Migration—both within and across borders—has become one of the most powerful socio-political forces shaping our globalised world, raising both opportunities and challenges for societies everywhere. And how better to communicate these serious issues to a mass audience than through a comic book, via an art form readily understood across cultures?

To achieve this, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) gathered 12 established comic artists, six from Europe and six from Asia, for two weeks of intensive brainstorming sessions and workshops to explore the topic of migration and come up with a book.

The notion of using a comic book for this Asia-Europe collaboration came from ASEF’s Executive Director, Ambassador Cho Wonil from Korea. He was inspired by a young girl who could tell him the history of many countries because she had been voraciously reading comic books.

Comics are a wonderful medium for story telling. They are reader-friendly, entertaining and, as importantly, accessible to a young audience. Taken to an art form, comics can communicate sensitive, even complex issues with cogency, emotion, and clarity and accomplish all this with disarming ease because the medium can lend itself to satirical, dark or witty humour.

The organisers had no expectations of the outcome; the project was treated as an experiment. ASEF simply set up the mechanism for the artists to produce work in keeping with their artistic integrity, leaving wide open the possibility of failure—and hence the opportunity for something truly creative emerging.

The ASEF Comics Project was deftly facilitated by Johnny Lau from Singapore, best known as the originator of the Mr Kiasu comic strip and Belgian comic artist Nix, Professor at Sint-Lukas Art School, Brussels, Comics Section.

In the first week, participants were given multi-dimensional perspectives on migration—counter-urbanisation, networks and webs, chaos theory, artificial languages and more. Eric Khoo, Singapore’s most well known filmmaker (and a comic artist himself), gave participants a sneak preview of his latest movie No Day Off about foreign domestic workers in Singapore, a poignant slice-of-life take on life in a foreign country through the eyes of a migrant worker.

After ingesting and digesting, it was time for a marathon session to regurgitate the week-long feast of information. Artists were left to their preliminary sketches...
ASEF facts & figures
The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), established in February 1997 by the members of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), is the only permanent physical institution of ASEM. It is a not-for-profit foundation based in Singapore, and seeks to promote better mutual understanding between the peoples of Asia and Europe through greater intellectual, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges. ASEF reports to a board of 39 governors representing the 38 ASEM countries and the European Commission.

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Vietnamese artist Le Phuoc explored the journey of an eyeball migrating to different parts of the body only to realize it couldn’t fit anywhere else. It eventually went back to the socket which still had the best fit. The motto: The place where one was born and grew up will always be home. Tommi from Finland also explored the idea of home and found it to be wherever he placed his blanket. Nix from Belgium, one of two female participants, had her bird trying to find ways to fit in among different species of birds and then coming to realize that perhaps to a collective sigh of relief, perhaps to a collective sigh of relief, perhaps to a collective sigh of relief, there was something common linking all birds and they could all live comfortably on the same tree.

Tomas of the Czech Republic used the bird metaphorically to examine concepts of hope and loneliness among migrants. Polish artist Rafal created an overpopulated futuristic world, polluted and miserable where people were desperately trying to move to another place to create a better future. Japanese artist Little Fish also had a futuristic setting and dealt with unemployment as the compelling motive to migrate. Alfi of Indonesia looked at migration in terms of the haves and have-nots; including the option some have to leave a country that others do not have. Craig from China, who quickly gained a reputation among the other artists for his love of food, used food as a key metaphor. Inspired by news reports, Nix’s story was about how the Chinese Mafia controlled the Belgian football scene. He poked fun at how absurd the situation had become. It was his take on some of the totally unexpected and unpredictable consequences thrown up by migration. According to ASEF’s project executive, the facilitators and the artists, the comic book will be a work they can be proud of. The 12 comics artists brought with them a high degree of drive, artistic pride

Given the iconoclastic nature of comic artists, was there any need or temptation to censor content? Perhaps to a collective sigh of relief among the organisers, this was a non-issue as none of the stories were inflammatory. Project executive Ms Soh Lai Yee says, “Actually not really. I thought they were all very polite to each other; I wished they would have been more direct with each other.”

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