

# **Introduction: attempts at cross-cultural comics studies**

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Globalization affects comics in a way which calls for cross-cultural research. Awareness about each other's particularities is vital in that regard. But a common ground is needed as well. Formalist conceptualizations of the "language" of comics have been providing one opportunity for discussion across cultures, as CJ Suzuki demonstrates in his contribution to this volume. Another opportunity can be found in aspects of modernity which have been experienced worldwide, for example, gendered readership and cultural legitimacy, censorship issues and historical thinking. What comic books and graphic novels, *bande dessinée*, manga and manhua, *historietas*, *beeldverhalen* and fanzines also share is their inclination toward escaping the "national". They either go over or remain under the level of national culture, not only in recent years.

To start with the latter, once comics exceeded the widely accessible newspaper medium, they became rooted mainly in subcultural communities. Still today, "comics" (or whatever word is used) evoke images of male nerds and adolescent girls, specialty bookstores and fan-talk rather than public institutions, sophisticated readers or scholarly conferences. But comics have always been heading toward the transcultural too, and in various ways. Without their early openness to European caricatures and American comic strips, Japanese manga would not be as successful as they are today. American newspaper strips and the superhero genre were fundamentally shaped by immigrants, and American comic books served as an important source of modernization to Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* in the 1950s and 1960s. Further attention may be paid to the

German comics market, as its dependence on imports can be reconsidered as a site of intercultural exchange.

In contrast, much of comics discourse, including research, shows an inclination toward nationalizing its subject. Claiming national particularities has certainly been useful, at least in two regards: to the domestic struggle for cultural status and to the international struggle for market shares. Yet recent conditions appear to be more complex. When, for example, Korean publishers try to sell manhwa in Europe and America, they carefully consider how far to follow the Japanese manga boom and where to distinguish their products from it. Japanese manga on the other hand, have enjoyed such a boom precisely because they look sufficiently exotic and familiar at the same time, in other words, because they lend themselves not only to the fascination of “otherness” (especially in Europe and America), but likewise to transcultural readings. In Japan, however, all comics which are not rendered in manga-style have only a slim chance of being read transculturally, that is, as comics. Since the 1970s, the Japanese domestic market has been nationalized to such an extent that the majority of Japanese manga readers simply lack transcultural comics literacy. Manga critics and researchers contributed to this constriction, as Odagiri Hiroshi describes in his essay in this volume, contrasting contemporary Japan with the U.S. From a different perspective, nationalization can be regarded as a variation on the general trend of compartmentalization in comics research. Pascal Lefèvre points out in his essay, that only very few publications discuss comics as such, beyond specific publication sites, genres and styles. This lack may confirm the impossibility of *transcultural Comics Studies*. Yet, it is also a fact that translated publications about comics meet with difficulties, whenever they develop their main arguments around inaccessible works. Thierry Groensteen’s *System of Comics*, published in French in 1999 and in Japanese in 2009, is one example, although it manages to counterbalance its discussion of single works unfamiliar to Japanese readers with more general parts that bridge different comics cultures by means of theoretical abstraction.

Groensteen was invited as keynote speaker to the 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference held at the International Manga Museum Kyoto in December 2009<sup>1</sup>. Opened in [1 http://www.kyotomm.jp/english/event/study/isc01\\_e.php](http://www.kyotomm.jp/english/event/study/isc01_e.php) (last access 03/09/2010).

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November 2006, this museum was made possible by a partnership between three parties, the city of Kyoto, the civic association which owns the land and the building, and Kyoto Seika University, the private art college with the longest tradition of educating manga artists at university level in Japan. Seika's International Manga Research Center is the conceptual carrier of the Manga Museum. With its first international conference, it finally tried to fulfill its obligation to the "international" with respect to not only introducing artists and collecting data, but also to unfolding critical scholarship. The present volume with its majority of revised and extended essays intends to be more than conference proceedings, but since it resulted from the Kyoto conference, a brief outline of this event is in place here.

Spanning three days, the conference began with a so-called New Generation Workshop where six doctoral students as well as post-docs questioned the status quo of Manga Studies from the angle of their specific research, all of them in Japanese, regardless of whether it was their native language or not. Four of these papers have been included in the present volume.

The official curtain-raiser to the conference, however, was Thierry Groensteen's keynote lecture, which drew attention to the heterogeneity of France's national comics culture, while emphasizing the importance of "one's own" heritage for future innovations. Groensteen called for a consideration of cultural differences not only in comics but also in intellectual discourse, especially between France and the U.S., but likewise Japan, whose manga criticism is still almost unknown to people without a command of the Japanese language.



Romanist and media-studies researcher Morita Naoko, appreciated within Japanese Manga Studies especially for her articles on Rodolphe Töpffer, was invited to comment on the keynote speaker. The elaborate version of her talk printed here could have served as an introduction to the whole volume, since it points at some crucial issues, such as the not-yet-obsolete virulency of comics' cultural status in Japan, and the importance of historically

intertwining textual with contextual analyses, or as she puts it, literary studies with social sciences. As is evident from her questioning of the alleged universality of the English word “comics” in the titles of both conference and present volume, Morita pleads for comparative, in other words, intercultural research. Indeed, a *transcultural* orientation may just prioritize one, allegedly universal culture over others—suffice to think of initially European notions such as “Art”, “autonomy” or “authorship” and their uninhibited, ahistorical application to both non-European and derivative fan works. Nele Noppe’s essay discusses the latter.

Morita voices doubts about how much the recent interest in globalization is actually linked to going into foreign cultures. The inclination to subsume “foreign” elements to one’s own protocols made itself felt at the conference as much as its counterpart. Natsume Fusanosuke’s essay reflects, for example, that a considerable amount of dialogue evolved around the way in which different reading and research traditions could be interrelated. This line of discussion led, among other things, to the proposal to explore in what regard experts lack “comics literacy,” in other words, to admit preferences and blind spots as one possible gateway to cross-cultural research. Furthermore, there were moments during the conference when Japanese colleagues addressed each other with opinions about their own field, as if the presence of foreign colleagues, obviously “being in need of explanation”, triggered communication among themselves. But there were also monologs exhibiting both the desire to be heard and a reluctance to listen. While this is not unusual for academic conferences, in Kyoto, it ran the risk of undermining not only intercultural efforts but also the spirit of comics which, as an initially non-authoritarian means of communication, was supposed to imbue the conference’s atmosphere.

Recently, an increasing number of young researchers employ manga as material within their respective disciplines; in Japan this has been happening mainly in sociology and anthropology, gender and media studies. In order to stimulate discussion about comics from a variety of perspectives, not limited to the domain of Manga Studies in the narrow sense, the conference was thematically structured into three sections and one final workshop. The first section, chaired by shōjo-manga researcher Ōgi Fusami who has mainly published in English so far, was dedicated to gender-

specific comics genres, with a special emphasis on women, a subject which is attracting more and more academic attention in Japan and elsewhere. Comics artist and collector Trina Robbins was the first to speak. Related to her exhibition *She Draws Comics: 100 Years of American Women Cartoonists* on display at the International Manga Museum Kyoto at the time of the conference, she reported on her experiences of “what girls want”. Her talk was followed by Wendy Wong’s introduction of girls’ manhua from Hong Kong, a culturally intriguing topic which now runs the risk of being overlooked in view of the increasing role of manhua from the People’s Republic. Her paper, as well as Itō Kimio’s recollection of the role of shōjo manga in Japanese society and Mizoguchi Akiko’s account of the chiefly female subculture of yaoi appear in the present volume.

The second section shifted the focus from the role which comics play for girls and women, to Comics Studies itself, especially discursive obstacles that impede cross-cultural research. The talks given by Pascal Lèfevre, Natsume Fusanosuke and Odagiri Hiroshi triggered the most vivid and controversial discussion of the whole conference, last but not least thanks to their self-critical overtones.

Under the heading of “Comics and Society,” the third section examined the capacity of social-science approaches for addressing political aspects of comics, something rare in recent Japanese Manga Studies. Focusing on comics’ relation to local politics and society, Lim Cheng Tju introduced Singapore and Malaysia as two completely different cases within Asia, and broadened the conference’s scope by also touching on cartoons (in the sense of one-panel drawings), an otherwise under-represented category of comics. Art sociologist Thomas Becker made a proposal to intertwine aesthetics and sociology, leaning heavily on Bourdieu’s “field” theory. While these two submitted essays to the present volume, Yamanaka Chie unfortunately did not. Specialized in Korean culture, her conference paper tried to link the proliferation of Japanese manga in Taiwan to specific generations, by means of surveys on media consumption within life histories.

The conference was concluded by a special workshop on *Barefoot Gen*, one of the few Japanese manga available in translation worldwide and therefore a good occasion for bringing various perspectives together. But as distinct from previous

attempts, the workshop did not recollect this manga's reception interculturally, in the context of different languages and discreet comics traditions. Instead it provided a case study for comics research, by reconsidering generic conventions and contesting fixed representational contents in order to determine the potential of *Barefoot Gen* in relation to collective memory, especially Japan's national victimization discourse. Here, some of the conference's few attempts at textual analysis were made. Against "formalist" approaches in Comics Studies (*manga hyōgenron*), critical scholars such as CJ Suzuki tend to call for research on reading protocols and contexts, as if the analysis of single works prevailed. But on closer inspection, the contrary appears to be the case, at least in Japanese Manga Studies, as this volume confirms. Natsume Fusanosuke, Saika Tadanori and Mizoguchi Akiko, for example, do name specific titles and point to their visual style, motifs or narrative content, yet employ them, at least in their essays here, to illustrate broader issues such as signification, identification and genre. In contrast, Kajiya Kenji and Thomas LaMarre demonstrate how textual analysis may result in new views of both the manga in question and not-manga-specific political issues, such as mobilizing forces of resistance against historical violence. LaMarre's textual analysis is not less critical toward conventional "formalism", but instead of replacing thorough readings of single works by investigations of audience or genre, he suggests an approach to the meaning of forms which questions the prevailing focus on manga literacy, structure and signification in order to uncover manga-specific potentials of political criticism. Mentioned in passing, Nele Noppe's call for considering, in her words, the "content" of fan-made manga (*dōjinshi*) is also noteworthy in regard to the role of textual analysis.

In the present volume, contextual analysis predominates textual. Likewise historical issues are given preference over topics that point to the future; Noppe and Kees Ribbens' consideration of the internet remaining the exceptions. In addition, investigations of the manga industry, although not missing at all, are conducted in regard to the sociology of culture, not economics, for example in Saika's essay. And if sociology comes into play, it is not the kind which relies mainly on surveys. Furthermore, our conference lacked references to art theory and film studies. Although held in Kyoto, a city of the arts, the topic of "comics as art" did not promise to

attract much critical attention. Nevertheless, shortcomings like these will hopefully not diminish the value of the present volume as an attempt at foregrounding crucial methodological issues instead of pursuing completeness, and at crossing cultures instead of just juxtaposing them next to each other.



With the help of The Japan Foundation, Goethe Institute Tokyo and Ōgi Fusami's Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research project on women's manga, nine foreign guests were invited, including *mangaka* Christina Plaka from Germany. It goes without saying

that some invitations had to be left to chance for financial and institutional reasons. But it should also be admitted that the organizers' network was not yet good enough to include researchers from Latin America, Eastern Europe or the Arabian world. Apart from cultures in the geographic or regional sense, there was an intellectual problem as well. The selection of the conference speakers and the contributors to this volume might reveal a tendency toward scholarship in the sense of theoretical thinking, methodological sophistication, familiarity with a variety of critical discourses and thus the ability to communicate across both comics cultures and established academic disciplines. This kind of comics scholarship, however, is difficult to find in Asia for example, including Japan. Fundamentally shaped by European modernity, it is now determined to a large extent by U.S. American academia with its specific institutional conditions. American-style conferences are held in Japan too, increasingly on the subject of Japanese popculture, among others things, manga and the related fandoms<sup>2</sup>. In the name of "internationalization" often conducted solely in English, these conferences address themselves not to a general Japanese audience, but rather to those students and scholars who are in rapport with American academia, among them younger Japanese academics who went to graduate school in the U.S. Usually, they do not invite speakers who are regarded as representatives of Manga/Comics

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<sup>2</sup> See the Asian Studies Conference Japan, held in 2010 for the 14<sup>th</sup> time, and the recent summer-school related symposia organized by Temple University's Japan campus.

Studies within Japan<sup>3</sup>. After all, Japanese Manga Studies, even though equipped with a respective society (*Nihon manga gakkai*) since 2001, does not seem cross-cultural and scholarly enough.

Indeed, Manga Studies in Japan originates mainly from the activities of collectors and critics. Some of them are university professors by now (a fact which, following Morita's essay, is to be related more to recent trends of populism within the Japanese university system than to the allegedly unproblematic status of manga within Japanese society). Yet, decade-long research on the institutional offside (*zaiya*) gave rise to two extremes, that is, either over-respecting conventional academism, or conversely, underestimating institutionalized scholarship. Since the 1970s, there has been a strong skepticism against both research in the humanities and intellectual discourse, out of the fear that cultural elites might snatch manga away from its regular readers and misappropriate it for their "foreign" purposes. Becker points to a similar attitude in European comics artists as one obstacle a researcher has to reckon with. With respect to Japan, Odagiri traces the now-prevailing ignorance toward foreign comics back to that attitude. While his essay reveals the discursive nationalization of manga which accompanied the favorization of *story manga* for young readers to socio-critical cartoons for adults, it does not touch upon the fact that the aversion against "cultural elites" has been directed against intellectuals who aim at society at large rather than their own small communities of kindred spirits, and that it has gone hand in hand with an increasingly uncritical attitude toward the manga market and industry since the 1990s.

At the same time, the unfamiliarity of manga critics with academia has furthered notions of scholarship which tend to put emphasis on positivist historicism, or structuralist semiotics at the expense of critical theory and political contextualization. This is, for example, evident at the annual conferences of the Japan Society for Studies in Cartoon and Comics (*Nihon manga gakkai*). It may also be one reason for the difficulties in winning over scholars not specialized in manga/comics research for joint

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<sup>3</sup> Such as Natsume Fusanosuke and Odagiri Hiroshi present in this volume, or Itō Gō and Fujimoto Yukari, speakers at our 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference in Cologne 2010. <http://imrc.jp/conference/> (last access 2010/03/09).



projects such as the Kyoto conference. All the more, I would like to thank those who did not shy away, namely sociologist Itō Kimio, literary scholar Kawaguchi Takayuki, and art historian Kajiya Kenji who contributed to this volume, but also media-studies researcher Fukuma Yoshiaki who served as chair for the final workshop. In regard to the above-mentioned American “enclave” within Japan, it deserves attention that most of the Japanese contributors to the Kyoto conference as well as the present volume are in command of at least one foreign language in addition to their native Japanese<sup>4</sup>, and that they have an expertise in both their respective disciplines and manga research.

Until recently, Comics Studies in Japan focused mostly on domestic manga, and only rarely challenged established academic disciplines. In contrast, our conference aimed at scholarship in a cross-cultural sense, that is, at critical interrelationships between comics researchers of different cultural background and discursive perspective. Such differences apply to nationality and generation, in other words, to classics such as Tezuka Osamu’s story manga on the one hand, recent fanzine creations and OEL (Original English Language) manga on the other (the latter being another desideratum of this volume, although Odagiri, Wong and Lim mention it in passing). But in the case of comics, the diversity does not end there. Among the conference’s speakers and discussants were academic and semi-academic researchers, critics and translators, curators and graduate students from various disciplines. Being quite exceptional for an academic conference, such variety requires considerable linguistic and critical effort as can still be inferred from the essays in this volume. There are theoretically informed argumentations next to historical accounts, more or less journalistic reports and even personal statements. Some of the contributions reveal how difficult it is to address Japanese and non-Japanese readers alike, a fact which became especially virulent during the process of translating and editing this bilingual volume. But while many non-Japanese publications on manga, for example, are not worthy of being translated into Japanese because they confine themselves to merely introducing specific knowledge, it is hoped that the essays collected here have the potential of critically stimulating readers in both English and Japanese.

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4 Several papers in the present volume were translated by their authors, in that case there is no translator indicated.

Compared to the conference, the papers have been re-arranged into three parts. The first part focuses on Comics/Manga Studies itself, with contributions by such renowned experts as Groensteen, Natsume, Odagiri and Lefèvre. While they as well as Morita consider mostly intercultural relations, Suzuki also illuminates transcultural flows in the transmedia workings of the Japanese Science fiction genre, as well as in the transnational circulation of the manga “genre” as it is often conceived abroad. His concept of “genre” allows for a consideration of readers’ expectations toward single works, but it also raises the question whether all comics/manga are generic products.

The second part begins with examinations of discourses related to “authorship” by Saika, Becker and Noppe, and turns then to issues of gendered readership. These two sides of creation and reception overlap clearly in the realm of fan communities, as Noppe and Mizoguchi demonstrate. Inomata Noriko searches for reasons why the very existence of French girls’ comics has fallen into oblivion and arrives at their specific publication site, that is, magazines, attributing the growth of shōjo manga not to national culture but media history. Mentioning that a separate realm of comics is not necessarily what female readers desire in France, her essay calls for further discussion about the evolution as well as the present pros and cons of girls’ comics. How girls’ comics related to Hong Kong’s modernization from the late 1960s onward, and what role they play today, is introduced by Wendy Wong with the help of one popular female character which carries the only manhua for girls among all the imported shōjo titles today. Similar to Wong, Lim too regards the global proliferation of both manga imports and manga-style as problematic, insofar as references to the local history of both society and comics are concerned. While his essay, which is the first of part III, suggests that local alternative comics have a bigger potential to tackle with that history than manga, Kees Ribbens’ analysis of Anne Frank comics closes with the question whether comics in general are a “medium without history”. At the conference his paper served as an introduction to the repositioning of *Barefoot Gen* by recapitulating the change of expectations toward war comics and touching upon recent trends, such as the popular iconization of historical contents and cross-media references.

The last three papers discuss *Barefoot Gen* directly, all of them focusing on the critical potential of this highly generic boys’ manga, in particular its emotional impacts.

In comparison to the genre of A-bomb literature, Kawaguchi shows how this manga which lacks stylistic complexity actually resists ideological simplification. Kajiya highlights its emotional, corporeal and social impact, that is, its “performative”, action-provoking power, arguing against concentrating all analytical effort on representational content in the narrow sense. This consideration of *Barefoot Gen* in relation to its specific medium (that is, comics, specifically *shōnen manga*) and as a medium of forces rather than single easy-to-read meanings is theoretically developed in LaMarre’s essay. Whereas critics tend to excuse *Barefoot Gen*’s shortcomings with respect to historical representation, bowing to authorities such as academic historiography, LaMarre proposes to “believe in manga”. This means nothing other than a paradigm shift in Comics Studies, from the uncritical application of established methodological frameworks which promise academic reputation, to a critical shakeup of academism by virtue of comics, in other words, getting a grasp of experiences which escape the attention of established disciplines. If Comics Studies has a particular potential, then it lies in turning alleged weaknesses into strengths. This applies, last but not least, to cross-cultural issues, for example, to the assessment of recognizably local comics on the one hand and border-crossing hybrids on the other.

On behalf of the International Manga Research Center, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who contributed to the conference as well as the present volume. I am particularly grateful to all those participants, who not only went to the trouble of attending three days of intense discussion in the heating-challenged hall of the Manga Museum—some at their own expense—but also spared no effort in revising their papers for publication. In addition to the generous supporters and all contributors mentioned above, I would like to thank the staff of the Manga Museum and all those who helped with interpreting, translating and editing, namely Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto and Kudō Yōko, Cathy Sell, Gan Sheuo Hui and Zack Wood, Noda Kensuke, Sugimoto Shōgō, Patrick W. Galbraith, Miyake Toshio, Yoshihara Yukari, Nakagaki Kōtarō, Takeuchi Miho, Renato Rivera, Sugawa Akiko, and Shiina Yukari. Although this volume took much more time and effort than expected, it will have been worth it if the discussion continues.



*\*A note on transliteration:*

Throughout this volume, Japanese, Chinese and Korean names are given in the domestic order, surnames preceding given names (except in citations to authors' works published in Western languages, where they appear in the English order). Japanese words, place names, etc. are rendered in italics when mentioned the first time, and with macrons indicating long vowels, except in citations where they appear in standard English. The romanization of Japanese words follows the Hepburn system ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hepburn\\_romanization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hepburn_romanization)). (last access 03/09/2010)

As distinct from the main text of the essays, in the bibliography at the end of the paper, surnames are separated from given names by a comma, which also applies to Japanese names.

Titles of manga works which were only serialized in magazines are given in "...", while the respective magazine titles are italicized.

**\*\*All photography courtesy of the Kyoto International Manga Museum.**