

Afterword: Intentions and methods behind my proposal for *Barefoot Gen* remakes abroad

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(trans. Cathy Sell)

We had finally reached the closing chapter of the 1st International Conference, held over three days in December 2009, when during the question and answer session of the concluding workshop “Public memory, private consumption: On *Barefoot Gen*”, I put forward the proposal of *Barefoot Gen* remake editions to be published throughout several countries and regions, as well as related examinations of demands and readers’ responses. But we were running out of time, and as it was a comment which did not ask for concrete answers from the panellists, and was rather a sudden idea, I was not able to explain myself in detail. Nevertheless, as a manga researcher and one of the conference’s organizers, I wanted to suggest something out of my observations which seemed to tackle the tasks and prospects of all the sessions. Instead of an afterword I aim here to clarify the concrete intentions and methods of my proposal, while looking back on the conference. As the title suggests, I will emphasize reference to its fourth part, the concluding workshop, whilst bringing to mind various themes covered across the three days, especially endeavouring to present those issues which were relevant to the conference as a whole.

1. Why *Barefoot Gen*?

First, a word about why I chose Nakazawa Keiji’s *Barefoot Gen*. For the same reason that was the intent and main point of discussion in the conference workshop; that is, because *Barefoot Gen* is relevant to the global experience and memory of World War II. It is the most famous manga among Japanese which deals with the atomic bomb and the gruesome ravages of war, and as such, it was promptly translated for overseas

publication.

However, reasons behind the overseas reception of this work are slightly more complicated. For more information regarding Japanese perceptions of *Barefoot Gen*, in particular the transition of its publishing sites and the particularities of its reading space, you may refer to *Hadashi no gen ga ita fūkei—manga, sensō, kioku* [The scenery that *Barefoot Gen* inhabited: manga, war, memory] (Yoshimura and Fukuyama 2006). Below, I will present some additional information relating to the reception of *Barefoot Gen* abroad.

Frederik L. Schodt, well known as a pioneering advocate for Japanese manga abroad, informs us that “by 1980, the only real ‘story manga’ available in English and distributed in the United States was *Barefoot Gen*”, followed by the explanation that “*Gen* had such a powerful message that the translation and production of the English edition were done by volunteers—Japanese and American members of a non-profit organization formed in 1976 called Project Gen” (Schodt 1996: 309). This devoted undertaking was based on the intention to convey *Barefoot Gen*’s compelling message around the world, and as is now common knowledge, it was then translated into multiple languages including Esperanto.¹ Then “in 1983 a shorter, similar story by Nakazawa, *I Saw It*, became the first Japanese comic published in the U.S. in true American format, complete with color printing”; however this was a risky experiment which almost resulted in bankruptcy of the publishing company and not until later when “the English *Gen* books were picked up by New Society Publishers and by Penguin Books nearly fifteen years later, *Gen* could hardly be called a successful commercial venture” (Schodt 1996: 309).²

There are three points in Schodt’s description that I would like to confirm for now. The first is that the commercial pretext behind *Barefoot Gen* appearing as the first case of translated Japanese manga published in America was not due to the needs of the local readers or its popularity within Japan, but rather, based on political motives concerning the atomic bomb and personal war experiences. The second point relates to the fact that the commercial success of *Barefoot Gen* occurred later on in the 1990s,

1 Sabine Fiedler (2006).

2 See also Roger Sabin (2006).

at a time when a number of other Japanese manga were also being translated and published abroad. And thirdly, we may confirm a fact which is reflected in the above two points, that even translated manga published in the American comics format were not especially popular in the mid-1980s.

From this, it can be derived that *Barefoot Gen* was not widely received in America solely due to its subject matter, that is, the message conveyed and the strength of its visual expressions, or the devices specific to the medium. And yet on the other hand, *Barefoot Gen* won popularity in the 1990s and onward, from among numerous Japanese manga translations, meaning that the initial lack of sales was not because the content was uninteresting. Rather, it can be inferred that in the mid-1980s the degree of recognition afforded to Japanese manga in America was still low, as was the level of manga literacy. Put simply, you can translate any manga and praise it for having a “powerful message”, “unusual design” or being in an “easy to read format”—but without a group who have a certain level of manga literacy, no work will gain popularity with the addressees.

Such recognition may only be proper, but this is a point we should make ourselves conscious of time and again, as we strive towards global Comics Studies. Because as far as reading or interpretative communities of specific countries and regions are concerned, knowledge and curiosity about the political, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which such communities have grown to the present level and scale (or have not), are equally important as knowledge and curiosity about a works’ contents. In a word, whilst again extremely natural, when we advocate “International Comics Studies” and find this advocacy meaningful, then we need to become better acquainted not only with “manga/comics” but also their “international” aspects.

Conversely, the more *Barefoot Gen* is praised as a canonic work of “Atomic Bomb Manga”, the more difficult it is to discuss it purely as manga in comparison with other manga works. Beginning with the personal history of the author as an atomic bomb survivor, political messages about the atomic bomb and war were brought into the foreground. Yet since this is not merely a problem which concerns Hiroshima and Japan, as the Asia Pacific War and World War II are now literally “international” matters of concern, *Barefoot Gen* definitely forms a useful subject of research for

global Comics Studies. This was notably demonstrated by the enthusiastic discussions that developed in the concluding workshop.

2. Why remake editions?

Next, let us turn to the question of why remakes? I don't have in mind a revised edition by Nakazawa Keiji himself, or a *dōjinshi* [fan-made manga] using his characters and visuals, but rather, completely remade editions by new authors.³ Figuratively, it would be the attempt at the possibility of a transformation from a “unique Gen” to “multiple Gens”. That is, as opposed to the merely translated editions which have existed up until now, remakes, created by authors of a different generation, gender, and residency to Nakazawa would make it easier to relativize the foregrounding of the original work as well as its characteristics as manga whilst bringing its unique strengths into prominence. Those unique strengths held by *Barefoot Gen*, are the strengths that reside in a work drawn from the unique perspective of an atomic bomb survivor, and that of a work which whilst an example of the mass print-media of manga, at the same time possesses a particular aura. Similar to a great many other manga, the message Nakazawa conveys in *Barefoot Gen* and the manga-specific devices used are his own. But the fact remains that his work is unparalleled because of the standpoint Nakazawa has as an atomic bomb survivor. Above all the originality of his work is supported by Nakazawa's outrage towards the war and the atomic bomb.

If the earnest wish of atomic bomb survivors such as Nakazawa is to appeal for the acceptance of the experience of the atomic bombing—something extremely rare in human history—as a universal issue, then the privileging of the authors' standpoint is not necessarily a blessing. Needless to say, if we maintained that *Barefoot Gen* could only be read as the canonic work of Atomic Bomb Manga, a great many readers would be unhappy. In this regard, the recent spread of manga that deal with the atomic bomb is noteworthy, for example, works such as Kōno Fumiyo's *Yūnagi no machi sakura*

³ There have been a great many occurrences of parodies and derivative works of *Barefoot Gen* by fans in the form of *dōjinshi* and internet manga. An excellent example is *1995 GenProductions* (<http://kamatatokyo.com/home.html>), which hosts *Hadashi no gen nikki* [The Diary of *Barefoot Gen*] (<http://kamatatokyo.com/hoge/hns-lite/>). For an evaluation of the trends of these works, refer to Kawaguchi Takayuki (2008).

no kuni [Town of evening calm, country of cherry blossoms] (2004) and *Kono sekai no katasumi ni* [In the corners of this world] (2008-9), as well as Nishioka Yuka's *Natsu no zansō: Nagasaki no hachigatsu kokonoka* [Summer's afterimage: Nagasaki's 9th of August] (2008) and *Hachigatsu kokonoka no santakurōsu: Nagasaki genbaku to hibakusha* [August the 9th's Santa Claus: The Nagasaki atomic bomb and bomb survivors] (2010).

That being the case, the creation of multiple texts (i.e. remake editions) which relativize the original would be useful in order to confront the possibilities and challenges of *Barefoot Gen* as both a medium for conveying a message, including Nakazawa's privileged authorship, and as entertaining reading matter.

As may already be evident, my proposal for *Barefoot Gen* remakes was inspired by Kees Ribbens' discussion of Anne Frank comics and Nele Noppe's paper on *dōjinshi* and derivative art. Of course *Barefoot Gen* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* differ in that they depict the atomic bomb and the Holocaust using fictional characters and real-life figures respectively. But they both appeal to the world through the visual expression of manga/comics regarding the experiences of people at the mercy of World War II. What is more important, however, is the crucial difference of one "unique Gen" as opposed to "multiple Annes".

As Ribbens points out, the image of Anne changes in accordance with publication site and contents, resulting in the unavoidable likelihood that the readers will have differing amounts of enthusiasm for the information and moral lessons from each work. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the issues of representation that Kawaguchi Takayuki touched upon, the image of Anne was molded right from the start in the environment of postwar media such as comics, movies and novels, and has essentially been an ex-post phenomenon. Accordingly, at the risk of not having understood correctly, it can be restated that there has never been a "unique" or "correct" depiction of Anne to begin with. Yet at the same time precisely because of this, Anne is still alive within the hearts of readers from many countries and regions.

Frankly speaking, I would like to see this situation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* adapted to *Barefoot Gen*. I would like to see a "surviving Gen" or a "reborn Gen" in response to the culture, ideology, society and history of readers from various countries

and regions around the world.

3. How to publish in several countries?

Nevertheless, there are obstacles that would get in the way of the immediate realization of such remakes. Certainly there would be copyright issues.

In 2009, Nakazawa Keiji announced his retirement as a manga artist due to the effects of declining eyesight. By considering Nakazawa's feelings of anger as an atomic-bomb survivor and the overlap between his personal life and *Gen*, we can imagine that it would be extremely difficult for him to entrust *Gen* to somebody else. Naturally it would not only be a matter of commercial significance or honor as a manga artist, but something that would affect Nakazawa's very identity. Accordingly, even by "normal" standards as one manga among many, the feasibility of a *Barefoot Gen* remake is unlikely.

However in this case "normal" refers to publishing activities as they have existed up until now. But if the publication were undertaken by a university, such as in the case of this volume, other possibilities would open up. Whilst neither better nor worse, the division of labour in capitalist society is supposed to allow universities different things from what are essentially profit-seeking corporate organizations. So perhaps that would prove a worthwhile avenue through which to publish the remakes.

Of course universities are also a type of enterprise and they cannot consider making an "unsellable book" just because they are a university. But universities recognize the significance of knowledge, thought, experimentation and establishment of discourse over consideration of sales as the most important factor (naturally, it is nice if a book sells, but that is not the be-all and end-all). In actuality, the publishing assistance schemes available to universities may well share this philosophy.

However it is by no means a rule that corporate organizations lack flexibility. For example, roughly two weeks after the end of our international conference, the newspaper *Asahi Shinbun* (Engl. edition titled *Asahi News*) published an article with the headline *Tezuka manga: maboroshi no kyōsaku jitsugen e—burajiru no kyoshō, seizen yakusoku* [*Tezuka manga: a vision of collaboration to be realized—his living*

promise to a Brazilian master] (Hirayama 2010).⁴ During their friendship while Tezuka Osamu was alive, seventy-four year old Brazilian comic artist Mauricio de Sousa and Tezuka had planned to collaborate on an animated film about world peace that would feature both their characters. However it was still an unrealized dream by the time of Tezuka's death. Then in 2009 de Sousa met with Tezuka Productions staff, and received permission to use Tezuka's characters. He is now aiming towards a comics publication in Portuguese. The article also explained that it was the first time Tezuka Productions had authorized a foreign comics artist to use Tezuka's characters.

This is a heart-warming story. But if anything, the rarity of this case is what makes it so heart-warming. Should this kind of trend expand, leading to the clearing of copyright issues that we found were often and again referred to in our conference, or even allowing academic consideration of *dōjinshi*, it would be substantially good news for future global Comics Studies as well as the readers of various countries and regions.

How long the characters and messages of their work will endure is a compelling topic for manga artists. In that respect, Tezuka was taken with the idea that his works could cross borders and might continue to be read for a long time; so we may regard the actions of Tezuka Productions as mentioned in the article as a decisive move to observe his intentions.⁵

Then surely in the eyes of Nakazawa, the copyright protection period notwithstanding, it would be his wish for *Barefoot Gen* to reach as many countries and regions as possible and to last as eternally as possible. However the realization of these aspirations requires more than the effort and desires of the author. The local publishing

4 An English translation of this article was published online by Asahi.com headlined *Brazilian animator finally teams up with Tezuka* (<http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201001290437.html>). (last access 30/08/2010)

5 Take for example, the following quote from Tezuka: "You can't understand the value of a manga until at least ten years have passed. But I do not just mean living on in memories, or thoughts of 'back in the day it was like this'. The most important thing is to inspire the same feeling in children ten years from now, and it is even more important to do so in twenty or thirty years. To transcend times and worlds has to be our daily bread in a manner of speaking" (Tezuka Osamu and Ishiko Jun 1992: 264).

Additionally, in regards to the precedent of foreign usage mentioned in the article, there are several examples of remake editions featuring Tezuka's characters within Japan, for example Urasawa Naoki and Tezuka Osamu's *PLUTO*, as well as remakes of *Black Jack* and *Princess Knight* (*Ribon no kishi*).

and distribution circumstances, social and cultural status of manga, and the level and historical development of readers' manga literacy need to be taken into consideration as well. If we assume that political position and attitudes, interpretation and memory in regards to World War II and the atomic bombing differ according to region, then a careful yet insatiable intellectual approach becomes essential. I mentioned this point above in my first section, while in the second section I discussed how the production of remakes, or "multiple Gens" would possibly amplify the voices of the atomic bomb survivors, including Nakazawa.

Now I shall discuss how publication could be realized in multiple countries. Although still in early stages of development I would like my proposal to proceed in the following manner. First, there should be an investigation about manga/comics related to personal experiences and memories of World War II, such as the translated editions of *Barefoot Gen* and *Maus* as well as *The Diary of Anne Frank* comics, especially in regard to how they sell and how they are used and published. Of course this applies to presentations of our conference too. Then, based on the survey results we could establish indicators of the breadth of the manga readership demographic in each region and their individual manga literacy levels. Those indicators could then be used for analysis to derive readers' preferred manga style and layout, in order to refine the fundamental strategy of the remake editions. Collectively, this would put university resources to practical use in their role as an assisting institution for the work process, with the aim to strengthen collaboration between universities and researchers. In the meantime, at some stage we should arrange an interview with Nakazawa, to discuss these ideas with him, and request permission to create a remake.

I realize that "saying is one thing and doing is another", but the greatest aim of this idea is the construction of a network for international collaboration among researchers and universities, which would be an essential point to the entire project. And needless to say, the first important step towards that has been our international conference.

To continue, we must ask who will be the agent in the overseas publication of *Barefoot Gen* remakes? It will be us. But then who are "we"? We are the participants in this international conference, or more specifically the people holding this anthology

of papers and those who currently have or will develop an interest in global Comics Studies among their future research activities. The Kyoto Seika University International Manga Research Center will do its part, as best it can, as a cornerstone of research to facilitate the mutual exchange of interests and the extension of such a network. In order to fill that role, “we” all intend there to be future international manga/comics conferences hereafter.

Conclusion

I have written this afterword to the present anthology based on my personal proposal in regard to *Barefoot Gen*. This proposal is supposed to be a case study of global Comics Studies, although that is not its entire purpose. In actuality, I believe that the issues this proposal raises have the possibility to relate back to each session of our conference. This is because, to borrow a phrase from Thierry Groensteen, a sincere study of the “system of comics” inevitably requires investigation into the reading and interpretative communities which make that same system what it is, in other words, the various issues surrounding manga literacy.

Again, as pointed out by Pascal Lefèvre, the selection of appropriate works for international comparison is an important task in order to comprehensively examine the system, form and contents of manga/comics. Consequently it goes without saying that this task overlaps issues related to transnationality and identity. *Barefoot Gen* provides the requirements to advance this sort of global Comics Studies, so my intention here has been to suggest a first step forward. In that sense, this proposal has been my Manifesto for Starting Global Comics Studies. It may be presumptuous of me, but I would like to end on this point, however in closing, I should perhaps touch on how we would put the earnings from a *Barefoot Gen* remake to use if it sold well. In Japan we have the saying “*oni ga warau*” [demons will laugh], equivalent to the English “don’t count your chickens before they hatch”, and since we do not want to be laughed at, let us discuss that another time.

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