



# Not your garden variety onion

*Marketing acumen and sheer cuteness have set Onion Tou on the path to becoming Taiwan's own homegrown Hello Kitty*

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— Amy Chang, founder of Full Tone Image and artist Ethan Liu's agent



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The many moods and guises of the very versatile Onion Tou.

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Over the past two years, an anthropomorphic onion with a big head and a body that looks like a huggable cross between the Pillsbury Doughboy and a Care Bear has taken over Asia. Abo, who is more commonly referred to in English as Onion Tou (洋葱头, also known as Onion Head or Onion-Kun), is the star of a blog, Onion Club (blog.roodo.com/onion\_club), that publishes several new comic panels per week, fan clubs all over the world and an all-encompassing array of merchandise that ranges from English textbooks to condoms.

Onion Tou is the creation of Ethan Liu (劉順龍), one of several Taiwanese artists, including Wan Wan (彎彎) and tutugo, who over the past two years have made the leap from creating online emoticons and publishing their art on blogs to garnering mainstream fame. Soft-spoken and modest, Liu hardly fits the stock image of a media mogul in the making. But with the marketing acumen of his agent, Amy Chang (詹嘉慧), the founder of Full Tone Image (豐采圖像), Onion Tou might just very well become Taiwan's own Hello Kitty.

For a character that has become so ubiquitous over the past two years, Onion Tou's beginnings were modest. Three years ago, Liu, who studied interior design at an art vocational high school in Tainan, decided on a lark to try his hand at creating an online avatar with MSN Shell, a program that allows users to customize MSN Live Messenger.

Onion Tou wasn't even meant to be an onion. At first Liu drew several little cartoon people. One had two tufts of hair sticking out from the top of his big, round head. “A friend of mine saw him and said he looked just like an onion, so I decided to call him that, too,” says Liu.

The emoticons were meant for Liu's own use. “There were things he did that represented how I was feeling inside. For example, in one drawing, Onion Tou was pointing to the sky and yelling angrily. I used him to express my own emotions at the time,” he says. Between the end of 2005 and 2006, however, Onion Tou started garnering a loyal following, starting with Liu's own friends, and then spread with the speed that only an Internet trend can. At the end of 2006, Yahoo! Taiwan featured Onion Tou in television commercials for the Web mega brand. The exposure gave the little cartoon fellow a jumpstart into offline fame.

The exposure came as a surprise, says Liu. “I didn't draw Onion Tou to attract people's attention, but then they started noticing him on their own.”

“In the beginning, Ethan felt that Onion Tou was just accidentally famous,” says Chang, who with her confident manner and forthright way of talking is Liu's polar opposite in personality. “I told him, of course, trends often start like that, but you have to take advantage of it.” To Chang, Onion Tou is more than a passing fad.

“Amy told me that she feels that he can have international appeal, and that people in other countries can take to him, like they took to Hello Kitty or Mickey Mouse,” says Liu.

In the late 1990s, Chang worked for two years at Yuk Long Publishing (玉郎圖書), the publishing house of artist Tony Wong (黃玉郎), who is often referred to as “Hong Kong's King of Comics.” Yuk Long Publishing's multi-layered corporate structure, which Chang compares to that of The Walt Disney Company, continues to

influence her management style.

Liu was Chang's first client after she founded Full Tone in 2006. The two met when Chang, who worked at a toy company after moving back to Taiwan, was hired to produce a line of Onion Tou figures for 7-Eleven.

“I laid down the law and told him, I have a two-, three- and five-year plan for Onion Tou. Aside from the blog, I told him I hoped to see him create comics, and then from those comics make animations, and from there create computer games and movies. There must be a plan like that in place,” says Chang.

Over the last two years, Full Tone has focused on securing marketing deals to increase international awareness of the Onion Tou character. “In particular, I zeroed in on Hong Kong, because trends there influence consumers in mainland China, which in turn influences Singapore and Malaysia, and from there you can reach the Indian market and so on,” says Chang. Full Tone has also inked licensing deals for Onion Tou in Japan, Italy, France and Canada. Onion Tou's licensing fees bring in about NT\$1 million per year. “It's not as much as people imagine, but each of our marketing deals open up new opportunities for us,” says Chang.

The range of people who buy Onion Tou products and follow the Onion Club blog “is very wide,” says Lin Yi-Chun (林怡君), the chief editor of China Times Publishing Co., which recently published *Onion Club Idiocy Test* (洋葱頭腦殘檢定), a book of quizzes and brainteasers. “Initially we thought the age range of fans would be from 15 to 35, but there are people older than that, especially female professionals, and grade-school kids that really love him.”

To capitalize on his wide appeal, Onion Tou's visage has appeared on products like textbooks, MP3 players, cellphones, plush toys, collectible figurines, USB drives — and even condoms distributed last year by Planned Parenthood of Taiwan (台灣衛生婦幼協會) as part of a safe sex campaign (“It is an important health issue, and I also told Ethan, if you can work with that, you can work with anything,” says Chang). To solidify brand recognition in the highly lucrative Chinese market, Onion Tou Web sites are maintained on QQ.com and Sohu.com, two of the most popular sites for bloggers in that country.

While Onion Tou's rise to fame has been very rapid, Full Tone's licensing contracts require that products be made in limited quantities and sold only in specific countries to keep each marketplace from being flooded with Onion Tou products. And Chang currently forbids media outlets from photographing or filming Liu in order to keep the spotlight on his characters. That particular strategy is a 180-degree turnaround from the marketing approach of artists like Wan Wan, who is now arguably just as famous as her comics.

“I feel that in Asia, and particularly in Taiwan, people are curious about artists and some times even more interested in them than they are in the art itself. The media is all over them, but that kind of attention can only last so long,” says Chang, noting that very few fans actually know who created the Hello Kitty or Doraemon characters.

Chang's mandate suits the introverted Liu just fine. Onion Tou is now used by thousands of online fans worldwide as a user icon for chat programs, social networking sites and blogs, but Liu continues to see



the comics as a form of self-expression. In a whimsically meta move, Liu created a character whose name (“E”) is stamped across his face in lieu of facial features and is meant to be a self-portrait. “Onion Tou is my creation, but I present [the characters E and Onion Tou's] relationship as a friendship,” says Liu, who is often referred to as “Onion Pa” (蔥爸) by fans. “At first Onion Tou was me, but then I thought that he had to develop on his own as a character.”

Just as important to the process of making Onion Tou an iconic cartoon as licensing deals is creating the story behind the characters: the personality quirks, relationships and adventures (and misadventures) that make the character and his friends come alive. “Ethan's illustrations are actually very thoughtful. It's not like he just draws these simple, cute doodles,” says Chang, who works closely with Liu on comic panels that are published every few days on Onion Club, the blog Liu started at the end of 2005 and that has since received well over 10 million hits.

The characters in Onion Tou's universe now include Meiya (德妹, also known as Onion Mei), who was originally meant to be his girlfriend but is now his sidekick and best friend, and a leather-jacketed rascal by the name of Greaser (古惑惡, AKA Delinquent Scallion). Onion Tou's fans know that he has a sweet tooth and is obsessed with cake, so gluttonous that he is not above venturing out in the thick of a typhoon for a snack, has a mischievous streak, is the frequent target of tantrums thrown by the mercurial Meiya and has been known to sneak a cigarette on the sly. His character flaws play just as big a hand in making Onion Tou adorable as his baby-like proportions.

“If someone picks a fight with Onion Tou, his first instinct is to run away. That's what he's good at, actually. But he feels like he is responsible for his friends, so he will do his best to resolve the situation, even if all he wants to do is panic and take off. He is not like characters who are constantly brave and go-getters, and that is something that makes people feel like he is someone that they can relate to,” says Chang.

“Onion Tou, he has all these different interests and he is carefree,” says Liu, “Meiya, on the other hand, is more diligent and hard-working than Onion Tou. My personality has these two parts, and I put them all into my characters. Even Greaser represents a part of me.”

Perhaps the key to the popularity of Onion Tou — and other characters that started as simple online avatars but have garnered a base of devoted followers — is that, like Liu, his fans also see something of themselves in the character. “When you use an emoticon to represent yourself, you don't have to say anything,” says Liu, “You can show how you are feeling without saying one thing at all.”