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Japan's Manga Culture

Fusanosuke Natsume

Since the 1990s *manga*, or Japanese comics, have been a focus of international interest. I first felt this in 1993, during a visit to Hong Kong to gather information on the impact of *manga* there and how *manga* had stimulated the development of local comics. Pirated editions of *manga* had been available in Hong Kong since the 1970s. The publishing of pirated works coupled with the development of Hong Kong's economy had helped local comics publishers grow, and around 1991 they began obtaining licenses for the legitimate translation and publication of *manga*. By 1993 the Hong Kong comics market was divided evenly between *manga* and local comics.

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Burgeoning World Interest The cycle of pirated editions, development of local comics, and shift to legitimate translation and publication licenses was repeated in South Korea and Taiwan, which also enjoyed rapidly growing economies. *Manga* became very popular in China, Indonesia, Thailand, and other East and Southeast Asian countries, as well—a phenomenon that captured my interest.

Comics publishers in Hong Kong were eager to learn from *manga* and also studied the potential for sales of Hong Kong comics in Japan. But as I learned more about the situation in Hong Kong, it fell to me to inform the publishers that prospects for such an undertaking were poor, since I believed that the different visual idioms and grammar of these comics, the cultural differences, and the different readerships—together with different production, publishing, and distribution systems—presented obstacles that could not be easily overcome.

Yet I found that these differences kindled my curiosity. As far as I knew, Hong Kong comics published in magazine format showed the obvious influence of *manga*, and the only difference appeared to be their shorter history. But when I actually saw comics in Hong Kong, I realized that the social and cultural differences from Japan were interlaced in the comics like the tangled roots of an immense tree. I believed that examining these differences in not only Hong Kong but East Asia as a whole would conversely enable me to determine what it is that makes *manga* what they are.

Between 1995 and 1997, some U.S. comics began to show Japanese influences in the way their characters were drawn, the layout of their panels, and so on. At that time I was writing a column on *manga* for *Look Japan*, a general-interest English-language magazine published in Japan for a worldwide audience. I received letters from all over the world in response to this column; around that time, a college student from Hong Kong came to Japan to report on the *manga* scene. I gave a talk on *manga* at the Foreign Press Center

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in Tokyo in September 1998, and in the next six months I was interviewed on a dozen or so occasions by overseas publications.

All this indicated that interest in *manga* is global, not confined to East Asia alone, and that the people who are interested tend to be journalists, researchers, or comics fans. That is what I learned from my experiences and what changed my orientation from emphasis on *manga* in Japan to a more international perspective.

In 1999 I lectured on *manga* and *anime* (Japanese animated films) in New York City in January and in Hong Kong in July. In October, I traveled to Paris to supervise a *manga* exhibition and participate in a companion symposium held at the Japan Foundation's Maison de la Culture du Japon à Paris. Until just a few years ago, I had never imagined I might be visiting such places with work related to *manga*. My chief interest has been the visual idioms and grammar of *manga*; in my analyses of visual idioms and grammar, I had given little thought to the *manga* scene overseas. As I associated more with comics people abroad and with Western researchers in Japan to study *manga*, however, I began to realize that there was a limit to the study of the visual idioms and grammar of *manga* from a purely domestic viewpoint.

Of course, this is a personal experience and my bailiwick is an area in which general Japanese readers and even *manga* people have virtually no interest. Although they are aware through the news and other sources that *manga* are popular abroad, they neither understand the significance of this trend nor see that it has any relevance to them. The *manga* market in Japan is huge and self-satisfied, for publishers, artists, and readers alike. They all enjoy a peaceful little world, but even so, interest in *manga* elsewhere grows stronger by the day. I feel the need to explain this phenomenon—which is unusual in Japanese culture, where it is more common to assimilate imported cultural values—to non-Japanese from a new perspective and a broader approach.

From Anime to Manga There are many reasons why *manga* attract so much attention today. The stage was set by the export of *anime* TV programs, which began to be broadcast in the United States in the 1960s and in France in the 1970s. Pirated editions of *manga* are said to have appeared even earlier in East Asia, but the current popularity of *manga* there stems from TV *anime*. Today the *anime* feature films *Dragon Ball* [*Doragon Bōru*; 1986] and *Akira* (1988) are familiar to many non-Japanese, so it is fair to say that the world became familiar with *anime* during the 1980s.

Thus children all over the world grew up watching *anime* programs on television and later became interested in the original *manga* on which the programs were based. That is the usual sequence.

The 1980s saw the advent of multiple TV channels in

Europe. That was also a time of rapid economic growth in East Asia, marked by the emergence of a middle class there. Video games also became very popular worldwide during those years. This was, in other words, an era of synchronous global consumption of mass entertainment, and *anime* was one of the diverse genres supported by this consumption culture. The 1990s saw *manga* published in translation, which stimulated interest in *manga*. Finally, information diffusion via the Internet has accelerated the growth of interest in *manga*.

Japan's TV *anime* boom began in 1963 with broadcast of the *Tetsuwan Atomu* series (shown abroad as *Astro Boy*), an animated version of the *manga* of the same title created by Osamu Tezuka (1926–89). Since then, countless other *anime* series have been based on *manga*, and it has become standard practice to televise *anime* and release the *manga* of the same title simultaneously. Thus *anime* necessarily lead back to *manga*. With this kind of support from television, that is, the cultivation of a market for product tie-ins (toys, confectionery, and games), and thanks to the media mix, *manga* continued to grow. One could say that in Japan this collaboration was made possible by the fact that both television and *manga* mushroomed after World War II as manifestations of popular culture.

The Comics Market The size of the comics market varies greatly from country to country. Unlike TV animation, which can be broadcast as long as sufficient channels are available, comics, which are part of the publishing culture, are greatly affected by each country's publishing markets, distribution systems, and so on. Yet virtually no comparative research has been done on publishing markets and distribution systems.

According to the All Japan Magazine and Book Publishers and Editors Association's publication index, the Japanese publishing industry's calendar 1998 sales totaled ¥2.6 trillion (roughly US\$24.8 billion); 870 million books and 3.81 billion magazines were sold that year. In 1997, *manga* accounted for 21.6 percent of total sales value and 36.7 percent of all books and magazines sold. Japan may be the only country in the world where comics make up such a large share of the publishing industry. One in every four or every three books consumed in Japan is a *manga*, which indicates extensive distribution, as well. In other words, *manga* are important to the general public and also generate considerable associated profits.

Because these figures are so huge, when I cited them in Paris, people working in the French comics industry asked whether they included animation and product tie-ins, as well. The answer is of course no. Actually, profits from *manga* themselves are probably smaller than those from *anime*, toys, and other related products. The small percentage of total sales value in comparison with the large percentage of total copies sold makes it clear that *manga* are sold in large quantities at low prices and have a

low profit margin. In any case, *manga* as products of popular culture in Japan are published on a scale so enormous that it is difficult to comprehend when compared with world standards.

Most of the *manga* made into *anime* have been child-oriented and sensationalistic, as were most of the *anime* and *manga* that have been exported. Their sensationalism led to a rejection of *manga* overseas, in many cases because readers outside Japan found the depictions of sex or violence in them too graphic. It is true that *anime* and *manga* are produced under looser moral strictures than those prevailing elsewhere, and in many cases Japanese works will be seen as too provocative for children. However, it is not so easy to determine what is inappropriate, given cultural differences in morals and differing religious and social attitudes toward story lines or action. Furthermore, *anime* and *manga* have followed their own distinct historical path to reach their present state.

Overseas, especially in the United States and Europe, one major misunderstanding of the markets for *anime* and *manga* springs from the preconceived notion that such material is for children only. In Japan, titles aimed at adult readers accounted for half the *manga* market at the end of the 1980s. It is essential to note this fact when describing the market; otherwise almost nothing about the market is comprehensible. That half the titles in the *manga* market are intended for adults means that, just like feature films, *manga* deal with many different topics and appeal to a wide variety of readers. It is not that adults enjoy reading the same *manga* as children, but that *manga* for adults are available. The current market developed only after adult readers were able to choose from a broad range of intellectually challenging, even profound, subjects, unlike the homogeneous fare of children's *manga*. Most non-Japanese fail to understand that quality, not quantity, is the issue here.

The Milieu of Manga *Anime*, too, have been handicapped by misperceptions of their audience. When *Maison Ikkoku* [*Mezon Ikkoku*; 1986] was aired in France, scenes of adults getting drunk were changed to show the adults drinking lemonade instead of alcohol, resulting in the sight of peculiar Japanese getting drunk on lemonade! This change was made not only because of restrictions on airing drinking scenes in programs for children—though even in children's programs in Japan, scenes are not likely to be censored simply because they deal with drinking—but also because of fundamental misunderstandings.

Maison Ikkoku, by Rumiko Takahashi (b. 1957), is a romance *manga* that was serialized in 1980 in a *seinen*, or youth, magazine (aimed at readers between the ages of about fifteen and roughly twenty-five), and it was originally intended for adult readers. Although the existence of *anime* aimed at adult viewers is taken for granted in Ja-

pan, that is not the case in the West, hence the misconception that underlies the rejection of *manga* and *anime* and points to deeper cultural differences. For the same reason, non-Japanese in Japan are quite surprised to see adults openly reading *manga* on commuter trains. Since the *manga* are often serialized in boys' magazines (aimed at readers below the age of about fifteen), non-Japanese come away believing that Japanese are immature. This is difficult for Japanese to understand because we do not feel that reading *manga* is abnormal.

I believe there are two questions at issue here. One is the matter of quality, mentioned earlier: *manga* cover a broad spectrum of topics from which adults, children, and youths can choose. The other is a matter of cultural background, of a vaguer boundary between childhood and adulthood in Japan.

Addressing the first question, countless *manga* magazines aimed at extremely narrow readerships coexist in Japan. There are *manga* magazines for children; for young boys and for young girls; for young men and for young women (who have "graduated" from the preceding magazines); and for adults. The older the age group, the greater the variety of *manga* magazines catering to it; and these magazines are further subdivided into genres appealing to such audiences as young mothers, *manga* aficionados, and people with specific hobbies, such as playing pachinko, mah-jongg, or computer games. And that's not all. The same boys' magazine, for instance, will carry everything from stories that very young readers will like to adolescent love stories and works that satisfy the violent imaginations of young men.

Such variety in a single magazine is possible because each *manga* magazine regularly carries over twenty stories, but it has also had the effect of firmly establishing the unique custom in Japan whereby it is not considered odd for adults to read young people's *manga* magazines. For instance, until the mid-1990s Shūeisha Inc. published an astounding six million copies of *Shūkan Shōnen Jumpu* [Weekly Boys' Jump] every week, each issue concurrently featuring the fight *manga* *Dragon Ball*; *Slam Dunk* [*Suramu Danku*], on the subject of basketball; the science fiction romance *Video Girl Ai* [*Den'ei Shōjo*]; the slapstick *Kochira Katsushika-ku Kameari Kōen-mae Hasbutsujo* [This Is the Police Box in Front of Kameari Park, Katsushika Ward], featuring a police patrol officer as the hero; and *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* [*Jojo no Kimyōna Bōken*], a story with a game-like feel appealing to *manga* buffs.

Dragon Ball was something that even young children could read. *Slam Dunk* required readers mature enough to be able to follow the complicated progress of basketball games and was targeted at young adult readers who could feel empathy for the punk who was the story's protagonist. *Video Girl Ai* and *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, built on romance and convoluted worldviews typical of role-playing games, were clearly meant for readers past adolescence.

Kochira Katsushika-ku Kameari Kōen-mae Hasbutsujo gained a large adult readership because the patrol-officer hero provided information on the latest games and hobby items as they appeared on the market.

Shūkan Shōnen Jampū has been commercially successful because it carries multitiered hit *manga*. It would probably not have met with such success had its age-group target been more narrowly defined. Adhering to the Western definition of “youth market” would have made the diversity of topics in this magazine eccentric. Indeed, the Japanese appellation “youth magazine” encompasses both major generational contradictions and genres that do not conform to the “youth” age-group designation.

Children, Youths, and Adults The global hit *Dragon Ball* is especially interesting in that its hero ages, passing from childhood to adulthood, getting married, and having children in the course of the story. In other comics ostensibly for children, both in Japan and abroad, the protagonist always remains the same age—whether that’s Charlie Brown in *Peanuts* in the United States, Tintin in the *Tintin* adventure-tale series in France, or Nobita in the *Doraemon* children’s-adventure series in Japan. This remarkable fact is not unrelated to the view, prevalent in East and West alike, that children exist in an idyllic, timeless state. Growing up and facing life are subjects that usually start to surface at around the age of ten.

It is certainly true that topics dealing with personal growth achieved through overcoming various obstacles are appropriate from the teen years onward. Romance, friendship, school-related issues, the allure of delinquency, interest in sex and violence—all are subjects that young people will inevitably encounter in the process of socialization. They have been treated in *manga* in such genres as sports, martial arts, love stories, and science fiction. Young people passing from adolescence to young adulthood need fantasies about sex and violence to reaffirm their self-identity, or, in some cases, to cast off their existing personality and start afresh. Fantasies are a sort of catalyst in establishing the ego. Because *manga* spontaneously responded to the need for such fantasies, sex and violence became prevalent topics in *manga*.

Osamu Tezuka, considered the father of postwar *manga*, was the first to introduce the issues of growing up in *manga* for children. In the 1950s he had already published numerous long *manga* featuring heroes who aged. His stories dealt with young boys with personalities warped by bitter experiences, the relativity of justice and evil, and so on. Some of his stories depicted a hero who dies. The broadening of *manga* themes eventually gave rise to *manga* for older youths in the 1960s, a time of revolution in youth culture. The themes of relativity in human life or the world and of growth and change in Tezuka’s *manga* sprang from youth’s continual quest for something new

in their clashes with an ever changing world. But at the same time, Tezuka’s *manga* exhibited a naive nonsensical or idyllic bent, a contradiction that later led to distinguishing features of *manga*.

One could say that there is a certain vagueness to the Japanese definitions of “child” and “adult.” I think that Japanese tend to allow adults their inner child and that they subconsciously believe that children have a sacred purity. Take the case of the still popular Buddhist priest Ryōkan (1758–1831). After his search for enlightenment, he acted the fool, playing with children all day long. He is seen as an exemplar of the ultimate adult ideal. Behind this view lies the paradoxical notion that the person who has achieved enlightenment reverts to a pure state like that of a child.

If Japanese are indeed more tolerant of children than Westerners are, it may very well be due to this subconscious culture. This assertion can be disputed instantly, given that there may be similar elements in Western culture and that the spoiling of children seems to be generally accepted in East Asian countries. I know that this theory of comparative culture is on shaky ground, but from what I have seen and heard, the Western acceptance of comics differs from that in East Asia. Simply stated, in the East there is greater acceptance of the possibility of adults’ being permitted to read comics. My impression is that the demarcation between childhood and adulthood is much less clear-cut there than in the West.

To clarify my thesis, I should explain how I bracket the age groups between childhood and young adulthood. The various age groups are defined by their characteristics, not simply by chronological age. As a rule, however, “early childhood” covers the period between the ages of two and five; “children” are those aged six to ten; “adolescents” are those between ten and fourteen (although at this stage there are marked individual and gender differences); “young adults” are those aged between fifteen and twenty; and the “post–young adulthood” period begins after the age of twenty. “Adults” are generally defined as people who are full-fledged members of society or who are parents, but I would say that this group is older than thirty. Social and cultural differences are undoubtedly substantial, however; and since I believe that the next age group up the rung always subsumes the preceding age group, my classifications are merely rough benchmarks.

In Japan, youthfulness has become an important value, ever since the 1960s when the youth culture swept the market. Previous adult values have been rejected, and there is less aspiration to adulthood nowadays. This trend has a bearing on the vague boundary between adults and children when it comes to *manga*. If “child” and “young adult” are variable concepts, “adult” is a constant concept. And if “parent-and-child” is a natural relational construct, “adult” is a social and artificial relational construct. In view of this, it may be difficult to find a clear

concept of “adult” in Japanese society today. However, this is not a subject for discussion here, since it involves so many different social and cultural factors.

The History of Comics The issue of “child” and “adult” as it relates to comics can be considered from a worldwide historical perspective. Today most *manga* are multipanel storytelling comics, a style that originated in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. That style was not the one- or two-panel satirical cartoon but the comic strip, a continuous picture story told in panels (like a movie) and published in newspapers. Dialogue was written in balloons inside the panels, rather than in captions outside the picture area.

Newspaper comic strips were effective in attracting readers, and the genre became established in tandem with animation and motion pictures. This change in the means of visual expression—that is, to multipanel narrative—probably had some connection with the public’s changing feelings about visual images and the development of motion pictures. This new style was eventually adopted in Japan. The first multipanel comic strip, *The Yellow Kid*, appeared in New York in 1896. (The press war over its cartoonist’s services added the term “yellow journalism” to American English.) A multipanel comic strip debuted in Japan in the 1920s, and it is interesting to note that a similar type of comic, which introduced dialogue balloons, appeared in France at about the same time.

Whether in the East or in the West, most of the multipanel comics that were big hits were adventure stories for children, such as *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, *Mickey Mouse*, and *Superman*. The cartoons that were the forerunners of comics were not necessarily intended for children, given that their main purpose was satire. But the growth of mass consumerism coupled with higher disposable incomes helped expand the cartoon genre to appeal to children.

Comics in Japan, the United States, and France all started out as expressions of popular entertainment. The most basic expression is the three-dimensional combination of panel, illustration, and dialogue, which comics in all three countries use. *Manga* were actually a method of expression imported in conjunction with the nascent mass consumer society. Comics of the 1920s and 1930s had a very modern, fashionable image.

It was Osamu Tezuka who, modeling his work on the imported-style *manga* of the pre–World War II period, changed the modes of expression, expanded the range of topics, and breathed new life into the genre. This change occurred after the war, in the 1940s and 1950s, and led to the birth of youth *manga* in the 1960s. At that time, Japan was enjoying rapid economic growth and was experiencing a flood tide of the global youth culture of rebellion. It was the era of student activism; the Beatles and other icons of pop culture exerted great influence; youth behaved defiantly toward older generations; and a movement

was afoot to find new means of expression for youth. Just like rock music and psychedelic art, *manga* became a vehicle through which Japanese youth could express themselves, and *manga* began to appeal to them directly.

From the late 1960s through the 1970s, *manga* artists experimented with various forms of expression, and those experiments transformed *manga* ever after. Some artists tried an avant-garde literary approach that was adapted to works of sheer entertainment; such works proved popular with the postwar baby-boom generation and expanded both the themes and the sales of *manga*. It was around this time that the conventional wisdom that children are to stop reading *manga* when they finish elementary school began to erode. Meanwhile, French comics, for instance, were developing a more aesthetic bent, which eventually led to the emergence of highly polished, pictorial, and artistic comics. But this development undermined the strengths of comics aimed at children. Perhaps *Tintin*, which has been serialized since 1929, remains a very popular comic for children because French comics have pursued more aesthetic expression purely for an audience of older youths and may have neglected children. More thorough research is needed to substantiate this point, however.

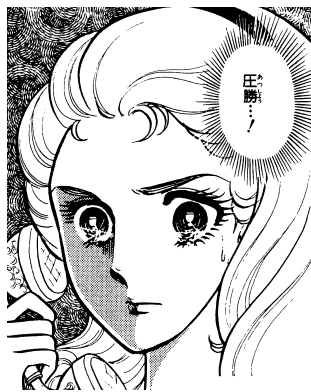
In Japan, the situation was different. Once *manga* were aimed at older youths, they developed into a sophisticated entertainment medium rather than becoming pretentiously artistic. The switch to an older readership led to a dramatic decline in sales of boys’ *manga* magazines in the 1970s, and those magazines reverted to being aimed at children. Many new magazines for older youths appeared, and magazines aimed at *manga* buffs undertook the publishing of experimental and artistic works. Artists creating *manga* for girls’ magazines also exerted a major influence on other *manga* in the 1970s. Their stories addressed such themes as concerns about sex, conflict with parents, romantic love, and death, and they polished the visual idioms used to depict human emotions. Technical changes in visual idioms used in *manga* for girls also had an impact on boys’ *manga* magazines. The late 1970s through the 1980s saw a boom in love-comedy themes for boys’ *manga* magazines, which had previously been the home of *manga* whose main topics were adventure, combat, or sports.

I believe it was around this time that *manga* shifted almost completely from imported modes of expression to uniquely Japanese modes. Although sharing common basics with comics abroad, *manga* developed a complex iconography that included, for example, various methods of ornamentation, rhetoric of detail, and distinctive visual idioms. In other words, *manga* developed a dual character, being, on the one hand, universal and very much a part of mass culture and, on the other hand, unique. The same can probably be said of American and French comics, but I will explore distinguishing features of *manga* below.

Manga Idioms and Traditions It is very difficult to discuss differences between *manga* and the comics of other countries not only because of the lack of comparative studies but also because it is hard to analyze different cultures in isolation from their languages. It is easy to become arbitrary or abstract when discussing these differences, and substantiation and history tend to be given little attention. However, I would like to present a frankly speculative analysis.

One of the distinctive features of *manga* illustrations is the extreme stylization of the human figure. This is not mere distortion or personification: the eyes of characters are often drawn exaggeratedly large or in a decorative shape. This is a figurative idiom so highly evolved that it is almost impossible to understand from the perspective of Western painting, with its strong tradition of realism.

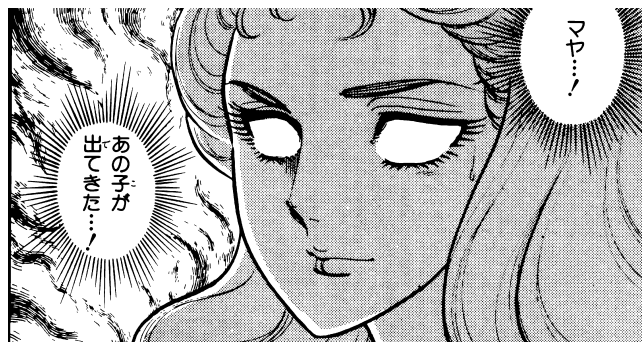
A *manga* artist will depict a young girl's eyes as huge, surrounded by luxuriant eyebrows and eyelashes; the pupils are decorated with a profusion of stars and lines that do not exist in real life. This treatment is used to express the radiance of a character, express a state of mind, or identify the main character. In other instances, the pupils, which are vital to expression, may be erased and the eyes drawn blank to indicate an abnormal emotional state. At times, an artist may distort the proportions of the head and the body and draw a character with a surprisingly different appearance; this is done to indicate the character's situation in a particular setting.



Suzue Miuchi, *Garasu no Kamen* [*The Glass Mask*], vol. 23 (Tokyo: Hakusensha, 1982), 160.

Often characters are drawn so simply as to be almost cartoon-like, even though the background against which they appear is drawn very naturalistically. In this case the artist forgoes consistency in the character's rendering and the visual unity between the character and the background. New interpretations are derived by combining stylized illustrations without regard for objectivity or consistency, and with a complicated overlay of symbolism. I suppose one could call this the colloquial idiom of *manga*.

This indicates that in *manga* illustration can be nearly identical to conversation. A closer examination of *manga* illustration leads to a comparison of the realism of Western paintings and the stylization of traditional Japanese or Eastern paintings, or of the relationship between paintings and words. One need think only of the *kibyōshi* (yellow cover) illustrated fiction for adults popular from the



Miuchi, 160.

late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, or of picture scrolls or poetry cards, in all of which words and illustrations are inseparable parts of a whole. Of course, one should also take into consideration that kanji characters are inherently pictorial. *Manga* can be compared with traditional paintings, too, in their use of white space, layout of panels, careful attention paid to outlines, and so on.

More important to note about *manga* is the attempt to tell a story by organizing illustrations in the imported framework of panels. *Manga* generally place more emphasis on an interesting story line and ease of reading than on a high degree of sophistication in illustrations. This is most likely a result of the influence of the traditional presentation of stories told in pictures and words, as seen in Japan's old narrative picture scrolls. More interdisciplinary research is needed on this subject, but in my opinion the key is the Japanese (or Eastern) cultural tradition that places words and illustrations in close proximity.

However, such research requires careful theoretical underpinnings, because the distinctive characteristics of present-day *manga* reflect the Japanese subconscious and can be identified only by stripping away the influences of the modern history of *manga* as an imported style of expression. Yet highlighting only those characteristics would slant the debate toward the closed argument of the special and unique nature of Japanese culture, an echo of Orientalism. *Manga* should be examined carefully, not only from their dual aspect of expression and commercial product but also from the perspective that they incorporate both the universal thread of popular culture and uniquely Japanese forms of expression. For researchers *manga* are a treasure-trove that remains largely unexplored.

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