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The Characteristics of Japanese Manga

Natsume Fusanosuke

Translated by Jon Holt and Teppei Fukuda

Translators’ Introduction

In the field of manga studies, Natsume Fusanosuke is widely known as an important critic and scholar. Not only does he maintain a brutally prolific publication record, but one must keep in mind he was of a new wave of manga commentators, critics, and scholars that made their impact on Japanese culture by bringing public acceptance to manga in the 1990s. Many scholars in comics studies are aware of Manga no yomikata (How to Read Manga, Takarajima, 1995), a co-authored book that consists of a considerable contribution by Natsume, and of its importance in establishing certain types of approaches to manga study and analysis. This translated essay is from Natsume’s follow-up study, Why Is Manga So Interesting?: Its Grammar and Expression (Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka: sono bunpō and hyōgen, 1997), the book form of his televised show and episode notes from NHK’s Human University (Ningen Daigaku). This essay is the culminating chapter (Chapter 12) in the series and the first part of the later published book (NHK Library, 1997). 1 In it, Natsume concludes his observations about why manga and its possible premodern precursors are so compelling for Japanese people and why manga should be considered an important part of Japan’s culture and artistic heritage.

Before Natsume, in the early 1970s, there was an emerging group of writers for magazines who promoted manga study, manga history, and manga analysis. Primarily this group consisted of fans and writers who had affiliations with the avant-garde comics anthology Garo. Ishiko Junzō, a central figure of the coterie magazine Manga-ism (Mangashugi), is a primary representative. Jaqueline Berndt describes Ishiko and his group’s call for “a distinctive approach that would allow a grasp of [manga’s] blending of verbal and pictorial arts and its particular methods of story-telling” (2008: 303). To fight against Ishiko’s group, there emerged a very mixed coterie who vigorously opposed Ishiko’s already solidifying and stultifying gekiga (mature-pictures) orthodoxy. Gekiga Alice editor Kamewada Takeshi, soon-to-be art history and cultural critic Hashimoto Osamu, and Comiket organizer Yonezawa Yoshihiro all struggled to establish a countercultural movement more rooted in a kind of populism. Sexual liberation, rejection of industry (publishing) controls, and freedom to explore subgenres (including science fiction and shōjo [girls’] manga) are all hallmarks of their “movement” to resist a kind of gekiga vision of manga reality.2 But by the early 1990s, a new wave of critics and scholars emerged, notes Berndt, with Natsume and Yomota Inuhiko, “who pioneered this movement, [and who] disdain modern orthodoxy. The extremes of both politically motivated criticism and extremely subject criticism” (304). What Natsume and his colleagues offered was a new kind of manga study through “their semiotic approach... by exploiting its unique means of expression from an internal perspective” (304).

Enter How to Draw Manga and Why Is Manga So Interesting?: Its Grammar and Expression. Although John Ingulsrud and Kate Allen favor the 1995 precursor as “arguably one of the most valuable books on understanding manga” and insist that the latter “fall[s] short on replacing the analytical breath,” we translated Why Is Manga So Interesting? because we felt that, on the contrary, its very clear and economical discussion was beneficial for both scholars and students of manga so new English-speaking audiences could clearly understand, 1. the type of formalist approach Natsume employed in these early works, and, 2. the character of manga criticism in the 1990s. Because Why Is Manga So Interesting? was not only published but also broadcast on Japanese public television (NHK from July to September 1996), it is a remarkable text that establishes how and why manga could become a legitimate form of Japanese pop culture by 1996. Indeed, the medium is the message. The show and this companion essay (the twelfth and final installment of the television series) indicate -- in real-time -- how manga could freely intersect both pop and proper cultures in Japan in the late 1990s.

Finally, it should be noted that this essay represents just the beginning of Natsume-sensei’s theory of manga. Since the 1990s, he has greatly shifted and magnified his view of manga as seen in a number of books where he discusses much larger forces in manga, such as readership, consumer trends, relationships between artists and publishers, the manga market in Japan and abroad, and the larger role of criticism and scholarship. Again, scholars should recognize the importance of this essay as an early place of departure for Natsume’s thought. Some vectors seen in “The Characteristics of Japanese Manga” can be seen in his later work. For example, Natsume has revisited his discussion of yellow-cover books (kiyōshi), discussed in the later part of this essay, as the possible prototype for postwar manga (see, Natsume, 2004: 113-127). Natsume is not the only scholar to consider manga’s premodern origins (Kern, 2006) and reconsider them (Kern, 2009). Other changes from our essay to that essay are noticeable, including a more developed view of American or western influence on postwar manga than what is seen in this translated essay.

A consistent thread that runs through Natsume’s approach to manga analysis -- and one which many readers of IJOCA will appreciate -- is his attempt to better situate Japanese manga within the comic-book industries, markets, and artistic-storytelling venues of other Asian countries. Natsume
describes how much of his work in the 1990s was shaped by his experience first visiting Hong Kong in 1993. He writes (2004: 328-329) about the great stimulation he received during his time there observing pirated and official translations of manga there, consulting with Asian publishers about the viability of taking a Japanese-industry approach to manga, and seeing how Asian manga compared in terms of expression (panel layout, for example) with that of Japanese manga. Also formative to the development of his manga ideas was his work writing manga columns from 1995 to 1997 for the English-language magazine Look Japan (published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). It was during these periods -- when How to Read Manga and Why Is Manga So Interesting? were written -- that Natsume noticed the “differences” (chigai) between his culture’s comic books and those found in Asia and in the West (2004: 330). These chigai then became the “characteristics” (tokuchō) of the present essay. In this translation then, we see the early perspective of Natsume as a manga scholar and critic as he establishes not only how we read (and enjoy reading) manga but also what makes manga so Japanese.

Lastly, the translators would like to thank Natsume-sensei for his permission to translate and publish this early essay. We have endeavored to represent his thought as clearly as possible but any errors herein are our own. We also thank the generosity of the publishers of the images used in the essay for the permission to reproduce them.

Jon Holt and Teppei Fukuda

Layered Panels Express a Character’s Complex Feelings

Let’s start off by taking a look at an example of a classic shōjo manga produced at the 1970s (Fig. 1). It is from Tachikake Hideko’s Be with Me on the Days It Rains (Ame no furu hi wa soba ni ite, 1977).

For readers these days accustomed to an ordered panel construction, it might be a bit difficult to read; however, as you read through it, you can understand how the construction of the overlapping panels here dramatically stages a dialogue going on within the mind (naimen) of our female protagonist.

On the right page, the top and bottom tiers of panels of recollections sandwiches her face as she meditates on her past. The artist draws her in a way so it seems our protagonist peeps from the present time into the world of past memories. The forefront, visible part of the page (gamen) consists of the settings of her memories and we have the spoken words of a boy character who appears in those scenes. Furthermore, there appears to be floating in the foreground things like strange bubbles and onomatopoeia that straddle the panel frames (waku o mata[gu]).

On the left page in the upper section, we have a panel with the girl
who appeared on the opposite [right] page, in a panel runs horizontally; here, as her panel horizontally straddles the other panels, she cycles through her memories. This bar panel is her moment in the present tense -- she is noticing something now. Although this is the same girl who was the person remembering the past, the panels are layered so they straddle the boy, who is being remembered, and the girl, who is doing the remembering. The artist does this because she shows a momentary intersection of the junctures of time, which is how we remember. Let’s say this is the sequential function of the panels (koma no keiki-teki kinō), which serves to parse the flow of time as it unfolds. The artist makes time that is totally anti-sequential (hi keiki-teki na jikan) so random events become completely contained within the sequential function of the panels.

What the manga artist does here is skillfully express how various things that pop up in a human being’s mind (naimen) can crisscross in a moment of time. So when we get to the bottom of the left page, the panels depict the contents of her memories again, but now it’s the boy who floats across panel gutters as he is recalled by the girl. This method of having a character drawn as he spans a number of panels is actually quite common in Japanese girls’ (shōjo) comics, but in this instance, it functions to unify various images of words that are being recalled.

If we did not have the free-floating form of the boy here, we would end up only having a series of images -- some happy ones with him, some sad ones of him -- recalled in the order they happened. By having the girl recall the boy as he floats through the memories, the artist can strongly make the reader feel how these images lack a strong temporally sequential aspect to them. In other words, the feeling here is not that the images flow in a clear A to B, B to C order, but that the boy majestically rides over the panels that normally maintain strict time continuity in order to further emphasize that in real life, we actually remember things in a vague, jumbled mess.

If you consider our boy and the strange floating bubbles are drawn on a transparent, panel-free sheet, then it’s possible to understand our two-page spread as a layering of multiple sheets, as seen in Fig. 2. In other words, they are like layers you see in traditional animation cells. Shōjo manga has a frenetic panel method, often using characteristic things like interior (bubbles [naito]) and layering (jiuō). And even in our right-page panel where the girl peeks out in the middle of the panels, she has no defining panel border. In a sense, it seems like the artist spreads out the white break space (mahaku) between the top and bottom sets of panels and she puts picture of the girl in there. The girl serves to divide the upper and bottom panels of recollections. Her appearance there has a function to have the story and the readers follow her back to herself for an instant of time. With this in mind, it seems possible then to replace or swap out those other panels and the white space in any real order you like.

Why is it that this collection of panels layered in this way can give us such a complex impression? If you permit me to leave aside the technical issues here, I would argue it is because the panels are positioned so each and every panel is located in different places, separated by only a single membrane-like layer. First of all, we have the location of the girl who is remembering (Fig. 2: panels 1, 2, 3, 8, 10); the positions of the panels where the girl’s interiority is felt (Fig. 2: panels 5, 9, 12); the places which are recalled by the girl (Fig. 2: panels 4, 6, 11, 13-16), and so on. Words are attached in their respective locations. All of these places then are layered in a way to show both the present-moment girl remembering and the past events that she remembers.

Panel Expressions That Matched the Mood of the Era

In other words, multilayered time like this is cast in the space of layered panels. We do not see here classic manga constructions — classically fixed on the principles of compression and release (asshuku and kaihō) and time segmentation — because these panels could not operate the same way and also express time as it is internally felt, being portrayed in layers like this. In the 1970s, Japanese comics developed when girls’ comics took the lead in driving innovation and transcending the parameters of traditional panel transitions. We see contemporary manga being overtaken by new forms that tried to treat panels in new ways, boldly experimenting by loosening time sequencing and expanding the white break space (mahaku), even using it as a panel.

The next question is: how can Japanese comics get away with this? One reason, I think, is that Japanese readers and creators want more out of their manga than mere sequentiality. The Japanese manga marketplace is booming so much that the desire for something more than sequential-art comics has clear commercial appeal. A revolution occurred in manga, because readers have matured in their manga tastes to-the point where they can process quite complex sequences like the one above.

Another factor that explains things is that Japan after the 1970s became a place where people ultimately deal with each other in very ambiguous ways, so the manga matches the mood of our era. Manga like this tell us that Japanese in the time period of the 1970s prioritized mood over message or thought. Maybe this is not true just in Japan. Maybe it is a global phenomenon in other developed countries. Or, it might have a connection to a general feeling where a middle-class mentality takes hold of the majority of the people. Still, I would like to reconsider why we get these kinds of comics in Japan.
The History of Japanese Manga Panels

We can answer my previous question by looking at changes in Japanese history with the rise of low-cost manga in the post-war period and also the revolution and marketplaces changes that occurred post-Tezuka Osamu. Yes, and even though we are currently engaged with the question of panel types here, I think we should widen our view of the issue a bit. Even so, if I use all my power, the next part of the conversion involves quite a bit of guess work, so it is okay for you to be cautious of what I am about to tell you, and, I'll try not to deceive you, but please hear me out.

What are manga panels, really? Comics reached Japan sometime after the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan's modern age, started. The first arrivals took the form of newspaper single-panel cartoons and multi-panel magazine cartoons made in the West. I think true multi-paneled sequences widely started to make their impact in the following eras of Taishō (1912-1926) and Shōwa (1926-1989) and of course these were patterned on Western ones. We could turn the question around and ask if anything like manga -- something we could at least say with a field that had a separation made by panels -- ever existed in Japan until it westernized.

To answer that question, we look at the mangaesque visual works created on woodblocks in the Edo period (1600-1868). We certainly can find a hybrid text that does not separate out the text from the illustration -- there are many Edo-period works that blend the two (Fig. 3. Edo-period kibyōshi yellow book, 1793]. Just like the emaki-mono (illustrated scrolls) that existed even before the Edo period, these kibyōshi works express events flowing in a temporal sequence that also show an interplay between text and illustration. However, it is in the Edo period that we reach a stage in hybrid visual art where we see something like the temporal segmentation of modern-day manga.

![Fig. 3. A yellow-cover book (kibyōshi) from the Edo Period. Writer Shiba Zenkō and Artist Kitaoshibegusa’s Fourteen Courtesans inside the Belly (Jōyon keisei hara no uchi). 1793.]

![Fig. 4. Emaki (illustrated scrolls) as proto-manga only without panels (koma). Illustrated Scroll of Judge Okuri (Okuri hōgan emaki).]

Take for example the The Illustrated Scroll of Judge Okuri (Okuri hōgan emaki), a work of the first half of the 17th Century (the Kan’ei era). Judge Okuri and his men are offered cups of sake, but the drinks are poisoned. They at first refuse, but fall into the trap and drink. In the emaki we see these linked actions as they drink and then flop around afterwards (Fig. 4). This is an amateur opinion, but I think the time sequences in works like this are far shorter than what you see in older illustrated scrolls. This is a fast progression and the event neatly unfolds. If it were possible to string these scenes together like manga panels, they might make a basic manga sequence.

Near the end of the Edo period, in Record of Yokohama’s Port Opening (Yokohama kaitō kenbun-shi, 1862), we have two two-page sequences spread
over four pages where the actions of a tightrope walker’s progress and fall are depicted including a scene when he splashes water upon his fall (Fig. 5). With the moment-by-moment sequence of this event depicted with the time separated across the pages and the turn of the page, it is easy to see this work as a close precursor to today’s manga.

Fig. 5. Illustration produced at the end of the Edo Period where the story continues as one turns the page. Gyokuransai [Utagawa] Sadahide’s An Account of the Opening of Yokohama’s Port (Yokohama kaikō kenbun-shi). Yokohama City Central Library. 1862.
1970) (Fig. 6), the artist totally takes apart the flow of panels that should show time sequence. He expresses a state of confusion where time is not time.

Or, we will often have panels where the borders disappear (Fig. 7). Manga often features parts where artists blur the operation of time sequences; another characteristic of manga is that it tries to tell a story somehow in the empty spaces on the page.

Text and image are closely connected. Time segmentation is made less obvious. Meaning is given to empty space. That is probably the most basic way to understand the characteristics of manga. But let me force the issue even more: I think you can even say that in Japanese manga, temporal aspects and spatial aspects have such a strong, close association that a reader can even exchange their places as one reads them.

The Japanese Language Structure and Japanese Manga Characteristics

Let me try to express it another way: since words are a temporal concept, then pictures are a spatial concept. In the West, language very much consists of sounds, so then their languages are established through letters that indicate sounds. That is also why Westerners can process nearly all languages using the hearing part of their brains. However, in the Japanese case, it is necessary to work with language using both the hearing and visual parts of the brain simultaneously, because the Japanese language brings together pure hearing-part words, which we call kana, and pure seeing-part words, which are kanji.

When Japanese are talking, we will visualize kanji as pictorial images, making distinctions in words that are different but have the same sounds. Thus, Japanese has an aspect to it where fundamentally sound and image intersect at all times, so that’s why it is a type of language where we can immediately swap out time and space.

Because of its symbolic quality, with a kanji it is quite relative whether one reads it either for its on-yomi (Chinese) sound or kun-yomi (Japanese) sound. Because there is a way for Japanese people to read a pictorial image like a Chinese character using a native-Japanese (Yamato) word, as we normally link Chinese kanji and Japanese language inseparably together, our language makes us Japanese carry out operations in daily life where we translate pictures to words and transpose words into pictures.

You may say this is sheer nonsense spoken by a rank amateur, but I do believe we can make a connection then between this structure of the Japanese language and the characteristics of manga. Here is a whole list of manga connections:

- the closeness between the pictures and the words (the symbolic or
iconic quality of manga’s pictures);  
- the loose quality of time sequences (highly stylistic or decorative panel compositions);  
- the utilization of white space (expanded interpretive possibilities for what happens between each panel).

We can imagine that all of those aspects of manga correspond to the workings of the Japanese language, which easily allows for the swapping out of both time aspects and space aspects.

Of course, all human beings operate and use language where they can combine and swap out the visual (space) elements and aural (time) elements, but I think the language of Japanese stands out for this quality among others.

Therefore, the Japanese koma, or panel, fundamentally limits the space of a picture. It is a space that shows us images in a temporal way. But if we were to stop with our description here, the space between the panels would merely be an in-between space (sukima). In American comics, they actually call this the gutter (gattaa/sukima). On the other hand, in Japanese manga, we call this space the “border of the panel” (koma no wakusen). In Japanese koma, there are two qualities—the “gutter” (sukima) and the “border” (waku), and so the two things can differ as like the positive and the negative of a photograph (Figs. 8-9).

The gutter then is nothing more than something negative created between two moments of time, but the frame is a spatial entity. As we can see in Tezuka’s manga from long time ago, you’d often have a character hanging between panels holding onto the gutter like it was an iron rod, or it can even break like the branch of a tree. Tezuka was aware of the ambiguities of the gutter and the frames. Tezuka was the one who realized this duality. And throughout the early period of manga (i.e. after World War II), as artists became aware of these temporal and spatial ambiguities, soon Japanese comic books would develop into their present state with these special features. If my hypothesis is correct, then we could then say there is a two-sided quality within us Japanese that lets us use language the way we do and that it probably has influenced our manga expressions. It is a no-brainer, really.
This particular kind of post-war expression that we call manga these days is translated and popularly spreading throughout East Asia. Just look at Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and you will see a number of writers who have come into maturity under the influence of manga. Whereas in Europe and the Americas, manga is still in the process of spreading out, having followed an earlier wave of television anime.

Look up “manga” on the Internet and you can find a number of Webpages that introduce Japanese comics but the addresses belong to American universities. I am not talking about a couple of pages, but dozens and dozens of them.

For Europe and North America (at the time in the 1990s), we are still probably in the realm of manga maniacs, but Japanese manga is at the stage of being a true “overseas export” (kaigai shinshutsu). We still don’t have the vocabulary to understand how manga as a Japanese cultural product has reached this unusually extreme export potential.

If we’re lucky, we might see the growing development of “mangology” (mangagaku) in order to meet demand coming next from overseas. I feel like we have reached a point where the times have changed and manga studies are no longer a joking matter. However, for me personally, I have always halfway approached manga for fun. If you ask me why, well, it’s because manga is interesting.

Endnotes

1 Readers interested in the preceding chapter (Chapter 11 “Panel Configurations of Shōjo Manga”) are encouraged to read our translation of it in the forthcoming issue of the US-Japan Women’s Journal (forthcoming 2020).


References


Natsume Fusanosuke is a professor at Gakushūin University, teaching at its school’s Graduate Program of Cultural Studies in Corporeal and Visual Representation, in Tokyo. His publications are too numerous to list here, but he is author and co-author of approximately 20 books on manga and manga scholarship, including Why Is Manga So Interesting?: Its Grammar and Expression (Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka: sono hyōgen to bunpō), Where Is Tezuka Osamu? (Tezuka Osamu wa doko ni iru), and New Challenges for the Field of Manga (Mangagaku e no chōsen). In addition to these achievements, in his career he has been a manga artist, manga columnist, television host for NHK’s public television shows on comics, and author of other books on Japanese culture, including Grandson of Sōseki (Sōseki no mago), which tells the story of his family and his connection to Japan’s great modern novelist Natsume Sōseki. In 1999, he was the recipient of the prestigious Tezuka Osamu Culture Award.


Teppei Fukuda received his Master’s thesis “Moonlit Nights and Seasons of Romance: Yosano Akiko’s Use of the Moon in Tangled Hair” and received his M.A. degree in Japanese at Portland State University in 2020. At PSU from 2017 to 2019, he taught Japanese language and culture; since that time, he works as a study-abroad coordinator at PSU. His research interests include Japanese poetry, manga, and the aesthetics of seasons in modern Japan.