

Japanese Manga: Its Expression and Popularity

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Japan's Manga Market

Why has manga (Japanese comic or cartoon) become so popular in Japan? Before we ask this question, we should look more closely at exactly how widespread manga is.

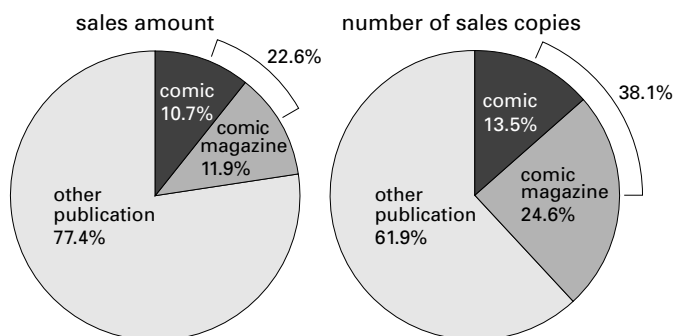
The Japanese publishing market is one of the most vigorous in the world. How much market share does manga have? The gross sales from publishing in 2002 was 2.3 trillion yen. The total number of published materials including magazines was over 750 million. 22.6% of total sales, or 38.1% of published material sold in 2002 are of manga (Figure 1). Since they peaked in 1995, both the percentage of manga in published material and the publishing industry as a whole have been in decline.

Still, there is no other country in which manga or comics hold such a large market share. Manga are less expensive than books or magazines. As we can see from these figures, if we consider the publishing industry as a table, one of its legs can be considered to consist of manga. If the manga industry falls into a crisis, the entire industry suffers.

What has created such a large market? There are many factors, ranging from the system of the publishing industry, historical conditions, and cultural backgrounds. Historically speaking, manga developed in conjunction with television and achieved a commercial success due to its interlocking relationship with other media such as television, animation, and video games, so-called media mix. Manga has become a form of popular culture having a big economic influence through secondary use, or character merchandising in toys, food, and advertising.

Japanese manga researchers have just begun to realize the fact that the success of manga cannot be explained just by discussing manga itself. Collaborative research by researchers in various fields will be needed in the future.

Comics and comic magazines rate in all publications as of 2002



(Figure 1)
source: *Shuppan Geppou* (monthly publishing), February 2003, The Research Institute for Publications

Cultural Background

It is natural to consider the cultural background of manga. Japanese society seems to have been more lenient towards manga than other countries. In the US, faced with strict regulations, comics lost freedom of expression in their growth period. Japanese manga, on the other hand, developed into different genres by working against external pressures.

East Asian cultures have had a relatively close picture-to-language relationship. In cultures with Kanji (Chinese char-

acters), it seems easier to develop a mode of expression in which letters are combined with illustrations and are treated as a picture. *Emakimono*, rolls of illustrations that accompany a story, developed in 12th century Japan as a means to tell a story. There has also been a tradition in popular culture of storytelling with both pictures and words. *Kibyoshi*, in the Edo period, is one such example.

There are traditions of illustrated story telling in Western culture like religious paintings and tapestries. Nevertheless, modern Western art seems to hold that illustrations and words should be separated. Therefore, a medium that contained a mixture of the two tended to be regarded as form of low-class mass culture. A reasonable explanation of manga development that turns to comparative culture is that Japan had a cultural tradition that was more receptive to manga.

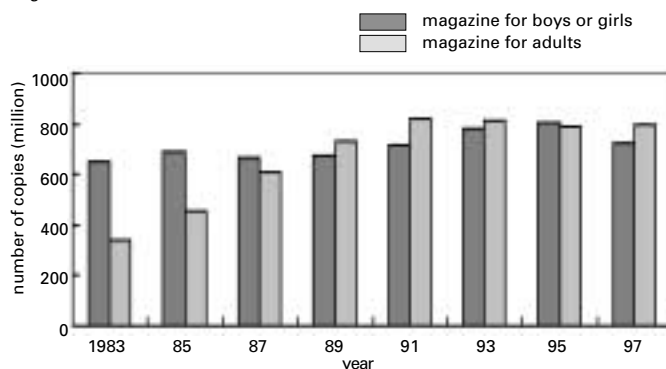
In reality, the style of manga as we know it today was influenced by American newspaper comics, with multiple frames, dialogue in balloons, and narration. These innovations were created at the beginning of the 20th century, in particular after the 1920s. The pre-modern Japanese publishing tradition suffers an interruption at the Meiji Restoration (1868). Modern Japanese manga had its roots in caricatures in Western newspapers and import of modern printing technology.

It is important to realize that there are inherent dangers in claiming manga as an outgrowth of native Japanese culture. Development of manga cannot be solely explained by looking at cultural similarities and ignoring historical discontinuities.

The Characteristics of Japanese Manga

Now, I would like to turn to a different aspect of manga. Figure 2 shows the number of manga magazines published for boys or girls and for adults from 1983 to 1997. We can see that adult manga increased in the '80s and held half the market in the '90s. This is an outstanding characteristic of the Japanese manga market. The fact that half the manga in the market is for adults shows manga in Japan is a major form of popular entertainment much like movies.

(Figure 2) Number of published manga magazines



note: All the figures in this article are from *Manga/Sekai/Senryaku* by Natsume Fusanosuke, 2001, Shogakukan Inc. Figure 1 (p. 209), 2 (p.211), 3-6 (p. 215), 7 (p.217)

The criticism that much of Japanese manga is “inappropriate for children” may be due largely to misinterpretations of youth manga. Similarly, Japanese television animation (*anime*) which is strongly influenced by manga, also has an adult market and is prone to the same misconception.

What do these figures tell us? The development of adult manga played a big part in the growth of the overall manga market in the '80s. Adult manga necessitates treatment of a wider variety of topics, which in turn influenced manga for youth.

When looking at Japanese manga, it is important to note that there is a genre for teenagers situated in between those of children and adults. Instead of the two genres neatly dividing the market, they share the market by degrees.

The Emergence of the Youth Manga Market

The Japanese manga market has an amazing variety of genres. There are manga to suit almost any age and interest group: boys, girls, youth, young women, office workers, game aficionados, people in their 40s and 50s. This diversification has its roots in the introduction and success of youth manga which arose with the emergence of '60s counterculture.

American comics and French bande dessinée (BD) were once in a similar situation. American comics became more adult-oriented, during World War II. Many more genres, for example, girls' comics, mysteries for adult women and romances, existed than there are today. Youth comics became more of an underground movement due to backlash from McCarthyism. Bound by strict regulations on expression, only the superhero genre now remains.

In France, as in Japan, the BD movement became more adult-oriented in the '60s, branching off from BD for children and developing artistically. The movement created BD with sophisticated illustrations, but it never achieved a place in the market as it did in Japan.

The young adult movement in American, French, and Japanese comics is part of the youth-oriented culture that emerged after World War II. Having the baby boomer population as its main target, it has a similar anti-establishment orientation as the Beatles and Rock'n Roll.

The reason that comics became exceptionally widespread in Japan may be the cultivation of the baby boomer generation, who were at the time young adults. The emergence of the young adult manga genre successfully kept the baby boomers reading manga into adulthood.

Furthermore, the market system, in which the market develops works cyclically to match a child's growth, may have clinched the success of the manga market in the '70s to '80s.

The Rise of Youth-oriented Manga and Violence

Manga underwent many changes from the '60s to '70s. One important change is the orientation toward older readers and evolution of teen-age oriented themes. The reason for worldwide manga-bashing due to sexual and violent situations may be traced to this period.

Let's look at a scene from *Dragon Ball* (serialized 1984–95) by Toriyama Akira, a big hit both as manga and an animated TV series. The main character is punching the enemy in Figure 3, but his face normally looks like the middle of Figure 4.

His rage at his friend's murder changes his appearance including his hair colour and face. This style of illustration plays to the relatively young readers' desire for metamorphosis. The main character at the start of the serial was a cute boy like Figure 5.

The main character learns martial arts and grows up, marries, and has children. During the story, many sympathetic characters die, eventually even the main character. The theme of tragedy and human growth, including battles as a form of initiation, is a traditional theme in post-War Japanese manga, one that Tezuka Osamu (1928–89) began in 1945–'50s.

Although there may be cultural differences, adults who do not know (or read) manga may feel upon seeing only these scenes above, that martial arts are violent and deaths of characters are cruel. The children, as readers, empathize with the characters as they grow and live and read the violent scenes as within the context of the story. Violence is not there just for violence's sake.

Exceptional manga such as *Devilman* (1972–73) by Nagai Go paved the way for such scenes to be depicted in boys' manga. *Devilman* was published in a weekly magazine for boys, *Weekly Shonen Magazine*; yet it grew a strong follow-



Figure 3: (top right) *Dragon Ball* vol. 27 by Toriyama Akira, p. 74, 1991, Shueisha Inc.
 Figure 4: (top left) *Dragon Ball* vol. 27 by Toriyama Akira, p. 55, 1991
 Figure 5: (mid left) *Dragon Ball* vol. 1 by Toriyama Akira, p. 7, 1985
 Figure 6: (bottom) *Devilman* vol. 5 by Nagai Go, pp.196-197, 1998, Kodansha Co. from *Manga/Sekai/Senryaku* p. 215



(Figure 7)
Wata no Kunihoshi by Oshima Yumiko
Oshima Yumiko Selected Works
Hakusensha Co., 1978, p.120
from *Manga/Sekai/Senryaku* p.217

ing among university students and other young adult intelligentsia. Thus, this story changed its themes in innovative ways.

It began as a superhero-type story of battles against the “devils,” a fearful foe of humans. The main character, Devilman, is half devil and half human. He despairs of the humans who kill the heroine in a witch-hunt caused by mass hysteria. After the extinction of humans, he fights a final battle against the devils led by a friend (who is actually a fallen angel), and finally destroys himself (Figure 6).

Here, we can see influences from student protests of the '60s and anti-establishment activism. The topic of the story evolved from a simple struggle of good against evil to a more complex one. The main character changing from a human to Devilman can be seen to correspond to a youthful desire for initiation.

A person undergoes two main periods of change. One is by age 3, the other before adulthood. A person changes his child self and breaks out of a mold to be reborn. The imagery that expresses this change is self-expression by violence. The same may be said for sexual expressions.

There were many works in the '60s and '70s that expanded their themes through sexual and violent expressions in girls, boys, young adults' magazines, meeting the needs of teenage readers.

Female Authors and Manga

Compared with male-oriented manga that focus on some kind of ‘battle,’ manga for girls, a genre unique to Japan, underwent a particular development that influenced the entire manga genre. In the '60s and '70s, girls' manga came to be written by authors close to the readers' age. A particular technique was developed to illustrate relationships with parents or friends, or romantic relationships. This technique had a big influence on later expressions of thought and feelings in manga.

For example, in *Wata no Kunihoshi* (1978–present; the serial is currently not being published) by Oshima Yumiko, a female kitten believes that she will grow up to become human. She is drawn as a girl with kitten ears. Her unspoken thoughts are placed inside a square box which floats on top of the frames (Figure 7). The work uses a mix of actual dialogue and inner thought and illustrates scenes which are not seen in reality. These techniques to depict psychological states—showing flashbacks, imaginary scenes, dreams, bits of subconscious—can be taken as a challenge on part of some girls' manga to pursue more “literary” themes.

The work of Oshima Yumiko later influenced Yoshimoto Banana, a famous female novelist. The works of other female manga artists in the same generation influenced many genres: TV, movies, theatre. Such works break the stereotype that literature is superior to manga in terms of creativity and topics.

Okazaki Kyoko, a female artist who had her start in young adult comics, contrasted sex and dead bodies in her work *Rivers Edge* (1993–94), to symbolize modern anxiety and comfort in young adults.

In Japan today, manga deal with topics which books or movies previously would have explored. In fact, much of current Japanese movies and TV dramas are based on manga.

The System of Manga Editors

In spite of these developments, manga still remain a form of popular entertainment. Japanese manga can be said to be both a medium of popular culture and one that pursues sophisticated themes.

There is also a factor which ties in two prominent features of Japanese comics: the idiosyncrasies of the market and variety and depth of expression. It is the manga editors in publishers who are the key to Japanese manga's pursuit of market demands and highly developed expressive methods. Their degree of participation in manga-making would be unimaginable in other countries. Editors actively participate in the process, and provide ideas for stories at times. They build personal relationships with the authors, and may stay up all night with authors to do intensive work.

A separate article is needed to explain this editing system probably unique to Japan. Here, I will just point out that this system is based on Japan's now-maligned system of lifetime employment.

Editors who were successful in expanding the manga market and developing it for young adults are trying to meet the wishes of literary enthusiasts while continuing traditions of children's publishing. As a result, manga for boys evolved into material that young adults also read. Techniques they created together with the authors established the later style of manga.

The manga editing system, which is probably in a symbiotic relationship with post-war Japanese society, needs further investigation. On the other hand, I see the present state of publishing as requiring fundamental changes in the system itself.

(translated by Ueki Kaori)

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Born in 1950. Graduated from Aoyama Gakuin University. After working in a publishing company, he has been studying and making critical remarks on manga. He wrote many books and essays upon his study includig *Tezuka Osamu no Bouken* (The adventure of Tezuka Osamu), *Manga/Sekai/Senryaku* (manga/world/strategy), etc. He has recently been studying overseas manga and comics as well as Japanese, and he delivered lectures in some countries. He is a grandson of Natsume Souseki, a great writer in Meiji period.

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