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**Adapting Comics and Cartoons to Develop 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners**

**Rida Afrilyasanti, S.Pd.**

**Yazid Basthomi, Ph.D.**

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**Abstract**

The globalization era has enforced students to have 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Students have to be able to obtain communication and critical thinking skills. Therefore, students need to be sophisticated in expressing ideas using multiple communication technologies, not just the written word. Students' ability in expressing ideas communicatively and critically can be gained only if they accustom to explore their ideas using all their multi modalities. Accordingly, cartoons and comics are considered as a good media for classroom teaching to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. This research investigates how cartoons and comics enable students to be 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. The results verify that cartoons and comics helped students to gain their 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. By having activities using cartoons and comics, students could enjoy their learning and freely exploring their creative and analytical thinking. As the result, students could be at the level to become active, responsive, critical and analytical. Therefore, they can improve their communicative and thinking skills.

**Key words:** comics, cartoons, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners

Modernization era has required schools to help students regain their competitive improvements in a quickly changing world. Therefore, schools should be able to provide education that is relevant to today's world. In order to meet the needs of this era, students have to acquire 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Wagner (2006) explains that the frameworks of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are digital age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity. This means that students have to be equipped with the core abilities within

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those frameworks: ability in understanding multicultural literacy, global awareness, risk taking, personal and social responsibility, and ability in producing relevant products.

In addition, Porter (2008:7) mentions some other 21<sup>st</sup> century communication skills, including: creativity and inventive thinking, multiple intelligences, higher-order thinking on the lesson learned, information literacy, visual literacy, sound literacy, technical literacy, effective communication (oral, written, and digital), teamwork and collaboration, project managements, and enduring understandings. Referring to all of those 21<sup>st</sup> century communication skills, as a teacher, we have to be able to conduct our teaching using all the multi modalities.

One of the media used in teaching that engage the students in using their multi modalities are cartoons and comics. The visual images in cartoons and comics help encourage students to observe and analyze the situation. Moreover, they also help the students to understand the situation told within the cartoons and comics more easily. Streich (2009) shrewdly explains that using visuals in our teaching promote students' analytical skills and activate higher level thinking ability.

Besides, the humors in cartoons and comics comprise enjoyment in the foreign language classes and release students' burden and tenseness in learning a new language. In addition, Oliveri (2007:2) explains that children can learn to analyze cartoons, look for subtleties beneath the surface of familiar situations, and gain a better understanding of symbolism, satire, and humor.

Hyde (2007) comes up with an explanation of brain research that teachers who embrace a variety of learning activities that appeal to multiple learning modalities (auditory-sequential, kinesthetic-tactile, and visual-spatial) are more likely to achieve early success for all students. It is simply because there is no student who learns only with one style. Thus, providing a variety of activities for the students help them to learn and comprehend better. Moreover, in one class, the students are so heterogenic that a teacher has to facilitate all of them to understand the materials.

Additionally, a conventional English teaching is still conducted by most of Indonesian teachers. Based on a research on Indonesian teaching by Applebaum (2007:266), it is indicated that most teachers and lecturers in Indonesia are still using teacher-centered approaches in their classrooms. In most teaching and learning process, teacher tends to talk and explain a lot. Therefore, students tend to be passive. It happens not only because students are not eager to participate but somehow it is also because they do not have any chance to use English although they are in an English class (Afrilyasanti, 2011:3). This conventional teaching and learning process makes students bored and in turn, it can increase the hardships in their learning English. Applebaum, 2007:266 also adds that students are usually bored in class and are not given the opportunity to practice what they learn so that students are not eager to talk or say anything.

Building on previous research which has paid attention to English teaching in Indonesia (e.g., Applebaum, 2007, Afrilyasanti, 2011) and the benefits of cartoons and comics as an alternative teaching media explained, conventional techniques for the English Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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teaching can be imbued with cartoons and comics. In short, the objectives of this research are: 1) describing the sample of materials, 2) describing the activities employed in using cartoons and comics in English language teaching, and 3) describing the implementation of cartoons and comics in enabling EFL students to be 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.

## **Theoretical Basis**

The underlying theories used in this study are discussed within two categories: the characteristics of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and engaging comics and cartoons for language teaching.

### **The Characteristics of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners**

Responding to the globalization era, schools need to expand what the schools are offering so as to keep pace with the demands of our modern workforce and the needs of our modern society. This is in line with Spencer's (2010:1) enlightenment that the world is less static, collaboration is vital, and learning is a continual process. The current environment in which students are exposed to is media rich, immediate, fast, engaging, dynamic and instant. Therefore, teachers should be able to enable their students to acquire skills needed in this current century and complement the students with living skills.

Furthermore, to make the students are able to meet the needs in globalization era, they have to acquire 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. By having 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, the students can be at the level to become creative, inquisitive, reflective, collaborative, efficient, flexible, tenacious, and open-minded, and in turn, can be effective learners, collaborators, communicators, and creators. Students who already have and or are equipped with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills tend to be more prepared to align with the shift in how students learn, how people get jobs, and how everything works in this era. Teachers, therefore, should have the ability to integrate the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into core academic subjects.

Rodgers et. al. (2006) elucidate that the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners tend to be a multi-taskers who use sounds and images to convey contents whenever possible. Students tend to learn better as they experience multi-learning stimulus. Therefore, the written learning materials need to be accompanied with visual and sound materials. Rodgers, et. al. (2006) also add that the hypertext minds of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners crave interactivity, are good at reading visual images, have strong visual-spatial skills, tend toward parallel processing and inductive discovery, look for fast response times, which leads to short attention spans. Expansion in technology in this century renders students to be multi-modalities learners.

Moreover, the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners have to have higher order thinking. They have to be collaborating, creating, critical thinking, contributing, conversing, and connecting. Hart, P. D. (2007) mentions some of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that should be acquired by the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, which include critical thinking and problem-solving skills, computer and technology skills, and communication and self-direction skills. In this regard, students should be engaged in a relevant and contextual problem- and project-based learning designed to develop the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and taught using a multi-disciplinary approach.

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## Utilizing Comics and Cartoons for Language Teaching

Comics and cartoons have been widely used as one of the teaching media in EFL classes. However, many studies done on the use of comics and cartoons as teaching media have not well documented the use of comics and cartoons as tools to enable students to be the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. Comics and cartoons have been used due to their interesting visual images, which can attract students to learn. Therefore, the activities used have not well developed students' ability to respond to visual images.

Basically, comics and cartoons can be used to enable students to have the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills because they embrace a variety of learning activities that appeal to multiple learning modalities. By providing all those multiple learning modalities (visual-spatial, kinesthetic-tactile, and auditory-sequential) in their teaching, teachers have assisted the students to be the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. Hyde (2007) clearly explains that, in general, no student learns with only one style; so it follows that providing a variety of activities for young students would help them to learn better.

In addition, comics and cartoons are also considered excellent teaching tools because they not only add humor to a topic but also illustrate the idea in a memorable way. In this regard, Giunta (2010) accurately explains that humor, such as found in cartoons and comics, is an important factor for making learning an enjoyable and, more importantly, memorable experience. Moreover, the activities in the teaching and learning process using cartoons and comics are interesting and interactive for the students. Barker (2009) clearly explains that the best way to keep our students interested and engaged in lessons is by making them interactive. Additionally, adapting comics and cartoons into our classroom with correct and applicable activities can encourage students' observational, analytical, and higher thinking skills. Oliveri (2007:2) elucidates that cartoons and comics can spark thoughtful conversation, and open the doors for teacher and students to discuss current events, social and family life, values, morals, and religious philosophies.

Furthermore, cartoons and comics can be adapted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning process by asking the students to critically analyze them, understand their implicit meaning, and gain a better understanding of symbolism, irony, and humor. Also stated by Oliveri (2007:2), comics and cartoons give insight into the world around us, and provide opportunities for genuine and meaningful communication. It is so because using cartoons and comics, students are taught to express their ideas using multiple communication technologies, not just the written word.

### Method

This study was descriptive qualitative, which was intended to describe the implementation of cartoons and comics in English teaching to develop the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. This research was conducted in an Indonesian EFL setting. The researchers worked with students of grade X of *Sekolah Menengah Atas* (Senior High School) *Negeri 8 Malang*, Indonesia. The total students engaged were 37 students of class X7 and 39 students of class X8. The two classes were selected because the principal researcher has been teaching in those

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two classes. The main data in this study were those gained from the results of recording on students' participations and students' score. The additional data were in the form of documents, the samples of the students' products.

## **Results & Discussion**

The results of data analysis were presented in three categories: sample materials, the activities employed in engaging comics and cartoons in language teaching, and the implementation of cartoons and comics in enabling EFL students to be the 21st century learners. The two former categories were used to show the procedures of using comics and cartoons as a teaching tool to develop the 21st century learners, whereas the latter category was used to describe the implementation of cartoons and comics.

### **Sample Materials**

Comic is a written, printed format in black and white or color. While, cartoon appears in multiple formats, they can be a both animated visual format with sound or sequence of drawings that tell a short story. For this study, the researcher used cartoon and comic in the printed format or they are usually called as cartoon or comic strips. However, it is also possible for the teachers to have the combination of the two formats of cartoon and comic in their teaching. The point is that teachers have to be able to engage and invite students to understand the implicit meaning within cartoon and comic they read or watch, and in turn, they can expose their own ideas in the form of cartoon and comic.

Helping the students understand the different kinds of implicit meaning within cartoon or comic strips can also help them develop critical thinking skills. In this regard, Oliveri (2007:2) also believe that cartoon and comic can spark thoughtful conversation, and open the doors for teacher and students to discuss current events, social and family life, values, morals, and religious philosophies. Therefore, for this purpose, the researcher provided samples of cartoon and comic that arouse students' interest to criticize so that they can be at the level of having analytical and critical thinking.

The examples of cartoon and comic given were taken from some websites that provide cartoons for educational purposes, for instance: *<http://www.morguefile.com>*, *<http://www.resultsinenglish.com/keep-on-winning-mixed-words/>*, *<http://www.politicalcartoons.com>*, *<http://www.cartoonweb.com>*, *<http://www.cartoonstock.com>*, and so on. Moreover, the researcher also encouraged the students to visit those websites. Three comics and cartoons provided in this study are sample materials to engage students having 21<sup>st</sup> century skill.

Because the topic being taught was racism, the researcher provided some examples of cartoon and comic dealing with racism. Below are some examples of cartoon and comic on racism or discrimination.



## Activities Set in Using Comic and Cartoon in Language Teaching

The activities included in this study are identical to Barker's (2009) statement that the best way to keep our students interested and engaged in lessons is by making them interactive. These activity pages give information on how to enable students analyze cartoon and develop their own cartooning skills, while using currently relevant materials as a guideline for lessons. The design of teaching using comic and cartoon to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century learners can be described into pre-teaching, whilst-teaching, and post-teaching:

- **Pre-teaching**

The pre-teaching activity engaged was addressed to prepare the students with the topic taught. Some questions were asked to the students to investigate their background knowledge on the topic that would be discussed and set the students to focus on it.

1. Asking the students to give opinions on their interest in cartoon and comic, such as:
  - How many of you like reading, watching or drawing cartoon or comic?
  - Who's your favorite cartoon or comic character? Why do you like them?
2. Asking students' background of knowledge on the topic that will be discussed, such as:
  - Have you ever heard the word "racism"? What does it mean?

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- Have you ever found racism, intolerance, or discrimination in your surrounding? What is it?

- **Whilst-teaching**

Some activities applied in the whilst-teaching were purposed to dig up students' understanding on the implicit meaning within cartoon and comic shown. Besides, the activities were also aimed to stimulate students' awareness on the situations happening in their society. Furthermore, they could be at the level of having critical and analytical thinking. Finally, the students were targeted to be able to produce their own cartoon and comic strips relating to the topic.

**1<sup>st</sup> Meeting**

1. Showing some examples of cartoon and comic about racism and discrimination (see Sample Materials).
2. Asking the students to criticize on the implicit meaning of the cartoon and comic shown.
3. Asking the students to mention and explain some examples of racism, intolerance, or discrimination occurring in their surroundings.
4. Asking the students to make their own cartoon or comic strips about racism, intolerance, or discrimination found in their surroundings (see Appendix).

**2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting**

5. Asking the students to display their cartoon or comic strips on the wall and shop for information from their friends.

- **Post-teaching**

The post-activity was employed to look into the students' product. The scoring on the students' cartoon and comic strips was done outside the classroom activity.

6. Asking the students to submit their cartoon or comic strips.

**The Implementation of Cartoons and comics in Enabling EFL Students to be the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners**

The last research purpose was to investigate the implementation of cartoons and comics in enabling students to be the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. In this regard, it was documented that all students could participate actively and supportively. Students' active responses were obvious in their active involvement in the classroom discussion, especially while having "shopping for information" activity. In addition, students' supportive responses were verified by their ability to explain the implicit meaning within their cartoon or comic strips (see Appendix) and the reason for choosing that strips and to provide support or reasons for their statements. These abilities are in agreement with what Rodgers. et. al. (2006) believe that the hypertext minds of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners crave interactivity, are good at reading visual

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images, have strong visual-spatial skills, tend toward parallel processing and inductive discovery, look for fast response times which leads to short attention spans.

Other findings were derived from the students' scores on their cartoon or comic strips. There were six categories on scoring the students' cartoon or comic strips that are differentiated into two scoring groups: cartoon or comic strips and their story, and shopping information activity. The researcher's scoring on students' cartoon or comic strips and story were drawn from students' writing skill, completeness, and creativity. Whereas, students' score for the "shopping information" activity was drawn from students' understanding on others' cartoon or comic strips, completeness on scoring, and group criteria. The scoring criteria are shown on Table 1.



Table 1 The Criteria of Students' Cartoon or Comic Strips

<b>Cartoon or comic strips &amp; story</b>			
Criteria	Outstanding	Good	Need more works
Writing skill	Student organizes the story well and critically explains the situation clearly	Student critically explains the situation clearly	Student misses some parts necessary for the communication of the story
Completeness	Student elaborates the drawing and finishes it	Student creates a story but does not finish the drawing	Student does not finish the drawing or the story.
Creativity	Student's ideas are sophisticated, humorous, and original	Student's ideas are humorous and original	Student's ideas are not original
<b>Shopping information activity</b>			
Understanding	Student shows evidence of clearly understanding on other friends' cartoon or comic strips	Student shows evidence of partially understanding on other friends' cartoon or comic strips	Student shows little evidence of understanding on other friends' cartoon or comic strips
Completeness	Student completes shopping information to all of her/his classmates	Student completes all but one or two friends' evaluations	Student completes shopping information to less than half the class
Peer criteria	Student evaluates peers' products in terms of good content and interest to others	Student evaluates in terms of good content	Student evaluates in terms of interest to others or based only on the drawings

**\*adapted from Song et. al.'s (2008:20) rubric for cartoon project**

The first category of students' cartoon or comic strips was students' writing skill. In general, most students already performed their outstanding writing skill. It was shown that 86% of them were able to organize the story well and critically explain the situation clearly, while the other 14% of the students performed good writing skill. The second category was the completeness of students' cartoon or comic strips and story. From students' score on the completeness, the researcher found that all of the students were able to elaborate the drawing and finish it. At last, in the third category, creativity, 49% of the students performed outstanding creativity, 34% of them showed good creativity, and the rest, 13% of them, needed more works.

Other findings about students' cartoon or comic strips project were derived from the students' scores on the shopping information activity, in which they had to try to exchange

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information they had with others by displaying their cartoon or comic strips and visiting others' displays to get information. There were three scoring categories for the activity. The first category was students' understanding. Based on the data on students' understanding, there were 83% of the students who had outstanding understanding on others' work, and the rest, 17%, had good understanding. The second category is completeness, 92% of the students were able to complete shopping information from all of their classmates, while 8% of them demonstrated good completeness. At last, in terms of the peer criteria, there were 42% of the total students who showed outstanding peer criteria, 34% of the students demonstrated good peer criteria, and the rest 24% of the students needed more works.

As noted earlier, all the data obtained from the cartoon or comic strips and their story, and shopping information activity showed that the students' learning activities using cartoons and comics strips helped them to gain their 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Students could analytically and critically explain their ideas in the form of cartoon or comic strips (see Appendix) and actively shop for information on their friends' cartoon and comic strips. The students' ability in exploring their ideas using cartoon or comic strips is identical to what Rodgers et. al. (2006) explains; the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner tends to be a multi-tasker that uses sound and images to convey content whenever possible. Using cartoon or comic strips, the students learnt to express ideas using multiple media, not just the written word.

Furthermore, students' good scores on their writing skills, creativity, and understanding show that cartoons and comics have encouraged them to critically analyze the social situation in their surrounding and explore it into a meaningful communication. This finding confirms Oliveri's idea (2007:2), i.e., comics and cartoons give insight into the world around us, and provide opportunities for genuine and meaningful communication.

Additionally, the fact that the students actively enjoyed the shopping information activity is utterly in agreement with Giunta's (2010) explanation that humor, such as found in cartoons and comics, is an important factor for making learning an enjoyable and, more importantly, memorable experience. By displaying the materials learnt in the form of cartoons and comics and also asking the students to make their own, they could easily understand and memorize the materials learnt.

## **Conclusion**

The aforementioned findings indicate that cartoons and comics can be effective learning media for the students in gaining their 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. The study found that by having activities use cartoons and comics we can lead the students to enjoy their learning and freely explore their creative and analytical thinking. They could relate the materials learnt and the phenomena in their surroundings. As a result, the students could be more active, responsive, analytical and critical. In other words, there have been some improvements in the students' communicative and thinking skills. Overall, the study suggests that it is important to integrate the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into core materials taught. Thus, it is highly advisable to use cartoons and comics as one of the alternatives media in English teaching to develop the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.

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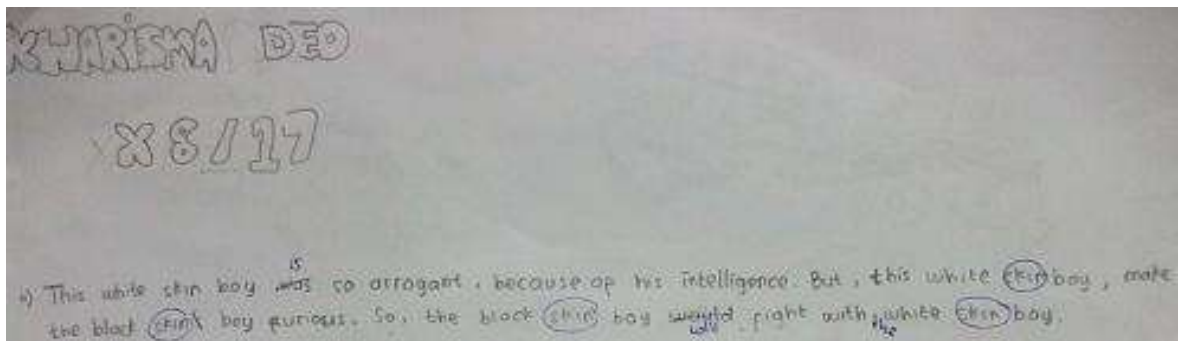
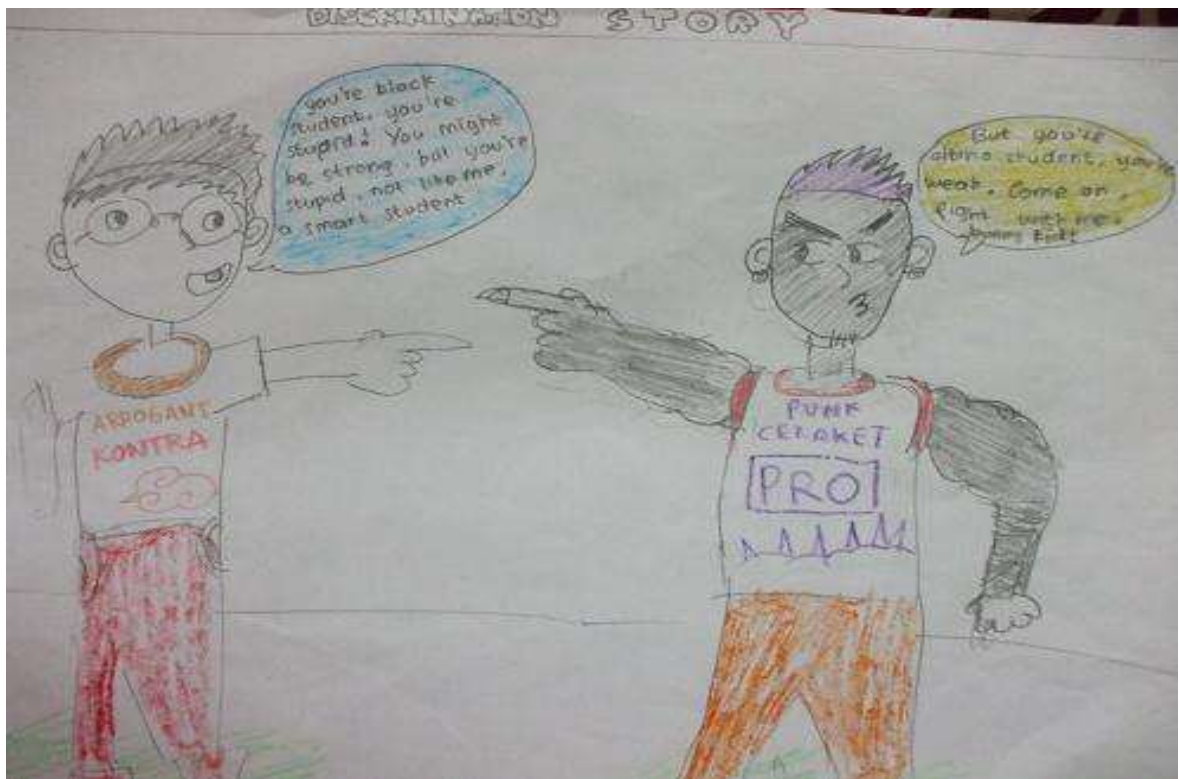
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APPENDIX  
Students' Products





The story tell about:  
 A tall about discrimination of trees, both of them have some big differences  
 the perfect tree is feels so perfect until he <sup>doesn't</sup> realize what he have has... (arrogant).  
 the ugly tree is not arrogant cause he realizes that he is in perfect tree but he is healthy inside.....

what he can learn no. Look at yourself ..... dont be so arrogant  
 Nobody's perfect in this world.

Mardi-F. 6  
 20/x.7 4



THIS COMIC WAS Explains About  
 Justice in OF INDONESIA

In Indonesia, Justice can be bought <sup>using</sup> with money. Rich people can buy justice as they want. The real justice is still Hidden. But the poor people with the poor life can't have a real justice. Many Judges still like Corruption.



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