

Manga truisms: On the insularity of Japanese manga discourse

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1. Japanese manga in the U.S.

Currently in Europe and the U.S., manga and manga-related topics are discussed as a subgenre of “comics”, or as part of the comics business. To give one example, the “Arts Beat” section of the *New York Times* (shortened to NYT hereafter) from March 12th, 2010 (Gustine 2010) discusses the hit film *Kick-Ass*, based on a comic by Mark Miller and John Romita Jr.,¹ as well as the comics version of the TV series *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, created by Espenson, Jeanty, and Whedon (2007),² and it goes on to mention that Kubo Tite’s *BLEACH*³ is number one on the comics’ bestseller list. Consequently, it seems worth taking a closer look at the system of classification used by this bestseller list (New York Times 2010).

The Graphic Books category on the NYT bestseller list, to which comics belong, is divided by format into three subcategories. *Kick-Ass* is number one in the hardcover category, while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is number one in the paperback category. The only difference between the two titles is format, which is easy enough to understand. However, the last category, where *BLEACH* is number one, is for manga. Looking at the structure of this list, it is easy to conclude that manga are so popular that they have a separate category devoted to them in the bestseller list. However, the list’s structure is

1 This series went on sale in 2008 under ICON, a label for original works by Marvel Comics’ creators.

2 Strictly speaking, this is a sequel written after the TV series was completed.

3 Viz Media started publishing the English translation in 2004.

not necessarily an accurate reflection of reality.

It is true that to a certain extent Japanese manga are an established genre in the U.S. market, but these “manga” are not the same as Japanese manga. We can see this by looking at the work ranked fifth on the list: *Dark Hunters* created by Campos and Kenyon (2009),⁴ an original American work. The criteria for being included in this list are not publicly available, but it is likely that works categorized as manga here are what we in Japan call “new book editions” (*shinshohan tankōbon*, a format slightly smaller than usual Japanese manga volumes). Trade paperbacks of comics in the U.S. are mainly the same size as comic books, that is, A4. So-called “digests” and “tankōbon” are relatively new forms born from and made popular through translations of Japanese manga. I assume that the art was also taken into consideration, but it does not seem to matter whether the work is of Japanese origin or not. It is more likely that because of factors like price and format, American “manga” and Japanese *shinshohan* were thrown together in the same category.

In contrast, there is the recent trend to promote Japanese manga published in large-size hardcover or softcover editions not as “manga,” but “graphic novels” in the U.S. The works by Tezuka Osamu published by Vertical are just one example. Starting with *Buddha* in 2006,⁵ they were published as large-size hardcovers and promoted in catalogues as “graphic novels”. The same strategy applies to Tatsumi Yoshihiro’s *A Drifting Life*; its English version was published in 2009 even before the Japanese one, by the Canadian publisher Drawn and Quarterly.

This means that in America the word “manga” has changed semantically; it no longer refers just to Japanese manga, and even Japanese comics will not always be called manga. When the word “manga” came in common usage in Europe and the U.S., it evoked also a certain kind of art style and narrative (which I will not discuss here), but even in regard to style, in the U.S., works that resemble manga but were not

4 It is interesting to note that a different work in this series, *Lords of Avalon*, was released by Marvel Comics in 2009 (Adaptation: Robin Furth, Art: Tommy Ōtsuka). Tommy Ōtsuka is a Japanese manga artist who does a lot of work in America.

5 Other works in the same format, include Takemiya Keiko’s *Andromeda Stories*, and Tezuka’s *Apollo’s Song*, *MW*, and *Black Jack*.

produced in Japan are no longer exceptional in the U.S.

This trend was pioneered by independent comics publisher Antarctic Press, owned by Ben Dunn, who has been drawing comics in manga style since the 1980s, and Adam Warren, who drew original comics and created the characters for Japanese SF author Takachiho Haruka's novel *Dirty Pair*. Artists like Adam Hughes, who started Gaijin Studio, a group influenced by Japanese mangaka, and the group Udon from East Asia, who in the 1990s turned Capcom's game *Street Fighter* and the Takara Toy company's *Transformers* into comics, were very successful in the U.S.

After the *Pokemon* boom in 2000, a "manga generation" appeared, influenced indiscriminately by both American entertainment like *Star Wars* and Japanese anime like *Dragon Ball*. Debuting at new companies such as TokyoPop, which quickly grew successful publishing the English version of *Sailor Moon*, these artists did not all succeed, but some were able to produce works related to the new media-mix current. One example is the comics version of Sherilyn Kenyon's fantasy novel *Dark Hunters*, which appeared in the above-mentioned NYT bestseller list, and another one is the original comic *Scott Pilgrim* by Bryan Lee O'Malley (2004), which has been turned into a live-action movie. Works like these suggest that the manga generation is about to establish itself securely in the North American comics business.

For authors and readers of this generation, "manga" does not necessarily mean Japanese manga.⁶ If stylistic hybridization continues in the same vain, the unifying force of the word "manga" will gradually weaken, and the art style and panel layout associated with it now will become just one of many technical and stylistic options.

2. Manga as a different culture

As mentioned above, at least in the U.S. and Canada, the reception and distribution of Japanese manga are now included in the domain of "comics", in the sense of "all comics in North America". This is probably the same in France and other European countries. Through the reception of "manga" as a foreign culture, its differences and commonalities with the comics from the country in question have become visible and

⁶ In contrast, there are also fundamentalists who insist that "Only Japanese manga are real manga!"; Svetlana Chmakova depicts them in her *DRAMACON*, vol. 2 (2006).

subject to debate.

There are not only active comics artists influenced by Japanese manga, like those mentioned above. Since the 1980s, manga has been discussed in the groundbreaking books by Frederik L. Schodt *MANGA! MANGA! The World of Japanese Comics* (1986) and *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (1996); in introductory articles, essays and reviews such as those published by Fred Patten in the small magazine *Animerica* and later collected in his volume *WATCHING ANIME, READING MANGA: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews* (2004). Around 1980s, when Schodt and Patten did introductory work in the academic field too, scholars like John A. Lent, who started up the *International Journal of Comic Art*, and Maurice Horn, who edited the *World Encyclopedia of Comics and Cartoons* (1998, first publ. 1978), began to bring manga as a research subject to the fore.

After the general comics boom of the 1990s,⁷ there were more opportunities to discuss manga, last but not least due to the greater interest in comics as a whole, and thanks to the manga boom of the 2000s, manga-related publications increased exponentially. Although insufficient, there was already some discussion about the differences and similarities between “manga” and “comics”.

3. Awareness of foreign comics in Japan

In Japan, the situation is quite different. Today, “manga” almost exclusively signifies Japanese manga, while foreign comics are not considered part of this category. In addition, the current manga discourse in Japan—from book reviews and introductory articles in magazines and newspapers to criticism and research—takes it for granted that “manga” is characterized by a specific form of expression, that is is “sequential art”, as Will Eisner and Scott McCloud put it (1985, 1993), or to be more precise, meaning narrative comics serialized in weekly or monthly manga magazines.

Before attempting to explain why foreign comics are not regarded as manga in Japan, it should be pointed out that even from a global perspective, the domestic Japanese manga market is unusually large. The amount of works produced domestically is so considerable that in comparison the circulation of foreign comics is dwarfed. Their

⁷ For more information about this phenomenon, see Odagiri (2007).

relative lack of distribution is directly related to the low awareness of “foreign manga” as a whole. To make matters worse, Japanese readers will sometimes simplistically assume that foreign comics must be of inferior quality because they do not sell well in Japan.

The strange thing is that there are numerous examples of foreign comics that are actually selling well in Japan; however, these aren't seen as “manga”. The Japanese distribution of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* and Hergé's *Tintin*, representative classic comics in English and French respectively, provides the most telling example of how strangely the Japanese manga market works. Schulz's *Peanuts* maintains its popularity through the sale of character goods, stuffed animals, and other merchandise since its character Snoopy, the Beagle dog, is extremely famous, but its original title is almost unknown. In spite of that it has been translated into Japanese several times, available until this day in both small and large paperback formats.⁸ However, these publications are rarely referred to as “manga” and they cannot be found in the manga corner of bookstores; instead, they are placed on the same shelf as self-help books and foreign literature.

In the case of Hergé's *Tintin*, the difference in treatment is even more obvious. Although *The Adventures of Tintin*, as the entire series is named, was published in Japanese by Fukuinkan publ., it is distributed as a “picture book” and only rarely referred to as “manga”.

There are countless similar cases which sold several ten thousands of copies supported by the American action-figure boom which Japan experienced in the 1990s, for example Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* (1992) and the *X-men* at the time of Jim Lee's artwork.⁹ More recently, there has been Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) and Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (1999), noteworthy because they stand out as long-selling foreign works, yet are routinely ignored in Japanese manga discourse by critics as well as researchers.

In Japan it has become customary to publish ranking guides of “this year's best

⁸ Two examples are Kōdansha's paperback anthology *Sunūpi no motto kiraku ni* (1995) and Kadokawa's *SNOOPY* (2002).

⁹ These comics were mainly published by Marvel from the late 1980s to the second half of the 1990s. Shōgakukan started publishing translations in 1994.

manga” in the form of so-called Mooks [a hybrid of magazine and book] by several publishers,¹⁰ but translations of foreign comics are almost never considered, and a category for “foreign comics” simply does not exist.

The problem is not the availability or distribution level of translations, it is the attitude that “anything that isn’t Japanese manga is of no relevance to us”, which prevails in contemporary Japanese manga discourse, and it is my personal opinion that foreign researchers and journalists need to know about this situation.

In America, a certain amount of French-language comics (*bande dessinée*, BD) have been published, and there are also several studies about French comics (Beaty 2007, McKinney 2008). When French-speaking researchers say that BD and American comics are different, they are able to back this claim up with their experience as readers, comparing the actual differences and commonalities of the two kinds of comics.

However, to most Japanese, regardless of whether the works are from the U.S. or France, they are the same, that is, “foreign manga”. Regardless of their reading experience or its lack, most Japanese wrongly assume that foreign comics are different from Japanese manga and thus of no relevance to them. Even critics and researchers are unaware that this assumption is flawed. For Japanese readers, “manga” is something so commonplace that they do not question what it actually means, but as long as critics and researchers dwell within this limited framework, it will be impossible to establish any international debate.

4. Considering foreign comics

What I said above applies to the contemporary state of manga discourse in Japan. In the past, however, foreign comics were actually read and discussed. In *Gendai manga no shisō* [Thought in contemporary manga], published in 1970, art critic Ishiko Junzō uses the words *kātsūn* and *renzoku koma manga* (lit. continuing panel manga) as equivalents to the American terms cartoon and comic strip.

In the same book Ishiko quotes from *The Comics* by Coulton Waugh

¹⁰ Some examples are Takarajima Publisher’s *Kono manga wa sugoi!*, and Freestyle’s *Kono manga o yome!*

(1947/1991), who did pioneering work in comics research. At the beginning of the book, Ishiko touches on American comics history in a manner which reveals his familiarity with contemporaneous comics and comics research. Works on manga written around 1970 by critics of Waugh's generation, such as Tsurumi Shunsuke (1973), Ozaki Hideki (1972), Satō Tadao (1973), and Kusamori Shinichi (1967), used foreign comics as a model in order to explore Japanese manga.

In his foreword to *Manga geijutsuron: gendai nihonjin no sensu to humoā no kōzai* [Manga Art: The Merits and Demerits of Contemporary Japanese Sense and Humor] (1967), published before the above-mentioned *Gendai manga no shisō*, Ishiko expresses dissatisfaction with the way that earlier manga critics such as Itō Ippei (1955) and Suyama Keiichi (1954) leaned on introducing foreign works in their publications, which indicates that in the past, Japanese manga discourse did in fact connect foreign and Japanese manga. This raises the question why the consideration of foreign manga that existed in Ishiko and Tsurumi's time disappeared.

5. Two notions of “manga”

In his paper “Manga hihyō no genzai: atarashiki kagaku shugi e no tsuna-watari” [The current state of manga criticism: a bridge to new scientism], published in the anthology *Manga hihyō sengen* [Manifesto of manga criticism] (Yonezawa 1987), manga researcher Takeuchi Osamu breaks post-war Japanese manga criticism up into three phases: (1) 1955-1964, (2) 1965-1974, and (3) 1975-1984. According to Takeuchi, manga criticism until the first phase showed an “instructional attitude” criticizing manga as too commercial compared to idealistic children's literature, with authors of children's literature and educators at its center. Takeuchi disapproves of their framework, which positioned manga as vulgar. Takeuchi regards critics of the same generation as the above-mentioned Ishiko and Tsurumi as dominating the second phase. He positions them as “intellectuals”, meaning critics and researchers that had already gained recognition in their respective fields, who came to the fore in this period of rapid development, when manga's popularity increased by association with animated series such as *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Astro Boy), and rental-library comics (*kashihon gekiga*)¹¹

¹¹ Produced only for rental libraries not general sale, these comics were original works or book

aimed at the young working class flourished gaining manga an older readership.

A year before Takeuchi's paper, Kure Tomofusa had already called these critics' approach "studies of mass culture by means of the study of manga" in his *Gendai manga no zentaizō* [A comprehensive view of contemporary manga] (1986), but Takeuchi is much more critical: From his point of view, these critics used jargon from their respective fields, such as "mass culture", and attempted to turn manga into a case study in order to examine the potential of existing sciences, but as with the publications of their predecessors, "the normal reader's way of reading stays invisible". In other words, Takeuchi thinks, that until the early 1970s, manga criticism consisted of analysis from external perspectives, which took the manga reader's view very lightly.

In contrast to this external perspective, critics which had grown up reading manga, including Takeuchi himself, but also Yonezawa Yoshihiro (1980), Murakami Tomohiko (1979), and Hashimoto Osamu (1979) came to form the "manga generation's criticism" and thus the core of the third phase in Takeuchi's historical account of Japan's manga discourse.

Takeuchi's scheme has become a kind of official view within Japanese manga criticism and research, as recent works on discourse history which adhere to it, like Natsume Fusanosuke's *Manga gaku e no chōsen: shinka suru hihyō chizu* [A challenge for manga research: the evolving critical map] (2004) and Koyama Masahiro's *Sengo nihon manga ronsōshi* [The history of manga debates in postwar Japanese] (2007), indicate. But a revisiting of Ishiko and Tsurumi's texts raises doubts about certain aspects of Takeuchi's scheme.

It is true that Ishiko, an art critic; Tsurumi, a researcher of popular culture in general; Ozaki, a scholar of popular literature; and Satō, a film critic, were renowned in their own fields by the time they started to publish manga criticism. However, contrary to what Takeuchi pointed out, when reading their work one cannot help but notice their preferences as mere readers. In both Ishiko's passion for *gekiga* [lit. dramatic pictures] and Tsurumi's statement, "I love Sazae-san", their tastes show themselves

editions which contained anthologies. Rental book stores existed in various forms until the 1970s, providing reading as entertainment mostly to blue-collar workers. Artists who are now highly respected overseas, like Mizuki Shigeru and Tatsumi Yoshihiro, created many *kashihon* originals.

quite clearly, which cannot necessarily be said about contemporaries like Yonezawa and Murakami, to name just two. In these works the perspectives of reader and theorist are not clearly divided which makes it much harder to decipher “the normal reader’s reading”.

Perhaps Takeuchi’s assessment was not really based on the analysis of their actual texts, but it rather originated in resistance against the “old notion of manga” proposed by Ishiko and others. This resistance was shared by critics who like Takeuchi belonged to the postwar baby-boomers and grew up reading Tezuka’s and his successors’ manga. Precisely this opposition between new and old notions of manga led to the decisive split between the manga criticism up to Ishiko’s generation and the manga criticism launched by Takeuchi’s generation.

6. Dis/similarities regarding the concept of manga/comics

Assumingly, what we call *manga* in Japanese, *comics* in English, and *bande dessinée* in French all signify the same medium and form of expression; however, each word refers to something entirely different. “Manga” signifies a certain kind of style, a certain way of drawing, as expressed in the term “manga picture”. In contrast, the English “comics” comes from “comedy” and refers to content. *Bande dessinée* is the French translation of the English “comic strip”, meaning “drawn belt”, in other words, comics with several panels (sequential art), that is, a form of expression.

Among these three general terms, the most difficult to understand is probably the English “comics”. It is hard to see why people would call sequential art a word that stems from “comedy”. In fact, narrative newspaper comics like *Buck Rogers* and *Tarzan* were not called comic strips in English, but rather “adventure strips”. The word “strip”, used here to signify a comic with several panels, normally refers to cloth or a rag, but it was probably chosen as an attribute for panels.

In America, this word and the variety of its meanings have been subject to debate for years, but the Japanese word “manga” is not easy either.

The word “manga” refers to a style of drawing; however, the usage of “manga-like”, or “mangaesque” as an adjective, contains a nuance of “funny” or “comical” in Japanese, just like the English word “comics”. This does not come as a surprise if we

remember that Japan's modern manga took so-called *ponchi-e* (Punch pictures) as its point of departure, modeled after the one-panel comics of *The Japan Punch*, a magazine established by an Englishman in 1862. The word “manga”, literally meaning “funny picture”, was not initially connected to an expressive form or equation with sequential art. The start of Japan's modern manga were single pictures, cartoons, so to speak, whose purpose was satire and humor. In the beginning, one-panel manga were “manga”.

7. The elimination of manga for adults

The elimination of manga for adults is obvious when considering, for example, Kusamori Shinichi's *Manga-kō: bokutachi jishin no naka no manuke no kenkyū* [Thinking manga: studying the moron inside ourselves] (1967). The kind of manga Kusamori sees as ideal is clearly not Tezuka's story manga, but rather an unconstrained manga determined by pictures and ideas and modeled after cartoons that appeared in American magazines like *The New Yorker* or *Playboy*. In fact, until Kusamori and Ishiko's generation, there was an unwritten rule that precisely these one-panel cartoons were manga for adults, whereas story manga, including gekiga, were children's manga.¹²

In contemporary Japan, the distinction between adult manga and children's manga no longer makes sense, but as societal common sense this distinction was still alive in the 1970s when serious story manga had already become the norm in magazines for boys and young men. And this was not really strange given the fact that at the time European and American comics served as the model. Kusamori's ideal cartoonists such as Steinberg and James Thurber, who published their works in first rate literary magazines like *The New Yorker*, were highly acclaimed artists in the U.S., while comic books were seen as mere children's reading material. As long as Japanese critics followed this foreign standard without actually trying out the respective works, their schematic notion of “cartoons are for adults, narrative comics for children” is understandable.

Of course, from a contemporary perspective, the difference between cartoons

¹² Tezuka Osamu, the pioneer of post-war manga, stated this clearly in *COM*, the magazine from his own Mushi Production publishing company (Tezuka 1967).

and narrative comics is in expressive form, not content, but back then it was obviously difficult to assume the very existence of serious story manga. In fact, what Ishiko and his contemporaries had to say in this regard is rather muddled and hard to understand.

The unconscious strategy taken by critics around 1980—those who belonged to the third phase of manga discourse according to Takeuchi—upset this scheme, but without clearly distinguishing between expressive form and content. They omitted cartoons, at the time known as comics for adults, from the concept of manga, and tried to reconstruct “manga” as an extension of children’s comics only. Symbolic in this regard is the five-volume anthology edited by Murakami Tomohiko and Takeuchi Osamu, *Manga hihyō taikei* [The manga criticism compendium] (1989), which summarized the manga discourse until then. The majority of articles included are about story manga by and after Tezuka as well as their predecessors in prewar children’s manga, which shows quite clearly the editors’ and their generation’s new notion of manga.

Thus, the word manga came to mean something completely different for Ishiko and Kusamori who saw manga as originating from cartoons, and for the critics of the 1980s who held the assumption that only story manga published after Tezuka were real “manga”. Actually, the biggest change in manga discourse around 1980 was the elimination of cartoons as manga for adults. But the use of the same word “manga” led to a lack of awareness about this discrepancy.

In Takeuchi’s above-mentioned discussion, the first phase of manga discourse is summarized as a (mainly critical) approach to children’s manga by educators and authors of children’s literature; however, the introduction of foreign comics by cartoonist Suyama Keiichi, whom Ishiko and Kusamori had directly in mind, as well as by Itō Ippei, the editor of the cartoon magazine *VAN*, seems to have never existed. This was already a distortion of the history of manga discourse, and precisely this distortion might have supported the present attitude of regarding foreign comics as irrelevant, although at present it is still too early for such an assessment. The only thing we can say for sure is that we should not take our current views and understandings of manga as self-evident. We do still lack an understanding not only of different cultures, that is, foreign comics, but also our very own past notions of manga. This is precisely the

issue.

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