

READING THE COMICS

by Frederik L. Schodt

In his travel book *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975), Paul Theroux recalls his encounter with a comic book left behind by a young woman seated next to him on a train in northern Japan: "The comic strips showed decapitations, cannibalism, people bristling with arrows like Saint Sebastian . . . and, in general, mayhem. . . . I dropped the comic. The girl returned to her seat and, so help me God, serenely returned to this distressing [magazine]."

Japanese *manga*, or comic books, come as a rude shock to most Westerners. With their emphasis on violence, sex, and scatology, *manga* do not seem to fit the typical Western notion of Japan as a subtle, even repressed, society. Yet *manga* are read and enjoyed by Japanese of every social class.

All told, comics accounted for 27 percent of all books and magazines published in Japan in 1980; the more than one billion *manga* in circulation every year amount to roughly 10 for every man, woman, and child in Japan.

The most popular Japanese comics appear in monthly and weekly magazines. Fat, 350-page boys' comic books—which have circulations as high as three million—combine dramatic stories of sports, adventure, and science fiction with humor. Girls' magazines place their emphasis on tales of love, featuring stylized heroes and heroines. Themes in adult male magazines range from the religious to the risqué, mostly the latter; the stories teem with warriors, gamblers, and gigolos. Until recently, Japanese women had to read comics written for teen-age girls or peruse those designed for their boyfriends or husbands. But in 1980, publishers came to their rescue with two monthlies, *Be in Love* and *Big Comic for Ladies*.

Why do the Japanese have such an unusual appetite for comics?

It is possible that their written language predisposes Japanese to more visual forms of communication. In its most basic form, the individual Japanese ideogram, adopted from the Chinese, is a symbol denoting either a tangible object or an abstract concept, emotion, or action. Cartoonist Tezuka Osamu has said of his comics: "I don't consider them pictures—I think of them as a type of hieroglyphics. . . . In reality I'm not drawing. I'm writing a story with a unique type of symbol."

The comic tradition in Japan dates back almost 900 years. During the 12th century, a Buddhist priest named Toba

(1053–1140) penned the *Chōjūgiga* scrolls, literally “humorous pictures of birds and animals.” In a style bearing strong resemblance to today’s Walt Disney figures, the scrolls showed monkeys, rabbits, and frogs bathing in rivers, practicing archery, wrestling, and worshipping. Refinements in woodblock printing during the 17th century spread cartoons from the aristocracy and the clergy to the common people.* European-style cartoons, often modeled on those of the British magazine *Punch*, became popular during the latter half of the 19th century; during the 1920s, Japanese artists marveled at the “Sunday funnies” in America and quickly adopted their style.

The real comic boom, however, did not take place until after the Second World War. Young Japanese in particular were starved not just for food but also for entertainment. Dozens of small *manga* publications sprang up to satisfy the growing demand, a demand spurred by the appearance in Japan of such American cartoon classics as Chic Young’s *Blondie*, serialized and translated in 1946.

To be sure, small children in Japan have always read comics for the same reason that children everywhere do—they are both accessible and fun. But the passage from childhood to adult life has not weaned postwar Japanese from their dependency on comics. Two modern developments help to explain why.

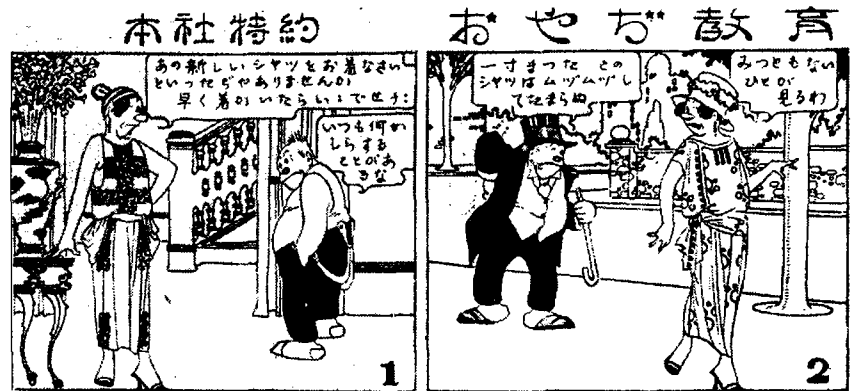
The Samurai Spirit

First, Japan has become a very crowded, urban nation, with a population density that ranks 20th in the world. Unlike many other amusements, comics require little physical space, and they can be enjoyed in silence and solitude. Pioneers in headphone amplifiers for electric guitars, tiny tape players, and other miniaturized gadgetry, the Japanese place a premium on not bothering others.

Second, Japan remains a society ruled by mutual obligations and codes of behavior. Individual desires must be subordi-

*The phrase *manga* was coined in 1814 by the Japanese woodblock print artist Hokusai, using the Chinese ideograms *man* (involuntary or in spite of oneself) and *ga* (picture). Hokusai was evidently trying to describe something like “whimsical sketches.” But it is noteworthy that the first ideogram also has the meaning “morally corrupt.”

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The first U.S. cartoon serialized in Japan, *Bringing up Father* appeared in 1923. *Mutt and Jeff*, *Felix the Cat*, and others soon followed.

nated to the good of the group, yet the pressures for individual achievement have, if anything, increased. To the student cramming for examinations, the businessman stuck in the corporate hierarchy, and the housewife trapped at home, *manga* provide an escape valve for dreams and frustrations. And as such, they play a vital part in Japanese popular culture, revealing legacies from the past, ideals of love, attitudes toward work and play, and above all, a thirst for fantasy.

When the first Japanese comic strips for children appeared during the 1920s, they depicted plucky samurai lads who always protected their feudal masters and fought for justice and the glory of Japan. The spirit, if not the figure, of the dedicated, skillful swordsman presides over many dramatic comics for men and boys. The typical modern samurai superhero slashes his way through sword fights that can last for 30 pages, usually against a backdrop of burning castles, ravaged villages, peasants in revolt, and assorted corpses. He tends to be stoic, not very vocal, and a member of a group. If not a member of a group, he is an outsider confident of his own purpose in a hostile world.

An example of the latter is *Ogami Ittō*, the anti-hero of *Kozure Ōkami* (*Wolf and Child*), by Koike Kazuo and Kojima Gōseki. Factional politics cause him to lose his job as executioner for the Tokugawa clan. After his wife is murdered, he becomes a paid assassin and embarks on a mission of vengeance. What saves the series from degenerating into endless bouts of slaughter—Ogami kills 37 opponents in one episode—is the presence of his infant son. Samurai stories often rely thematically on the

contrast between human bonds and battlefield violence.

Given the martial quality of most traditional samurai epics, one would expect Japanese to savor "war comics" in the American style of *Fightin' Marines*, *Fightin' Army*, and *Sgt. Fury*. The ancient samurai idolized obedience and regarded dying for the sake of honor as a privilege, and the government tried to revive this aspect of the *bushidō* ethic in World War II. Total defeat, however, and the war deaths of 1,972,000 Japanese ended that tradition. Under ARTICLE 9 of the 1946 Japanese Constitution, the Japanese "forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation."

Everything but Cricket

Many artists, in fact, have done their best to ridicule the wartime warrior values. Mizuki Shigeru lost his left arm during an American bombing raid in World War II, and his 350-page comic *Sōin Gyokusai Seyo! (Banzai Charge!)*, based on his own experiences as a soldier, illustrates the hazards of blind obedience. A detachment of soldiers under the command of a major intoxicated with *bushidō* ideals arrives at an island off Rabaul, New Britain. When the Americans appear, the major orders a *banzai!* charge, sending his green troops to destruction. Some survive, but headquarters informs them that since their glorious deaths have already been reported, they must either commit suicide or attack again.

The demise of militarism, however, does not mean the demise of self-sacrifice, endurance, and competition. These Japanese ideals live on in other contemporary activities, notably sports. During the early years of the post-World War II U.S. Occupation, the authorities banned traditional Japanese school sports such as judo, karate, and kendo—all reflections, it was thought, of *bushidō* values. When Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, finally lifted the ban in 1950, the result was a tremendous boom not only in sports but also in sports comics.

One of the first sports strips to appear was *Igaguri-kun*, by Fukui Eiichi, a tale of a judo expert named Igaguri that found favor with Japanese youngsters. *Igaguri-kun* led to comics featuring not only traditional Japanese sports but also baseball, football, professional wrestling, boxing, and volleyball. (Perhaps the only major sport neglected by Japanese comic artists has been cricket.) Athletic prowess became a source of national pride and provided a legitimate channel for aggressive tendencies. If Japanese boys could no longer dream of growing up to be heroic warriors, they could at least become sports stars.

CONSUMPTION AS CULTURE

The Japanese first tasted American fast food—Howard Johnson's and Kentucky Fried Chicken—at the 1970 World Exposition in Ōsaka. At the time, their income per capita was \$1,702, below those of Puerto Rico and Italy. By 1980, that number was \$7,672, or close to the \$10,094 of the United States, and American-style fast-food franchises, as well as amusement parks, supermarkets, and other service businesses, had sprouted from Kyūshū to Hokkaidō.

Indeed, McDonald's (with more than 450 Japanese outlets), Kentucky Fried Chicken (430), and other U.S. fast-food eateries probably owe little of their success to their cuisine; the more than 1,500 take-out sushi outlets run by one Japanese company attest to the superior appeal of native dishes. Both Japanese and American chains, however, have profited from the growth in disposable income and from the fact that 40 percent of all married women now work at least part-time.

Meanwhile, a new breed of "office ladies"—young, single working women living with their parents—has entered the consumer ranks, and the slow spread of the five-day work week has allowed more time for excursions and amusements.

The markets thus created or expanded were made to order for the formula of standard ingredients, computerized inventories, and comprehensive training manuals devised by U.S. service companies. One example is Tokyo Disneyland, which opened in April 1983. While it did not invest in the project, Walt Disney Productions provided the local developer with 300 volumes detailing everything from costume design to crowd control. The result: a 114-acre park identical to its counterparts in California and Florida. In 1983, some 10.4 million Japanese strolled with Mickey and Minnie, rode on the Mark Twain Riverboat, or listened to Slue Foot Sue sing (in English) "I'm Looking for a Big-City Beau."

Until recently, notes Tokyo economist Kusaka Kimindo, a former Wilson Center Guest Scholar, "Japanese companies, bound by a reliance on 'serious' industries, neglected to develop amusements." Now they make and market Windsurfers, hang gliders, and other "fun" items—for home and, of course, export. Last February, the Chinese government announced that a Japanese company would build a "Disney-style" park in Beijing.

The Japanese are also taking service technology a few steps further. Some five million vending units sell everything from shoes to mixed drinks. And at a suburban Tokyo supermarket, robots unload trucks and restock aisles. In Japan as in America, leisure and prosperity are now the mothers of commercial invention.



Most popular among the sports comics are highly stylized *bēsubōru*, or "baseball," stories. In 1966, the success of a baseball comic called *Kyojin no Hoshi* (*Star of the Giants*) helped to usher in the genre known today as "sports-guts" comics. Written by Kajiwara Ikki and drawn by Kawasaki Noboru, *Kyojin no Hoshi* stars a young boy named Hyūma Hoshi, who dreams of joining the Yomiuri Giants, Japan's most famous baseball team. His father teaches him to field flaming baseballs, part of a harsh training program for Hyūma that would make any real-life American coach sob with pity. Eventually, the boy becomes one of Japan's ace pitchers. The story ends, however, on a mixed note: Hyūma beats his arch-rival but tears a tendon in his arm and must abandon baseball.

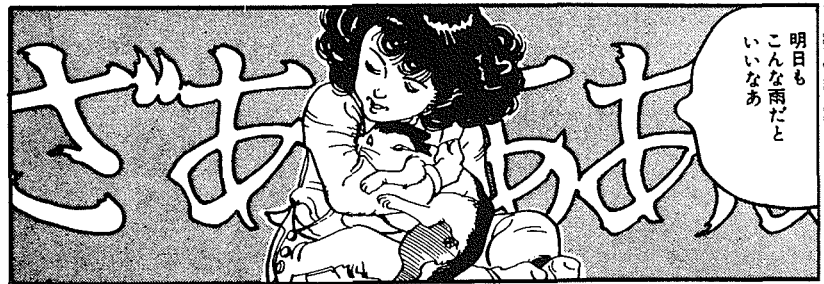
Salary-Man

A companion to the sports comic is the so-called work comic, aimed at an audience of boys and young men who have not yet entered the work force, or at those who have only recently found a job. The stories stress perseverance in the face of impossible odds, craftsmanship, and the quest for excellence; the heroes are young men from the low end of the social totem pole who strive to become the "best in Japan" in their chosen professions.

In *Hōchōnin Ajihei* (*Ajihei the Cook*), by Gyū Jirō and Biggu Jō, a young man forsakes his father's occupation as a traditional chef in order to make fast food for the masses. The relationship between master and apprentice supplies much of the drama. From the 23-volume series, readers also learn how to peel onions, chop carrots, make noodles, and even fry ice cream without melting it. A series by Nakazawa Keiji called *Shigoto no Uta* (*Ode to Work*) concentrates less on technical information and more on the spiritual meaning of hard work and a good job.

Yet, while the Japanese still pay homage to traditional values, they are not the diligent, dull automatons routinely portrayed in the Western news media. Japanese white-collar workers, for example, enjoy their own irreverent genre of comics, known appropriately as *sarariman*, or "salary-man," comics.

American and European business executives, awed by Japanese management techniques, often pine for a more obedient, loyal, and productive work force, like that which supposedly exists in Japan. Salary-man comics, however, show Japanese office workers as they see themselves. One of the first, *Fuji Santarō*, by Satō Sampei, began serialization in the *Asahi* newspaper in 1965. It featured a company employee who, in an early sequence, was shown painting open eyes on his glasses so



Three Japanese comic figures: Noriko (above), a normal Japanese girl; Mazinger Z (right), a warrior-robot controlled by a boy seated inside its head; and Ichiban, the test-taking hero of an "exam" comic, one of Japan's newest genres.



that he could sleep safely during staff meetings.

The typical hero of salary-man comics is a middle-class everyman known in Japan as the *hira-shain*, or rank-and-file employee. His is an unhappy existence. Married to an ugly woman, he dreads going home, and he hangs his head low after being scolded by his boss. The other key figures include the president (likes to play golf, is old and not too bright), the department head (hardworking and stern), the section chief (desperately wants to become a department head but fears he cannot), the "eternal chief clerk" (incompetent and stuck for life in his posi-

tion), and the rank and file, many of whom are also *madogiwazoku*, or "those who sit idle beside windows"—deadbeats in a system of lifetime employment.

Another much-lampooned sacred cow is Japan's traditional family structure. In *Dame Oyaji (No Good Daddy)*, by Furuya Mitsutoshi, a small, pathetic salary-man has the misfortune to have married Onibaba (Demon Hag), a scowling woman built like a warrior-robot. Early episodes all follow the same pattern: The father tries to assert himself, fails, and is tied up, burned, or beaten by his family. He represents the reverse of the stereotype in male-oriented Japan, where the father has traditionally been an aloof, authoritarian figure.

These *manga* that mock Japanese stereotypes are presented only half in jest. In reality, they are proof of the changes that Japanese society has endured since the end of World War II. For example, Japanese women—who first received the vote in the 1946 Constitution—can now turn to a growing number of cartoon strips created by women for women. One of the first was by Hasegawa Machiko, whose *Sazae-san* began in 1946 and ran until 1974. Sazae, the heroine, symbolized the new Japanese woman: still family oriented and respectful of tradition, but independent minded. Today, some 45 different young girls' and women's comic magazines appear every month.

Boy Meets Girl

Most of them do not embody current Western feminist ideals. Whether the heroine be a sports star, a young girl, a woman on the job, or a housewife, romance (often illicit) is invariably the motivating dramatic force. Scenes where a young girl is struck in the face by an angry young male, and then thanks him for "caring," can still be found.

The male and female characters in these stories have a distinctly Western look: tall, with large, expressive eyes and light hair. What their physical appearance reflects is a revolution in the way Japanese people view—or wish to view—themselves. Before the Japanese ever saw Westerners, they depicted themselves in scroll paintings and woodblock prints with Asian features, and often smaller-than-life eyes. Today, billboards, television commercials, and magazine ads usually feature Caucasian models, both male and female.*

*A form of surgery popular in Japan today is to have an extra crease put in the upper eyelid, creating a rounder eye (cost: \$1,000). Different ways of raising babies, an improved diet, and greater use of desks and chairs—instead of squatting on cushions—have given many younger Japanese the lithe and lanky look of their comic-book heroes and heroines.

Until a few years ago, most boys and men in Japan regarded girls' comics and the work of women artists with a mixture of puzzlement and derision. They could not understand the female obsession with syrupy romance, and they were repelled by the florid art style. But the increasing sophistication shown in girls' comics such as *Berusaiyu no Bara* (*The Rose of Versailles*), a 1,700-page fictional tale by Ikeda Riyoko of the life of Marie Antoinette, has attracted many male fans. Some read girls' comics in order to learn how women think. Others find the emphasis on emotion and psychology refreshing.

The Visual Generation

Recently, comic-book publishers have made tentative attempts to unite male and female readers. In September 1981, *Duo* emerged. Its catchy slogan: "We reached out for the same magazine at the store, and that was our beginning—*Duo*, for the two of us."

Despite their success in attracting a broad readership, *manga* are not without their critics. Nagai Gō came out in 1968 with *Harenchi Gakuen* (*Shameless School*), which aroused the wrath of parents by introducing overt eroticism into children's comics and by mocking Japan's monolithic educational system. Students in the series spent most of their time cavorting in the nude, playing mahjong, and throwing sake parties. Japanese law forbids the graphic depiction of genitalia or sexual intercourse. But through the use of suggestive techniques, many contemporary comics—children's and adults'—depict far more erotic scenes than are found in *Harenchi Gakuen*.

In 1979, as controversy continued, an educator named Matsuzawa Mitsuo fired off a polemic entitled *Nihonjin no Atama o Dame ni Shita Manga-Gekiga* (*The Dramatic Comics That Have Ruined Japanese Minds*). The jacket blurb on his book asked: "IS YOUR CHILD SAFE? . . . Children hold the key to Japan's future, and their minds are being turned into mush. This book tells how comics might ruin the nation . . . and issues a bold warning to parents whose children face the [university entrance] exams!"

Matsuzawa's appeal, and others like it, seem unlikely to stem the comic tide. Besides reading them for pleasure, Japanese now rely on cartoons and comics as an effective way to communicate: They can be found on street signs, shopping maps, instruction manuals, electricity and gas bills, and even in phone booths. One Tokyo publisher recently came out with a history of the world in comic-book form. The growing intru-

sion of *manga* into daily life is one reason that modern Japanese youths, already surrounded by television sets and video tape recorders, are described by pundits in Japan as the *shikaku sedai*, the "visual generation."

All in all, Japan's comic-book industry today dwarfs that of the United States or any other country. But the isolation that helped Japan to develop such a rich comic genre also limits its exportability. American comics can be found around the world: *Superman* alone sells in more than 45 nations. Transplanting Japanese comics is not so easy. To publish them in other languages would involve redrawing or photographically reversing the frames so that they could be read from left to right; word balloons also must be altered to accommodate horizontal (rather than vertical) dialogue. The difference in symbolic vocabulary alone dwarfs any technical problems. How would an American guess, for example, that when the nose of a Japanese male character gushes blood, he is sexually stirred?

Even so, there have been some export successes. Japanese robot stories have won many fans in Europe. A popular figure in mainland China is Tezuka Osamu's *Tetsuwan Atomu*, known in the United States, Venezuela, and Peru as *Astro Boy*. Since 1963, U.S. television has also dubbed and broadcast several Japanese TV series based on *manga*. Finally, the overseas market for *manga* spin-offs—toys, picture books, and video games—ensures that the world will get a glimpse, if only indirectly, of Japan's vigorous new visual culture.

