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Tatsumi Yoshihiro's Gekiga and the Global Sixties: Aspiring for an Alternative

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"If manga are the biological parents of gekiga, kashihon-ya [rental bookstores] are its
foster parents."

Tatsumi Yoshihiro, *Gekiga daigaku* [*Gekiga University*] (Tatsumi 1967: 12)

I. Introduction: Gekiga Revisited

In the culture of Japanese comics (*manga*), *gekiga*, often translated into English as "dramatic pictures," exists alongside mainstream entertainment manga. In today's Japan, the term loosely refers to a type of comics with a long narrative (story manga) that is oriented toward youth or mature readers with little or no comical effect. The term was coined first in 1957 by Japanese cartoonist Tatsumi Yoshihiro with the intention of diverging from—if not opposing—the postwar mainstream manga that were aimed at children (*jidō manga* or *kodomo manga*). In 1959, with other like-minded cartoonists, Tatsumi founded a group called "*gekiga kōbō*" [the "Gekiga Workshop"], which spawned a short-lived gekiga movement and mostly produced suspense and crime fiction comics. The Gekiga Workshop was disbanded the following year due to divided opinions about gekiga among the members and the shifting nature of the

comics industry at that time. And yet, Tatsumi's aspiration to create something different from conventional manga powerfully inspired other creators and, in the sixties, gekiga became a medium in which Tatsumi and other gekiga artists explored the potential of comics to express themselves artistically and engage in social critique.

This paper first investigates the media history of gekiga, including Tatsumi's initial conceptualization of it, the condition of the comics industry and market at that time, gekiga's initial readership, and how it was consumed when it first emerged as a distinctive form. Any examination of gekiga's genealogy must also consider its material history and socio-economic context so as to not reductively ascribe a new innovative form of expression to an artist's "talent" or merely engage in a formalist discussion of comics through a close reading of content and form. This methodological approach is also informed by recent critical reflections on manga criticism in English-language scholarship that have tended to assume a transhistorically homogenous manga readership in Japan (Berndt: 296-297). To respond to this call, I will discuss the rise of gekiga in relation to its readership. As with the case of other forms of popular culture, the emergence of gekiga was deeply intertwined with the historically specific formation of the manga industry as well as the social, economic, and political conditions of Japan. And yet, like the trajectory of the nation, Japanese comics were informed, constituted, or constrained by the larger formation of the international cultural politics of the age as well. My paper, then, attempts to discuss Tatsumi Yoshihiro's works—some of his best, mainly produced in the late sixties and the early seventies—to show how his gekiga critique the rapid industrialization that alienated and repressed certain segments of citizens during the economic rise of the nation in the postwar period. This paper attempts to argue that Tatsumi's gekiga in the sixties were the product of his artistic passion for innovation, the domestic socio-economic condition of the nation, and the worldwide cultural rebellion against the Establishment, known as counterculture.

II. The Genealogy of Gekiga: The Rental Book Industry, Osaka, and Readership

To approach the genealogy of gekiga, it is crucial to explore a significant commercial and cultural site called *kashihon-ya*, the rental bookshop in Japan. Similar to a contemporary video/DVD rental store, *kashihon-ya* is a store that lent books for a small charge to customers or allowed customers to read books on the spot. Although its origin can be traced back to the Edo period, rental bookstores flourished in the early and mid-twentieth century [fig. 1]. Typically, *kashihon* rental bookshops were private- or family-owned small businesses that often combined rental book commerce with the selling of other items

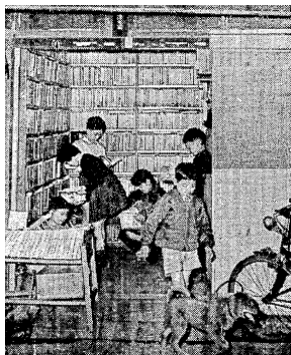


Fig. 1 A rental bookstore
© Asahi Shinbun Company
(April 24th, 1960)

such as used books, snacks or stationery products. At the height of their prosperity in the mid-fifties, there were at least 20,000 kashihon rental bookshops throughout Japan (*Kashihon manga kenkyu-kai*: 13). Before the advent of television, kashihon books offered citizens everyday entertainment and avocation during the recovery period. Along with samurai-period novels [*jidaimono*] and mass entertainment novels [*taishū shōsetsu*], manga books also attracted children and young adults. Japanese manga critic Nakano Haruyuki states that, in the late forties and early fifties, the Japanese comics market had two separate locales: the magazine industry and the kashihon

manga industry (Nakano: 48). In contemporary Japan, manga culture is centered on the magazine industry; typically, manga are first serialized in comics magazines, and then collected and published in book format [*tankōbon*]. Before the sixties, however, reading comics in book format at rental bookstores was also a common way to consume them. Kashihon publishers existed not only in Tokyo but also in Osaka, Nagoya, Kobe, and other cities where cartoonists were under contract with local publishers and contributed their works directly to them. The kashihon industry gradually declined by the mid-sixties as major publishing houses located in Tokyo began to extend their comics magazine network throughout Japan. Yet, the kashihon industry cultivated young, talented gekiga creators, including Tatsumi Yoshihiro, Sakurai Shōichi (a brother of Tatsumi Yoshihiro), Saitō Takao, Satō Masaaki, Hirata Hiroshi, Shirato Sanpei, and Mizuki Shigeru before they became active in comics magazines. As manga critic Ishiko Junzō remarks, kashihon rental bookstores were the "matrix and incubator" for the birth and growth of gekiga (Ishiko 1973: 178).

It is also important to consider the regional difference in publication culture within Japan when examining the germination of gekiga. Along with Tokyo, Osaka had many kashihon publishers who were very active in the kashihon industry at the height of their popularity; in fact, many of the above-mentioned gekiga creators were working originally in Osaka. Even before Japan's industrial modernization during the Meiji period (1868-1912), Osaka was already famous for its rich and vibrant popular culture and entertainment. As it developed as a mercantile hub in the Edo period, Osaka was a center of the extravagant and flamboyant *Genroku* culture, a cultural explosion in the

early Edo period (Genroku period, 1688-1704), driven by the rise of the merchant class. Relatively free from the feudalistic mores of Edo (now Tokyo), Osaka merchants and townsmen had more freedom to leisurely pursue popular culture. Famously, popular writer Ihara Saikaku produced several overtly erotic novels that became popular and were circulated in the already well-established commercial publishing system. In modern Japan, this commercial city also played a significant role in popular culture, particularly in relation to the development of postwar Japanese comics. As is well known, the first postwar manga boom was triggered by the publication of Tezuka's seminal manga *Shin Takarajima* [New Treasure Island] (1947), originally published by the Osaka-based Ikuei shuppan in a format called "*akahon*" [red book]. Tezuka's manga quickly became a huge hit, generating the "*akahon* manga boom" in Osaka. This *akahon* manga boom was the product of the period of material shortage that immediately followed the war; and yet, it paved the way for the rapid growth of the *kashihon* industry along with the increasing number of rental bookstores. Osaka's vigorous publishing culture also contributed to the rise of *gekiga*. In the early fifties, whereas the Tokyo comics industry was centered on magazine culture ["*zasshi bunka*"], the comics business in Osaka was still structured around the rental book ["*kashihon*"] industry. In his book about *gekiga*, Tatsumi contrasts Tokyo and Osaka publishers in those days: Compared to the Tokyo-based publishing houses that were producing well-packaged, sophisticated comics (following the previous mainstream manga tradition), Osaka publishers were producing comics of mixed quality that showcased more inventive and innovative comics (Tatsumi 1967: 14). After noting this contrast, Tatsumi summarizes his point by saying that "if Tokyo manga is likened to white-collar workers, Osaka manga is that of peons" (Tatsumi 1967: 14). Tatsumi's remark points to the fact that Osaka's publishing culture possessed an uninhibited dynamism that allowed it to create something different. Many early *gekiga* creators, including Tatsumi, were working in this publication culture.

Tatsumi's coinage of the term *gekiga* in 1954 was partly a response to the sporadic, but repeated public criticism of the content of manga at that time. By the mid-fifties, the content of comics, particularly in *kashihon* manga, began to shift from children's entertainment to more intricate forms of entertainment, occasionally containing some violent and graphic elements. This shift was a response to the gradual maturity of an audience no longer satisfied with childish narratives (Tatsumi 2010: 225-227). Feeling an urgency to differentiate his comics from children's comics, he coined the term in 1957 and attached it to his short story comics called "Ghost Taxi"

¹ Genroku culture was centered in *kamigata* (Kyoto-Osaka area). Along with Ihara Saikaku, Japanese playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon produced several masterpieces for the *bunraku* puppet theater.

[Yūrei taxi]. Two years later, in establishing the Gekiga Workshop, Tatsumi sent a letter to editors, publishers, newspapers, and other manga creators (including his admired Tezuka), which was the de facto manifesto of the gekiga movement. He wrote:

More recently [in the mid-fifties], the story manga has been vitalized through the influence exerted by the supersonic development of other media, such as film, television, and radio. This vitalization has given birth to something new, which is gekiga. Manga and gekiga perhaps differ in methodology, but more importantly, in their readerships. The demand for manga written for adolescents, i.e., those readers between childhood and adulthood, has never been answered, because there has never been a forum for such works. This hitherto neglected reader segment is gekiga's intended target. (Tatsumi 1967: 25)

Although the term gekiga today is habitually associated with more “realistic depictions” or “dynamic drawings” in contrast to mainstream manga’s “cartoony style,” Tatsumi’s 1959 manifesto clarifies that his central concern for gekiga is its readership. Responding to the maturity of the comics readers who were no longer satisfied with comical depictions, gags, and childish narratives, gekiga broke away from children-oriented entertainment and headed off toward more refined narratives and deeper themes for adolescents.

When the gekiga movement was initiated in the late fifties, regular



東京の迎えを受けて上京した宮城県の中学校卒の就職者たち—上野駅で
Fig. 2 Middle-school graduates from Miyagi to work in Tokyo © Asahi Shinbun Company (March 20th, 1957)

customers at rental bookstores were not only schoolchildren but also young adolescent workers. In the mid-fifties, the rate of students continuing their schooling into high school remained low; approximately 50 percent of students started working after their ninth year of obligatory schooling. This means that almost half of Japan’s young people were working by the age of 14 or 15. Japan’s rush into economic growth triggered a demand for workers at small factories and businesses in the major cities. To supply the needed labor, young workers were recruited from relatively jobless rural regions and

brought by chartered trains called the “mass employment trains” [*shūdan shūshoku ressha*] to industrial cities, including Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka [fig. 2]. This generated a sudden increase of young people in urban areas. Nicknamed “golden eggs” [*kin no tamago*], these young workers were often celebrated by mass media, but many were

² The translation of his letter is taken from the English translation of *A Drifting Life*. I edited it slightly based on his original letter (Tatsumi 2010: 251).

engaged in tough manual labor in unfamiliar working environments away from their hometowns. These adolescent workers occupied an important segment of gekiga's readership at its initial stage. As another gekiga creator Saitō Takao remarks, the readers at the kashihon rental bookstores were blue-collar workers, and he produced his gekiga works for them (Saitō 2009: 4). After work, they dropped by rental bookstores and enjoyed gekiga comics; in return, gekiga creators catered to these adolescent readers' expectations. Along with Japan's socio-economic condition at the time, this kind of dialogical relationship between creators and readers resulted in a specific form of comics, that is, gekiga.

III. Tatsumi's Gekiga and the Global Sixties

Whereas many of Tatsumi's gekiga in the late fifties were either suspense psychodrama or detective fiction, primarily targeting adolescent readers, his aspiration for an alternative to mainstream manga inspired other creators to explore the potential of the medium, looking for what manga could be, not just limited to entertainment for children. In fact, in the next decade, gekiga flourished as a distinctive subgenre of Japanese comics, attracting more mature audiences, including college students, artists in other fields, and cultural critics. In particular, the Japanese alternative manga magazine *Garō* was founded in 1964 by editor Nagai Katsuichi who hired gekiga artists such as Shirato Sanpei, Mizuki Shigeru, Kojima Gōseki (under the name of Suwa Sakae), Tsuge Yoshiharu, Takita Yū, and the like. These artists who supported the initial development of this alternative magazine employed the comics medium as a means of serious artistic exploration and social and political critique. By the late sixties, Tatsumi himself also began to explore more serious and dark themes, such as economic hardships, social alienation, sexual perversion, and psychological complexes, often depicting marginalized people living on the fringes of society.

Due to thematic similarities and historical simultaneity, several critics have been tempted to find a link between Tatsumi's gekiga and American underground comix. Yet, Tatsumi disavows a direct connection between the two, stating that he was unaware of the underground comix movement on the other side of the Pacific Ocean (Tatsumi 2009: 198). However, I would argue that the synchronic emergence of this alternative direction in comics—and, for that matter, sixties' radical art in general—was not a mere coincidence but was directly and indirectly triggered by the social and cultural currents of the period: the sixties' worldwide countercultural rebellion to the Establishment. Cultural theorist Christopher Connery argues for the importance of

discussing the “sixties” as the global cultural and political revolution that took place in western nations as well as in Latin American and East Asian countries, extending beyond local and national contexts (Connery 2009: 184). In a similar vein, Japanese Studies scholar Steve Ridgely warns that discussing Japanese counterculture from the “globalization-localization” model—that Japanese counterculture is an adaptation of Western-originated cultural phenomenon into the local Japanese context—is extremely problematic, for such an understanding naturalizes the logic of cultural imperialism (Ridgely 2011: ix). Instead, Ridgely proposes that we should “conceive counterculture as a rhizomatically structured and globally synchronic mode—a new set of ideas and methods that appeared around the world at roughly the same time” (Ridgely 2011: ix). While cultural and political struggles were varied in each differently situated national context, the youth in this range of countries had actively formed countercultural movements, employing street politics, demonstrations, cultural events, performance arts, music, and even comics, to raise dissident voices against mainstream conformism. And yet, Japanese counterculture was not unrelated to the global political order. In fact, one of the largest Japanese countercultural revolts in the sixties was the anti-Anpo movement (anti-security treaty movement), a struggle against American expansionism, the regimentation of Cold War logic, and the Japanese nation’s direct and indirect complicity with it. Tatsumi’s recent semi-autobiographical work *A Drifting Life* [Gekiga hyōryū] (2008) narrates his personal life in the form of comics memoir, overlapping it with different social and historical moments or events of Japan and inserting historical figures (politicians, film stars, and popular singers) who are drawn with photographic realism (in contrast to main characters who are drawn in the “cartoony” style). Throughout *A Drifting Life*, he overlaps his life with the trajectory of postwar Japan. This is most clearly exemplified by a statement made by protagonist Katsumi, the creator’s alter ego: “Japan, too, is adrift!” (Tatsumi 2009: 825). In the last chapter, the protagonist, who has somewhat tired with the comics industry, rekindles his passion for gekiga in the frenzied crowd of protesters against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. While never explicitly associating himself with the new left politics or the student movements of the time, Tatsumi shares the radical, revolutionary passion of the sixties’ uprising that attempted to break with the establishment and form a new force. In *A Drifting Life*, such a concurrent iconoclastic impetus is expressed through the voice of Katsumi who keeps shouting “no” with other protesters in the front of the national diet building. [fig. 3]

Witnessing the force of the crowd, the protagonist contemplates that “the demonstration is a new force and it’s trying to destroy something! It’s an incredible



Fig. 3 Tatsumi's alter-ego Katsumi regains his passion for gekiga (Tatsumi 2009: 827)

force fueled by anger! That's the element that gekiga has forgotten . . . Anger!" (Tatsumi 2009: 827). It is this zeitgeist (the spirit of the time), this search for an alternative to the mainstream that Tatsumi's gekiga synchronically shared with other countercultural movements in the global sixties.

Paralleling the rise of politicized youth movements in the sixties, Tatsumi's gekiga shifted toward social realism, thematically dealing with the social injustice and inequality imposed on ordinary people. In the late sixties, Tatsumi was based in Tokyo, contributing his comics to youth [seinen] or men's magazines (both comics and non-comics magazines) such as *Playboy*, *Big Comic*, *Young Comic*, and *Garō*. From the late sixties, major Japanese publishers started publishing

several youth manga magazines, aimed at college students and older readers. For this readership, Tatsumi created gekiga works that portray the lives of blue-collar workers, middle-aged men, or working students who toil away in underground sewers, dark factories, or junkyards. In these works, Tatsumi presents a pessimistic vision by detailing the alienated lives of people who barely made ends meet in modern, industrial Japan when the nation was experiencing a series of economic booms. It would not be difficult to find traces of the young workers of the previous decade, the readers of earlier gekiga at rental bookstores, in Tatsumi's depictions of these laborers.

As Frederik Schodt regards Tatsumi as a "master of the short story format" (Schodt: 2008: 7), Tatsumi skillfully encapsulates a "slice of life" of lower-class people within limited pages. Tatsumi narrates stories primarily by visual elements, reducing individual utterance, dialogue, and expository narration. His visual storytelling technique is characterized by the use of a minimalist, hardboiled style, which is probably informed by then-popular Western and Japanese suspense horror and detective films, such as Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955) and the Japanese detective suspense film *Get Him!* [*Kyatsu o nigasuna*] (1956). In his most recently published autobiography *Gekiga gurashi* [*Gekiga Life*] (2010), Tatsumi confesses that, in the mid-fifties, he and other gekiga creators were enthusiastic about "Mike Hammer," American popular fiction writer Mickey Spillane's hardboiled detective series (Tatsumi 2010: 210). Like protagonists in hardboiled detective fiction, some of Tatsumi's main characters are taciturn, hiding internal emotions and feelings behind ostensibly undisturbed masks. And yet, the readers can observe their internal struggles and frustrations through the



Fig. 6 Restructured Tokyo from "Abandon the Old in Tokyo" (Tatsumi 2009: 42)



Fig. 7 The "shin-kansen" causes a psychological torment from "Abandon the Old in Tokyo" (Tatsumi 2009: 64)

Olympics (1964) [fig. 6]. As historian Igarashi Yoshikuni remarks, the Tokyo Olympics was a national project that had an important symbolic meaning to the nation: "the full acceptance of Japan back into the international community" after the defeat of the war (Igarashi 2000: 143). The Tokyo Olympics was a timely opportunity for the Japanese government to "advertise" the nation to the world as a newly born, modern, technologically advanced nation, which prompted the rise of nationalistic fervor in Japan. For that purpose, Japanese government officials hurried to introduce the high-tech bullet train system [*shinkansen*] and install numerous street lamps in Tokyo to literally brighten up the cityscape (Igarashi 2000: 150). In addition, the Tokyo Metropolitan government forcefully "cleansed" disfigured veterans, delinquents, homeless people, and prostitutes from the streets (Igarashi 2000: 152). Contrary to such a nationalistic presentation of the brightened Tokyo, Tatsumi's gekiga constantly depict the dark side of the city by de-glorifying the nation's capital. In his gekiga, Tokyo is described as "a decrepit old man" ("Just A Man," Tatsumi 2008: 44) and the high-tech symbol of the bullet train appears only as a cause of torment to the protagonist ("Abandon the Old in Tokyo" Tatsumi 2009: 64) [fig. 7]. Also, Tatsumi prefers to draw gloomy and disconsolate places in his gekiga such as dark alleys, underground sewers, and dingy streets beneath railroad overpasses [*gādo shita*]. Through the focus of these places and the people working there, Tatsumi's

gekiga undermine the master narrative of the "high growth period" of capitalist Japan (1955-1973), during which the nation achieved the world's second largest GDP. Yet, Tatsumi's gekiga works foreground the disfranchised citizens and laborers who devoted their workforce for the nation although their contributions were not much rewarded or acknowledged. Tatsumi's gekiga works point out the paradox of the nation's "economic

success," as Paul Gravett writes, "Tatsumi's tight, tense short stories did not hide the fact that, underneath, something was going wrong with the Japanese dream" (Gravett 2010: 6). Throughout his gekiga, there is a smoldering anger against the nationalist (and capitalist) formation of the nation.

As mentioned above, Tatsumi's dissident voice was inspired by sixties' protests, but it also came from his childhood. Born in 1935, Tatsumi experienced the last stage of World War II and the defeat of his nation as a child. His gekiga "Good-bye" is set in the period of Occupied Japan (1945-1952), in a red-light district where U.S. soldiers buy Japanese prostitutes. In an interview, Tatsumi says that he was very "upset" about Japanese adults who apathetically left social injustice untouched (Tatsumi 2008: 209). He also adds that the boy who appears in the story is himself. This remark attests to the fact that Tatsumi is a member of the generation that Japanese writer Nosaka Akiyuki once called the *yakeato-sedai*, or the "generation of the burned-out ruins." This generation witnessed the catastrophic confusion of the nation brought about by its defeat. As children, they experienced material suffering, starvation, and despair. As literature scholar Roman Rosenbaum discusses, people in this generation experienced the total inversion of society from the glorification of the emperor to postwar "democracy," which brought about "the *yakeato* generation's suspicion towards the Japanese establishment" (Rosenbaum 2007: 287). Members of the generation also took part in the sixties countercultural movements.

IV. Conclusion: Re-evaluation of Tatsumi's Gekiga

In conclusion, Tatsumi's best gekiga works in the late sixties were born in the nexus of his artistic pursuit of innovation, the maturation of postwar manga readers, and the rise of sixties counterculture. In postwar "democratic" Japan, which was supposed to grant equality and freedom, Tatsumi's gekiga critically expose the illusionary nature of those ideals, at least, to lower-class citizens. In this sense, his gekiga might be diametrically opposed to Tezuka's earlier manga that present an atomic-powered mechanical superhero who embodies the ideals of democracy and modern humanist values. If superheroes in popular media conventionally represent perfect, idealized forms of the human subject in society, Tatsumi's gekiga undermine such wishful thinking by exploring the sorrow and misery of the people living on the fringes of society.

In 2010, Tatsumi's over-800 page magnum opus *A Drifting Life* won two prizes at the annual Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards in the United States: the "Best U.S. Edition of International Material—Asia" and the "Best Reality-Based Work." The recent

visibility of Tatsumi's works in North America was promoted by the efforts of Japanese American comic artist Adrian Tomine who claims that he renewed his interest in comics when he encountered Tatsumi's gekiga at the age of 14 (Tomine 2005: 5). The increasing acclaim of Tatsumi's gekiga works also corresponds with the prominence of "graphic novels" in North America. While being a contested term, it was best expressed—if not firstly coined—by Will Eisner when he used it on the front cover of his work, *A Contract with God* (1978). With this work, Eisner cultivated a new direction, away from the conventions of the American superhero genre to one that depicted the lives of poor immigrants in 1930s New York, highlighting their sorrow and misery through stories about failed dreams, domestic violence, child abuse, and their materialistic and romantic desires. Tatsumi's winning of the Eisner award seems appropriate since both Eisner and Tatsumi share a similar perspective on life that captures lower-class people's

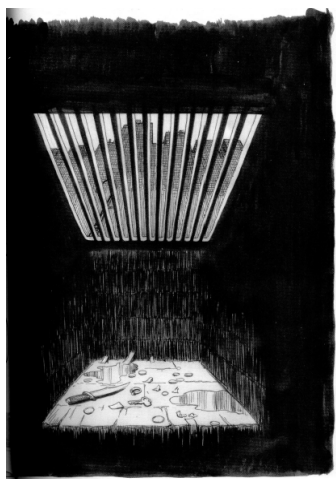


Fig. 8 Will Eisner's New York from New York: The Big City (Eisner 2000: 15)

lives in urban areas. Both artists never fetishize the bright splendor of developed industrial cities. Rather they depict cityscapes from dark alleys or underground critically exposing the human struggle and suffering behind prosperity [fig. 8].

Today, Tatsumi's gekiga works have regained their acclaim in Japan, as his short gekiga works have been collected and published. In the long-lasting economic recession, a recurrent nostalgia for the era of Japanese economic growth (1953-72) has emerged in the mainstream mass media. Against such a revisionists romanticization of the period, Tatsumi's gekiga critically show us what past economic growth brought to certain segments of citizens and how they experienced social repression and alienation at the height of capitalist acceleration in postwar Japan.

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