

Book review*

Suzuki, Shige (CJ) and Ronald Stewart (2023) *Manga: A Critical Guide*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Manga is a catch-all term used in Japan to refer to comics of any origin. Outside Japan, it is generally used to refer to Japanese comics, drawn and written in a particular ‘manga’ style. The word *manga* 漫画, the characters for which mean “comical drawing,” dates at least to 1798, when it appeared in the preface of Santō Kyōden’s picturebook *Shiji no yukikai* (Seasonal Passersby) in reference to “drawing as one pleases.” Comical art in Japan predates this by centuries (e.g., *Chōju jinbutsu giga* [Animal-People Caricatures], 12th and 13th c.), but the *manga* most people know of today—the topic of *Manga: A Critical Guide*—is a mostly modern product. Despite the literal meaning of the word, and *manga* “carrying a connotation of childish stories and humour” (p. 66), the genre goes far beyond this, its vastness mindboggling. Its seemingly countless sub-genres target and draw readers—and others through the “media mix,” transmedia adaptations and circulation—young to old, all gender identities, Japanese and non-Japanese. *Manga* can be funny, but it is not inherently so, and humour scholars should not expect a thorough discussion of humour in this guide. In fact, humour is not even listed in the index, nor are words like caricature, comedy, laughter, parody, or satire (though one does find these in passing). This notwithstanding, the book is a timely and valuable contribution to *manga* studies, comic studies, Japanese studies, and can offer a better understanding of the *manga* genre to scholars of history, humour, gender and sexuality studies, and other fields.

As Suzuki and Stewart point out, the groundwork for *manga* studies as an academic field was laid in the 1990s and, from this time onwards, a steady flow of critical work on *manga* appeared in English. *Manga: A Critical Guide* is the latest addition to the rapidly growing list of scholarly work that treats *manga*, though one of few well-written handbooks. It has 266 pages and comes with an introduction, four chapters, 26 black and white figures (most are of poor quality), and an appendix containing *manga* resources. The Chapters 1) “Historical overview”; 2) “Social and cultural impact”; 3) “Critical uses”; and 4) “Key texts” are straightforward enough, but the book may not be as readable or enjoyable for students as the publisher hopes (and the cover misleads). High school and university educators should find the book useful as a reference, however, particularly for its lists of creators and titles, discussion questions, and shorter subsections that appear later in the work.

The “Historical overview” Chapter (86 pp.) makes up nearly forty percent of the book’s main body. It has two parts that cover pre- and post-1945, respectively. The chapter is effectively written and detailed, but is gauged more for the *manga* scholar-historian than the general reader who may be “making their first steps into the world of *manga*” (back cover). It is helpful that the authors start with the basics, including how *manga* has been and should be defined. They scrutinise invented traditions and attempt to challenge popular views, for example, that *manga*

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history begins with the work of Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989). They rely heavily (and commendably) on a large body of work by Japanese and non-Japanese scholars and discuss manga's trajectory as well as its numerous developments in response to readers, social movements, the publishing industry, and more. This reviewer particularly enjoyed discussions about the evolution of manga format itself, for instance, frames or panels (*koma*), speech bubbles and variants, and transformation of narrative styles. The authors detail Western comics' strong influence on manga, too, and briefly mention Japan's earlier popular literary traditions, namely the previous era's 'playful works' (*gesaku*), the latter of which hopefully prompts humour scholars to investigate Japan's premodern comical genres. Manga's developments just before and after 1900 echo those of the Japanese modern novel (*shōsetsu*), particularly in terms of increased focus on depth and reduction of superficiality and bawdy humour. Early *mangaka* (manga creators) were virtually all male, and the industry remains male-dominated today, so it is helpful that the authors give some attention to women writers and artists, and to the issue of gender. The treatment of wartime manga sadly gets little consideration aside from the token mention of propaganda and Japan's "dark valley" (p. 44), but this mirrors prior (largely Japanese) scholarship. Such an outpouring of details, developments, movements, names, and other information is impressive, but some readers may wish the authors would have included a chart or timeline for quick reference, and more discussion about manga humour.

Chapter 2, "Social and cultural impact," is also comparably long at sixty pages, but it reads more like a guide than Chapter 1. Twenty-five short sections cover a range of topics from censorship and sexuality to *dōjinshi* (fanzine) participatory culture and institutions, all of which the history discussion figures into. A key point of Chapter 2 is that, because manga has had such a significant—mostly positive, some detrimental—role to play in modern Japan, overall its profile has skyrocketed domestically and internationally to the point that it has drawn attention from academics and is now viewed as a subject worthy of 'serious' intellectual inquiry. Indeed, for many today, manga is the first thing that comes to mind when they think of Japan. This has to do with its omnipresence, not only in Japanese bookstores and manga cafes, but virtually everywhere one looks in (and increasingly outside) the country thanks to "media mix," namely "a Japanese transmedia marketing and franchising strategy" (p. 132) that is character and not storytelling based, therefore encouraging readers and fans to "migrate" away from manga to other works, arts, merchandise, etc., that feature their favourite characters (pp. 134, 137). This goes to say that manga is a carefully calculated, commercial undertaking. And characters' viability and power to influence are employed for countless objectives beyond simply making sales. Humour may have a role to play in this, say, when characters achieve 'favourite' status (and marketability) for their comical, incongruent, or eccentric dispositions and looks, but the authors do not explore this in depth.

In addition to offering readers diversion, manga is used to wage social critique, defend marginalised groups, spread information (and misinformation) as well as educate readers in textbook format. Manga's patent influence has led even the Japanese government to exploit it in its *Cool Japan* campaign and other initiatives. Importantly, Suzuki and Stewart lay out how this came to be with reference to an impressive range of primary and secondary sources, one of the hallmarks of Chapter 2 and the book overall. Manga specialists may be versed in what the book offers, but there will be a benefit to having all this in one place. And aspiring manga scholars will be loaded with new information and leads to pursue. The authors even made time to defend the unfairly stigmatised *otaku*, that is, "fervent manga fans, especially a subcultural group of young (and not-so-young) males" (pp. 104, 116). There is no question that manga has a powerful, hypnotic draw, because it offers something to virtually everyone, but it is also key that manga culture is *inclusive*, encouraging amateur participation and fostering (or fabricating) communities. An example given is the magazine *COM*, founded by Tezuka Osamu in 1967,

which eagerly solicited contributions from local manga groups (pp. 140-141), something that calls to mind various inclusive literary pursuits undertaken in the country at least two centuries before this, particularly in Tezuka's native Osaka, which happens to be modern Japan's comedy capital.

Manga's Chapter 3 is titled "Critical uses" and in twenty pages succinctly introduces five methodological and pedagogical approaches to studying manga, introducing tools, terminology and critical frameworks. The content is logically organised and condensed into easily digested subsections and will be welcomed by scholars and graduate students who teach manga courses at universities. It will not likely make absorbing reading for average students and therefore may disincline educators from asking them to buy their own copy of the book, but teachers should have their own if just for the lists of questions that promise to go far in helping fuel productive classroom discussions and inspiring ideas for class projects. "Bounds of manga," "Formal and visual analysis," "Biographical approaches," "Gender and sexuality studies approaches," and "Historical questions and historical representation" are this section's chief approaches and, while endorsing all five, the authors rightly warn readers regarding some of their limitations, for example, "when approaching manga from a gender and/or sexuality perspective, we should remain cautious with regard to any allegation or claim that (over)simplistically connects manga content with the society as a whole" (p. 180). One might say something similar about manga's humour, which, rarely fixed, is culturally and linguistically conditioned, fluid and serving many functions. Finally, helpful for specialists and general readers, the chapter (as does the rest of the book) dependably focuses on manga but keeps sight of the larger comic studies context with references to work by comics scholars, such as Hillary Chute (p. 182), Scott McCloud (p. 168), and Andrei Molotiu (p. 184, n. 9).

The final chapter, "Key texts" (35 pp.), despite its title, is not meant to be a canon of manga titles, but that is essentially what it is. Still, the authors point out that the section is anything but comprehensive and should therefore serve as a point of departure for people to further explore the world of manga and be able to do so in English translation should they wish. Humour scholars will particularly benefit from the synopses, which should help them quickly identify content and potential research leads. The 35 texts are listed in four categories: pre-1945 works of historical significance; key manga creators and representative works; target readership as per the five largest commercial categories; and variety, i.e., additional genres, types, and themes. As one would expect, this section reads like a who's who of the manga world and includes well-known titles like *Barefoot Gen*, *Akira*, *Doraemon*, *Dragon Ball*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Golgo 13*, *My Brother's Husband*, *Naruto*, *Oishinbo*, *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon*, *Rose of Versailles*, and *Slam Dunk*. Scholars (and students) who know manga will not find much new here, but the chapter will prove useful as a quick reference guide. The chapter is not only full of names and titles, of course. Each work introduced comes with a synopsis and information to consider while (re)reading or teaching. For instance, the authors tell us that Yanase Takashi (1919-2013), the creator of *Anpanman*—a caped hero who has a head of *anpan* (red bean-jam bread roll) and offers it to people in need—"went through the hardships of wartime, as an imperial soldier (sent to China), and the immediate postwar period of food shortages" (p. 199). When introducing *gyagu* (gag) manga—the title offered is Usui Yoshito's (1958-2009) *Crayon Shin-chan*, a widely relatable child with "thinly masked hints of adult motives" (p. 210), which, like *Anpanman*, is a household name in Japan—the authors point out that "Japan has a rich history of humour comics" and that, while considered by some to be more 'cartoony' and simplistic (in both linework and subject matter), *gyagu* manga "has been one of the long-lasting forces attracting readers to the medium across generations" (p. 210).

Readers will find at the back of the book an appendix containing a glossary with about fifty words, a list of manga-related museums, archives, libraries, etc., and lastly a URL for the book's

companion website (needing an update at the time of this writing). The 17-page bibliography is a fine resource, but the index, while in no state of disarray, might be augmented in a future printing to aid readers with quick reference. This reader had to do a lot of flipping between the table of contents, titles and subtitles in the body, note sections, and bibliography, so perhaps expanding the index could help make this guide a bit more accessible, or “easy-to-navigate,” as the publisher advertises. As a final point, while humour scholars can learn much about manga, its history, roles in society, and conventional critical approaches, this is not a guide that carefully examines humour. Those with special interests in manga and Japan might like to have *Manga: A Critical Guide* on their shelves, but others may wish to simply borrow a copy when needed.

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