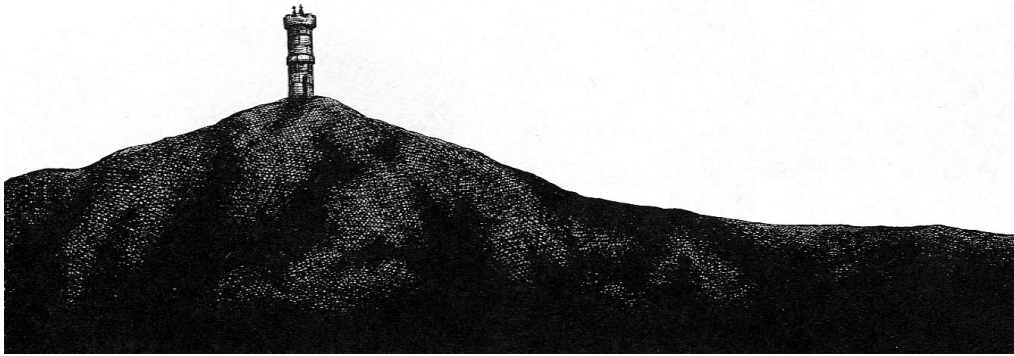


Figure 8. Panel from Osamu Tezuka's *Buddha Vol. 1 Kapilavastu*. An example of the texture that Tezuka creates in his comics.

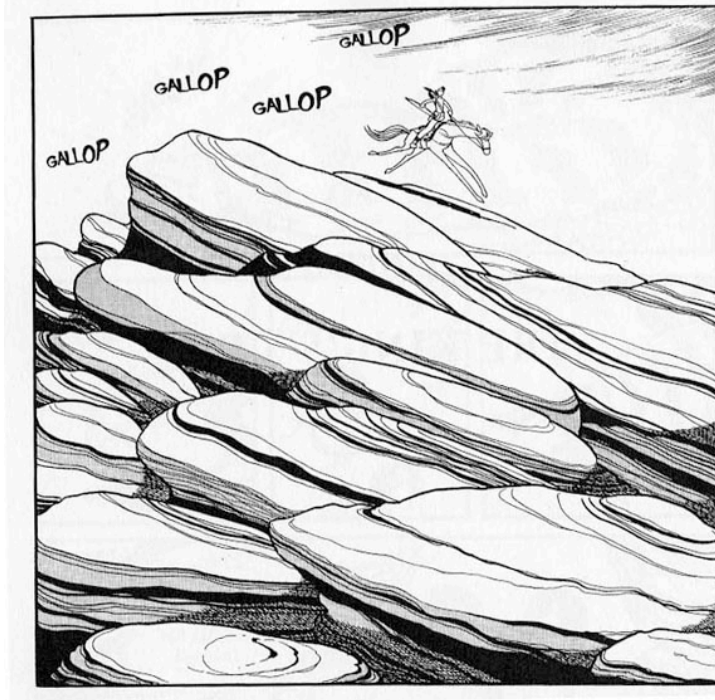


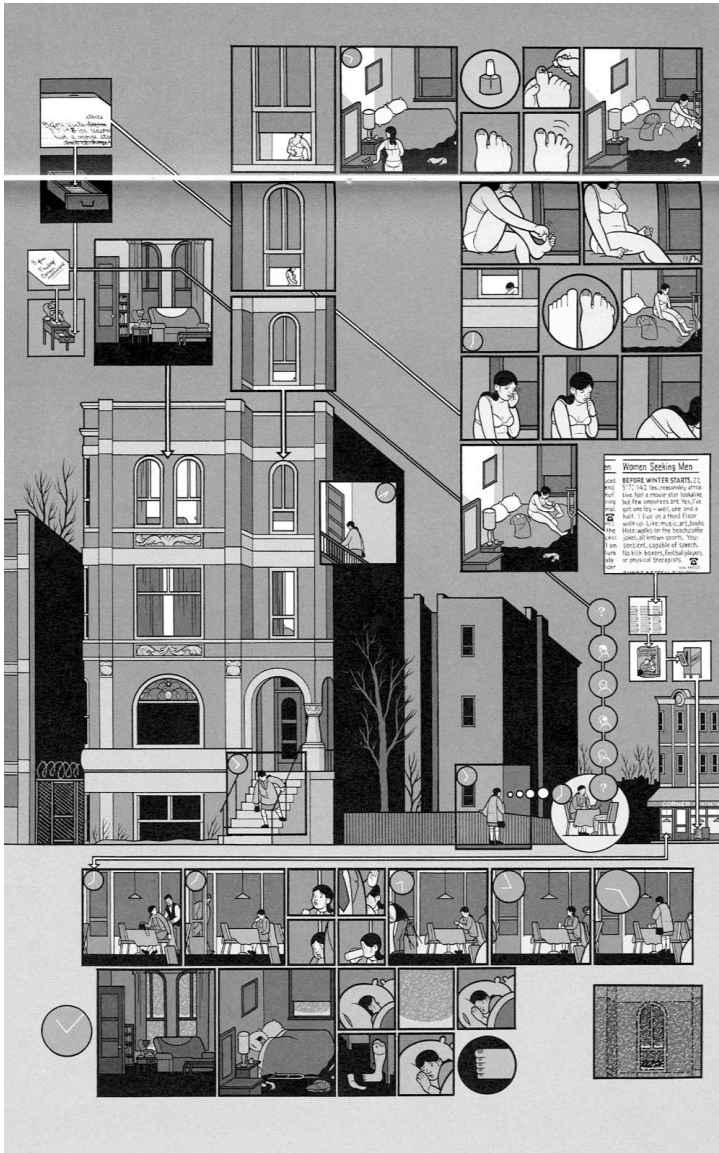
Figure 9. Excerpt from Adrian Tomine's *Six Day Cold In: Sleepwalk and Other Stories*. From such drawings I learned how to draw hair. Adrian Tomine is also one of the few comic artists that include Asian American characters.



Tomine's comics such as *Summer Blonde* and *Sleepwalk and Other Stories* feature many Asian American characters (Figure 9). Sometimes their ethnicities play into the story, and other times, the character's ethnicity is of no consequence to the narrative. Yet these Asian American characters are relevant to me, because they have an effect of normalizing Asian Americans, showing that we have the same bad moods, strange personalities, and hang ups as any other American.

Comics based on autobiographical stories have been interesting to read, because they help me to understand ways in which to tell a personal story. *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *Unlikely* by Jeff Brown, *My New York Diary* by Julie Doucet, *Blankets* by Craig Thompson and *A Child's Life* by Phoebe Gloeckner, in particular come to mind when I think about matters such as how much to divulge, and the relevance of truth. I have learned from these authors that whether the story is true or not is not as important as telling a compelling story.

Figure 10. An excerpt from Chris Ware's Acme Novelty Library No. 16 depicting an untraditional comic composition



Integration of my comic art and the Museum Studies Program

Concurrent with the Master in Fine Arts program, I participated in the Museum Studies Certificate Program (MSP), also at the University of Michigan. I am particularly interested in interactive exhibit design in natural science themed museums. Though seemingly unrelated, my MSP experience has had an influence on both my comic style and content. Through my practical work with museums, I have had a chance to develop my comic style, as I applied comics to elements within exhibit design. Comics work particularly well in making otherwise daunting

scientific concepts more approachable. Projects using comics within exhibit design include “Evolution in Action”, in which comics explain the process of viral evolution (Figure 11), “Grasshoppers and the Ice Age,” a poster-sized comic relating the research of UM entomologist Lacey Knowles (Figure 12), and “Mastodons and the Ice Age,” an activity book for children (Figure 13).

Figure 11. Evolution as Evidence exhibit, at the Exhibit Museum of Natural History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Also, detail from the comic about viral evolution, featured in the exhibit.

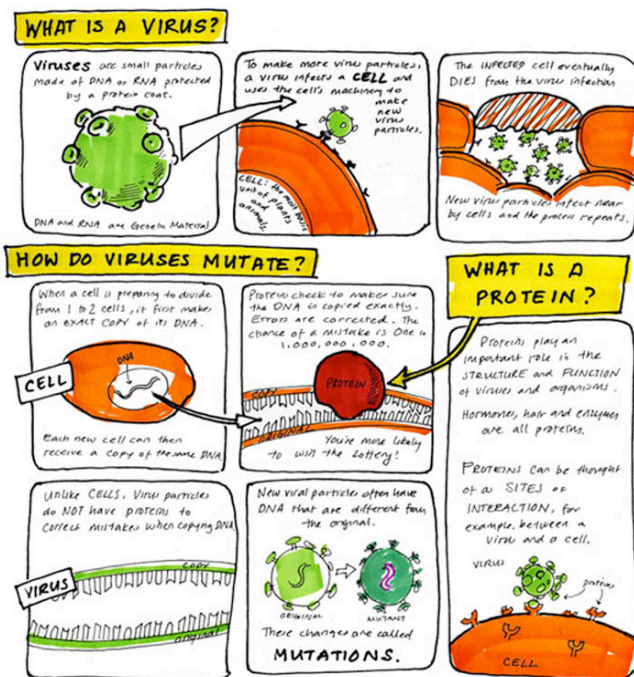
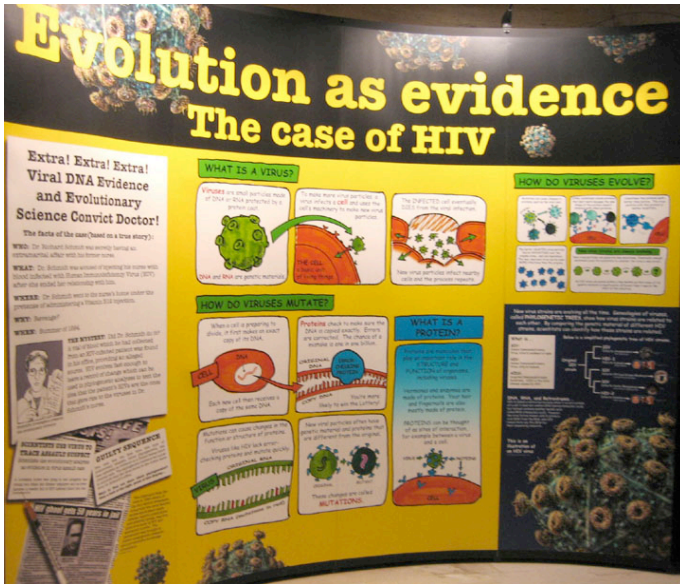
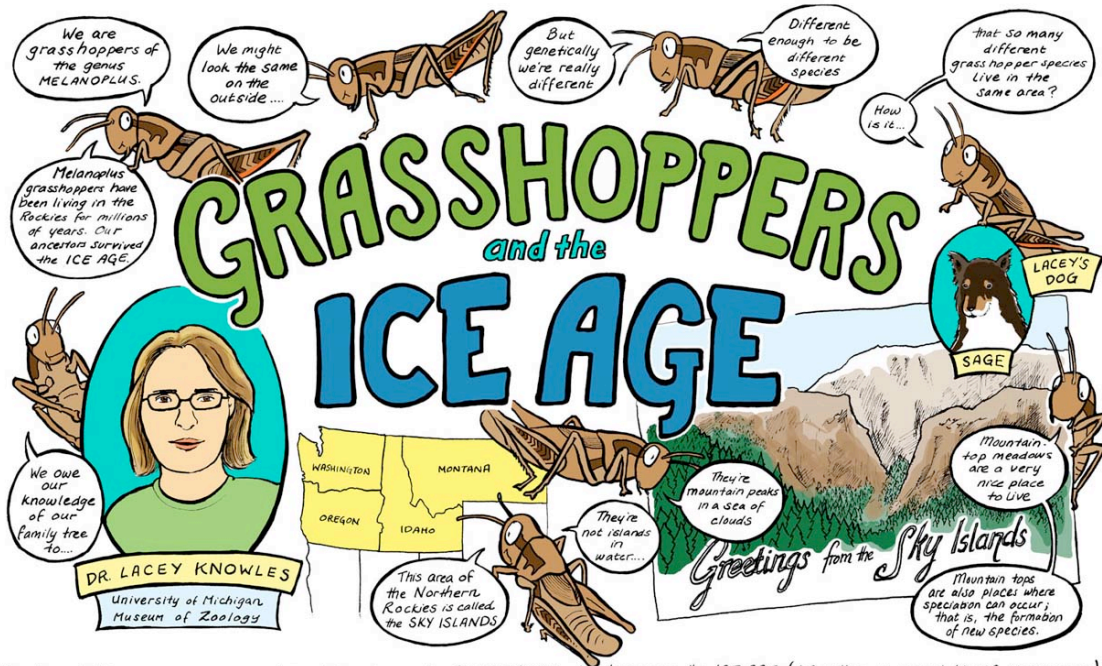


Figure 12. (a) Top half of Grasshoppers and the Ice Age, a comic about the research of University of Michigan Museum of Zoology entomologist, Dr. Lacey Knowles.



The story of *Melanoplus* grasshopper evolution takes place in the **PLEISTOCENE**, also known as the **ICE AGE**. (1.8 million to around 10,000 years ago)

In the **SKY ISLANDS** the **Pleistocene** was characterized by episodes of **Fluctuating Climate...**

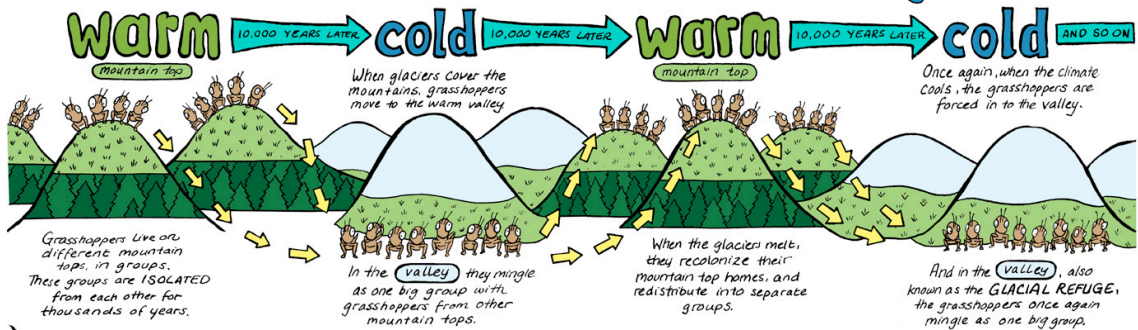


Figure 12. (b) Bottom half of Grasshoppers and the Ice Age, a comic about the research of University of Michigan Museum of Zoology entomologist, Dr. Lacey Knowles.

But... what do **small isolated** groups and a **large mixed** group have to do with species diversity?

Well, my little INSTAR! These conditions led to two different outcomes...

* Juvenile grasshoppers are also known as INSTARS.

Some groups were isolated for so long... they evolved and became so distinct... that they couldn't mate with grasshoppers from other groups.

Other grasshopper groups experienced enough mixing... that no new species emerged.


I'm sorry it's not going to work out.

So, one outcome is the formation of new species due to geographic isolation & GENETIC DRIFT**.


Speciation occurs when groups of organisms cannot interbreed due to genetic differences.

** genetic drift phylogeography

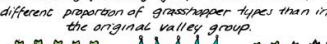
Here is a simplified example of genetic drift. Imagine 15 grasshoppers living in the valley.



When the glaciers recede, they randomly head up to one of three different mountain tops...



The resulting founding groups each consist of a different proportion of grasshopper types than in the original valley group.



The consequent generations are determined by these new proportions. This is the effect of GENETIC DRIFT, which is more pronounced, the smaller the group.

How did Dr. Knowles figure all this out?

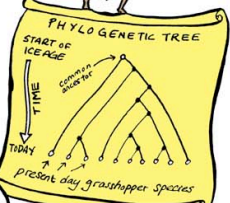
By using techniques in Phylogeography... the study of genetic variation of organisms across landscapes.

Genetics? Doesn't that involve collecting DNA from us? Doesn't that hurt?

and... how did she get DNA from our ancestors?

Well, Dr. Knowles studied our current day distribution and genetics and by using statistical analyses programs as well as by learning about climate change in the ice age, she figured out the MOST LIKELY history of our Genus, *Melanoplus*, in the Sky Islands.

PHYLOGENETIC TREE



START OF ICE AGE

TODAY

present day grasshopper species

Jennifer V. Zee

find out more ...

Learn how analysis of genetic differences may reveal why grasshopper groups don't interbreed... Click on "L. Lacey Knowles at www.eeb.lsa.umich.edu/eeb/research/researchers/evolution/

The use of narrative in exhibit design has become increasingly important in museums (Roberts p.137). By creating an exhibit experience that follows a story and allows room for interactivity or interpretation, rather than (in the extreme case) sets of detached facts, the visitor is more likely to remember new concepts, as well as to enjoy the experience. I am now very conscious of the visitor and thus reader experience, and I take into consideration how I might leave room for interpretation, to make for a more interesting experience. In *Biceps* I hope that my readers find themselves filling in the gaps of the story with their own imagination.

There has been a recent emphasis on designing museum experiences so that they are accommodating and respectful to visitors of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Hein p.44). The discussion of this topic in our MSP proseminars not only heightened the awareness of my own ethnic and cultural background, but also reiterated the idea that all types of people are equally valuable. Thus, this theme reinforced the hybrid identity concept in that people should be recognized for their own uniqueness, rather than cast aside as something other than the mainstream majority.

This thesis project was also a valuable learning experience in that now I feel acquainted with the topics of Asian American culture, history and identity. I have expanded my knowledge base and as a result, I feel confident that I will be able to contribute as a museum worker at cultural and community museums as well as those that are scientific in nature.

Conclusion

In my future work, I hope to incorporate the strengths of both *Art StudANTS* and *Biceps* into one comic. Such a story would thus include the development of both place and characters and an effective use of both space and detail. I would like to capture interesting instances of human behavior and social interaction and to integrate them into stories. So far my comics are based on personal experiences, but I may try to tell stories as told to me by others, or create imaginary plots.

I have learned that Cultural identity is not a state of being, but an ongoing, constructive process. Fed into this process are internal factors, such as one's personality, experiences and upbringing, but also external factors, such as cultural and societal traditions. At the start of my thesis project I felt very unsettled, although I had completed *Art StudANTS in Beijing*. *Biceps* allowed me not only to study societal and identity issues that were meaningful to me, but also I developed valuable skills in storytelling and rendering. I have arrived at a stage where I now see my investigations into culture and identity as a process of personal growth, and I plan to continue the conversations initiated by my thesis project through reading, drawing, reflection, and discussion.

Epilogue

While I was mass photocopying *Biceps* at the local Kinkos, an elderly Chinese woman entered the store. Instead of approaching any of the customer service people for help, she came straight to me. Catching my attention, she spoke a few words in a dialect other than Cantonese, but I recognized a few words and understood that she was asking whether or not I spoke Chinese. I wracked my brain for the Cantonese words to say “not very well,” but the language issue was not a problem for her.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a note written on the back of an envelope, reading “one duplicate” in English, and she then pointed at a print out of a gas bill. I gestured her towards one of the machines, but she shook her head, pulled out a Ziplock bag and dumped about 13 pennies into my hand. Copies were in fact, only 8 cents and the machines accepted only pre-paid cards and credit cards, but certainly didn’t have the vocabulary to explain this. So I photocopied her gas bill using my machine, and tried to hand the pennies back to her. She refused the change, and motioned that I should keep the change, almost as a tip. Bowing and saying “Tank you! Tank you!” she backed out of Kinkos clutching her fresh photocopy.

I stood there with a dumb smile, feeling extremely lucky. Not because of the 5 cent tip, but because I had one foot in the shiny, technology-filled world of the American Kinkos, and the other in a place where smiling, wrinkly little old Chinese ladies pick *me* to help them with their photocopying. I exist in a unique place between two worlds.

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