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TIME TO RE-EVALUATE TANIGUCHI JIRŌ'S PLACE IN MANGA

Natsume Fusanosuke | August 12, 2021

Natsume Fusanosuke is Emeritus Professor of the Graduate Program of Cultural Studies in Corporeal and Visual Representation, Gakushūin University. Despite his recent retirement from Gakushūin in March, he is still very active in manga criticism and scholarship. Originally a manga artist himself in the 1980s, by the 1990s he began doing more writing about manga, although he often still employs his cartooning skills to assist in his analysis and explanation of his subjects, much like his American contemporary Scott McCloud. It is not a stretch to compare the latter's *Understanding Comics* to Natsume's work in the classic *How to Read Manga* (*Manga no yomikata*, 1995; co-authored with Takekuma Kentarō and others) and his subsequent *Why Is Manga So Interesting? Its Expression and Grammar* (*Manga wa naze omoshiroi no ka: sono hyōgen to bunpō*), which aired originally as a NHK [Japanese public broadcasting] ten-week lecture mini-series. Like McCloud, Natsume pioneered techniques to see and analyze comics that are still in use today by scholars. Although Natsume's publications are too numerous to list here, he is author and co-author of approximately twenty books on manga and manga scholarship, including monographs like *Where Is Tezuka Osamu?* (*Tezuka Osamu wa doko ni iru*, 1992), the first full-length study on the manga giant. After the 1990s, Natsume went on to revise his early approaches to manga study, analysis, and scholarship, as seen in his *New Challenges for the Field of Manga* (*Mangagaku e no chosen*, 2004). He also co-edited with Takeuchi Osamu a new reader for Manga Studies, *Mangagaku nyūmon* (2009). In addition to these achievements, in his career he has been a television host for NHK's public television show on comics (*Broadcast Satellite Manga Night Talks* [*BS Manga yawa*]), and author of other books on Japanese culture, including *Grandson of Sōseki* (*Sōseki no mago*, 2003), 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.

In the following essay on Taniguchi Jirō, whom Natsume considers one of Japan's most important manga creators, Natsume re-envisioned the artist in the context of recent manga history. Taniguchi passed away in 2017, but his work suggests a path towards a new kind of "adult reading" of manga, which is a theme of Natsume's recent writing on how Japanese people read their comic books and how perhaps they *should* read them. As his essay title suggests, he feels the time is now to reconsider Taniguchi's artistic achievement. In fact, a recent exhibition of Taniguchi's art ran again in his home prefecture, Tottori, from last January through February. His work continues to be popular with Japanese, such as *The Solitary Gourmet* (*Kodoku no gurume*, 1994-96; 2008-2015), which was adapted into a popular television and web series. (English-speaking audiences need only to wait until next year for the translated edition from [Fanfare/Ponent Mon](#).)

- Jon Holt & Teppei Fukuda, translators

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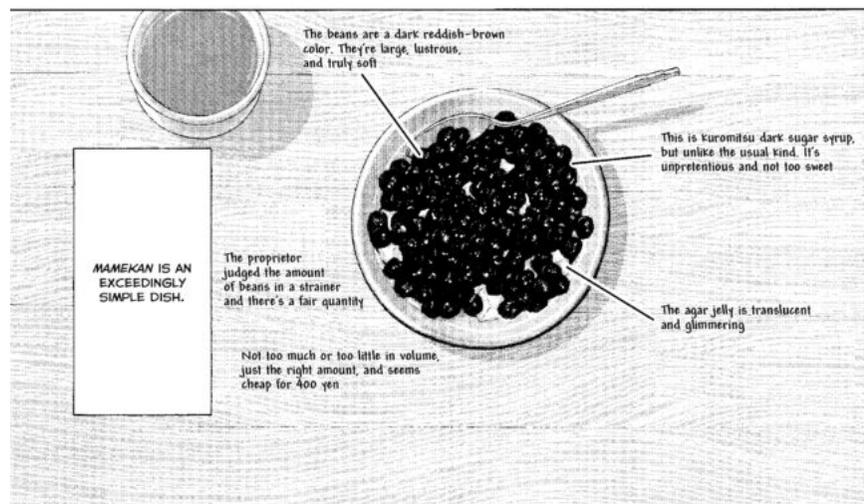
I cannot remember when exactly was the first time I met Mr. Taniguchi. It is in the far past for me. There was a party hosted by the publisher Futabasha where I was seated with other manga writers like Sekikawa Natsuo and Karibu Mārei, the critic Ishikawa Jun, and the artist Ōtomo Katsuhiko. We were all then so young and many of us were still unknown to the world. It really should have not surprised me to have Mr. Taniguchi sitting among us, this small group of big personalities. It is also possible that Taniguchi -- who is such a shy and calm person -- could have faded from my memory. He did not, but he is that kind of person.

There was a meeting I had with him that I do clearly remember: it was later, in 1998, when he was with Sekikawa as they were both awarded the second Tezuka Osamu Culture Prize for their co-authored *The Times of Botchan* (*"Botchan" no jidai*, 1987-1996; first serialized in *Weekly Manga*

Action [*Shūkan manga akushon*]). This manga was not their first work — they had been a hit-making team back in the 1970s with their stylish, hard-boiled detective story *Trouble Is My Business* (*Jikenya kagyō*; originally serialized in 1980 in *Manga gyangu*; new series serialized from 1982 to 1994 in *Weekly Manga Goraku*), a true masterwork that gave off the rare aroma of 1970s men's graphic novels (*seinen gekiga*); *The Times of Botchan*, on the other hand, was superb in how it translated into manga the world and ideas of the Meiji-era (1868-1912) Japan with the masterly touch of historical fiction (like that of Yamada Fūtarō). In it, Taniguchi obtained the utmost minuteness in his pictures, and he displayed much finesse in producing finely detailed, three-dimensional spaces through his comparison of Japanese- and Western-style buildings and streets from that period.

I seem to remember that around this time I was running into him at a number of events. It is often said that Taniguchi has difficulty speaking in front of people, but, quite the contrary, he can be very eloquent; even so, I could sense that he was a bit nervous. When he ran into me, I could see right away from his face that he could relax with me, for I was one of those people who had long gotten used to these situations.

It was in November 2012 that his hometown Tottori City put on a special Taniguchi Jirō exhibit showing his original pages from his manga. As a part of the show, there was a special cross-talk, in which I participated along with Taniguchi and Benoît Peeters. Peeters of course is one of France's most famous BD critics and co-author of the masterwork series *Les Cités obscures* (1982- , E. *The Obscure Cities*; J. *Yami no kuniguni*; art by François Schuiten). During this time, I had the chance to walk the exhibit and view it together with Mr. Peeters. Taniguchi's manuscript pages were unexpectedly small. What really surprised us about his originals was just how much detail was compressed in those beautiful pictures and also how there was not a trace of any refinishing done by him. Another strong memory I have of that experience was seeing how he did things like the luster of a dish of *mame-kan* (black sweet bean and agar confectionery), his technique of layering and scraping screen tones, and other things all from his late-period masterwork, *The Solitary Gourmet* (*Kodoku no gurume*, written by Kusumi Masayuki [1994-1996 *Monthly Panja*; 2009-2015 *SPA!*]). If you only look at the printed version, you will absolutely not see all of his details. Some manga artists will work on their manuscript page almost like one would work on a full tableau - a work of art unto itself; Taniguchi approaches his manga manuscripts the same way. I really do think this is true for Taniguchi Jirō.



While Mr. Peeters and I were looking at his original art, he explained to me the high esteem Taniguchi has in his home country of France.

"Someone I know has a father who doesn't read French *bande dessinée* (BD), but when this son gave his father Taniguchi's manga as a present, the father now only reads his works. There is something different about Taniguchi's work - it gets read and appreciated in a different way than, say, Japanese kids love their *Dragon Ball* comics."

I also heard that actually much attention now from all over the world is being given to Taniguchi's and Tatsumi Yoshihiro's works as they are seen as graphic novels (*gurafigku noberu*), a new kind of international brand geared toward intellectual readers. This kind of acceptance differs greatly from the popularity seen in Japan mainly with that core group of hardcore teenage fans - and far, far different from the mania that *otaku* fans have for Japanese anime. What we are seeing in this group of French intellectuals is that they like the tranquil literary quality of the films of Ozu Yasujirō, as opposed to how Hollywood values Kurosawa. Taniguchi's popularity became established in France with his work *The Walking Man* (*Aruku hito*, 1990-1991 [originally printed in *Special-Issue Morning*]). The fact that you could read and understand this manga with his middle-aged male character just walking about -- without any lines of dialogue - - gave Taniguchi the reputation of being the "Ozu" of BD artists.

Taniguchi has won award after award in France at the Angoulême International Comics Festival, including his 2003 award for *A Distant Neighborhood* (*Haruka na machi e*), and in 2005 he won again for his *Summit of the Gods* (*Kamigami no itadaki*). And, in 2011, he was knighted a Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Elsewhere, in Spain, Italy, and other countries where BD is popular, he has picked up other awards and recognition. Even his *A Distant Neighborhood* (originally running in *Big Comic* in 1998) was adapted into a live-action film by a Belgian filmmaker. Without a doubt, Taniguchi stands out for being a manga artist more popular in Europe than in his home country of Japan.

In order to understand that concept, it is necessary to consider the differences between the Japanese comic market and that of Europe, but we lack the needed layers of research to properly do that. Even so, in Japan, from the point of view of either the readers or the media, it has become well understood how manga is broken down into various different genres - ranging from super-popular works like *Doraemon*, stories running in *Shōnen Jump*, etc., to a much larger and wider age-range but adult demographic, including adults (i.e., young men, *seinen*), and another geared toward for girls and women (*josei-muke manga*). The market can be further broken down into various branches depending upon the kind of story, so there are "sports manga" (*supootsu-manga*), "food manga" (*gurume-manga*), "school manga" (*gakuen-manga*), *shōnen* (boys') manga, *shōjo* (girls') manga, young(-men's) magazines (*yangu-shi*), and women's magazines (*josei-shi*). Japanese manga publishers are so big these days and their particular markets vary but people recognize that each market has some connection to and continuity with each other. There are manga for children, for teenagers, for adults; then, you also have the distinctions in gender. In other words, no one thinks it is weird to have two very different works like Taniguchi's *The Walking Man* and Toriyama's *Dragon Ball* existing in the same manga marketplace. This is actually the main characteristic of the comic market in Japan, but people do not realize that and they also do not know enough about what the publishing industry is like in foreign countries.

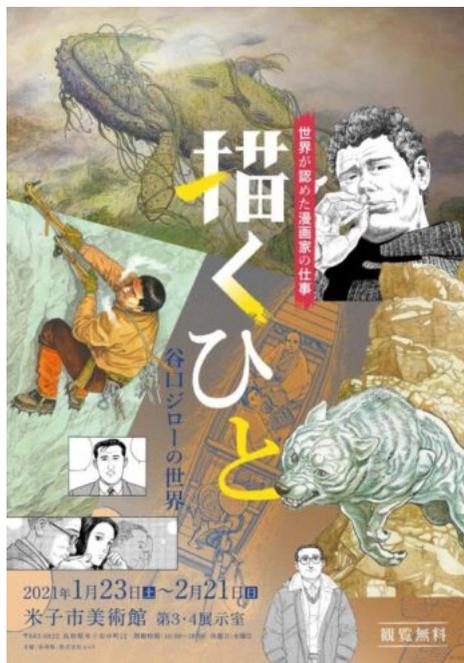
But at least when it comes to the comics industry and BD -- from what I've seen outside of Japan in various countries -- there is nothing like the diversity of genres like we what have in Japan. Outside of Japan, there are no sports comics; there are almost no girls' comics. (A long time ago there had been, but...) And when it comes to manga's international popularity, in fact it is just the popularity of TV anime, so the popularity of manga is just peripheral to those anime trends. It makes all the more sense then that even in the case of the popular *Captain Tsubasa* (*Kyaputen tsubasa*), the main reason why it got that much popularity is because of the success of its anime

adaptation. Also, because essentially there is no sort of “sports-genre” anime or manga in these foreign countries, it is very understandable that Japanese anime -- which also has a variety of genres -- is able to compete extraordinarily well in foreign markets where they have anime-specialty television channels geared toward young viewers. I regret to say that not enough research has been done on this in Japan yet, so it is hard to concretely report on these matters.

Therefore, according to Mr. Peeters, what differentiates Taniguchi’s position in manga scene is that his works have characters with a high degree of autonomy (*jiritsusei no takai*); they are geared toward thinking adults, like those written by Mr. Peeters, such as his *Les Cités obscures* - totally unlike the typical “Japanese manga” that are mostly aimed at and consumed by children (at least those going through puberty) that often get attached to the original manga only first because of the popularity of its anime. Perhaps it was from our cross-talk at the event, but I seem to recall that he said, “Taniguchi’s works are not BD (manga) that Japan can be proud of - they are a kind of BD that the whole world should be proud of.” (For Mr. Peeters, manga is just one category within the larger genre of BD.) In other words, what he is arguing is that we should give a special place to and a critical evaluation of Taniguchi’s works so that “as a BD (=manga) it comes to be valued as something that any thinking adult in the world should read.”

This criticism itself perhaps gives sure proof that there still exists a strong intellectual class in a place like France and how much sway it can have over France’s society. By the way, in Japan, the boundary between intellectuals and the masses has become blurred from a long time ago, so if there is any group that can stand in the middle ground between the two, it might be the subculture of hardcore fans (*otaku*) out there, but I think, in general, even when it comes to Taniguchi Jirō, no one would say he represents a special class of intellectual culture in Japan. Even as I say that, because the whole “graphic novel” culture keeps progressing, it might be possible to see Taniguchi’s manga earn their place in history as a kind of “world BD” or “world manga,” especially as his international reputation becomes more established.

Postwar manga in general was able to rise from pure entertainment into some higher art form only sometime in the late 1960s. Of course, it did that by acquiring a new kind of expression (best appreciated by its “maniac” fans) as “*gekiga* aimed at young men” (*seinen muke gekiga*), so that, by the 1970s, we see a divergence with a new kind of group of artists -- the so-called New Wave (*Nyū wēbu*) best represented by Ōtomo Katsuhiro -- and their magazines, so that even a big publisher like Shōgakukan began to corner the market with magazines like their *Big Comic* (*Biggu komikku*). *Big Comic* was a magazine that brought together the two camps: on one hand, there was the *Garō* group of Shirato [Sanpei], Mizuki [Shigeru], Umezu [Kazuo] and others from the rental *gekiga* market; on the other hand, there was the *COM* magazine stable of Tezuka [Osamu], Ishi[no]mori [Shōtarō], the Fujiko-artist team and so on, who best represented “story manga.” *Big Comic* would have them all. Next, from the creative editor-in-chief Konishi Yōnosuke came the concept of “creating for manga a new realm of the quasi-novel (a bridge between mass-media and pure literature novels [*taishū bungaku to jumbungaku no chūkan shōsetsu*]).” And once *Big* started down this road, they went on to fully realize that mission. And yet, many of such manga *seinen*, or manga young men, of that time (of which I was one) very much resisted this “commercialization” (*shōgyō-shugi*) move on our manga being made by those big publishing houses.



Promotional poster for *Taniguchi Jirō's World of Drawing*, a 2021 exhibition at the Yonago City Museum of Art in Tottori Prefecture.

In his later years, Taniguchi produced his *Raising a Dog* (*Inu o kau*, 1991), which is very much one of his daily-life, Ozu-like works. Satō Toshiakira, who was in charge of its production, tells the story of Konishi coming to visit him one day, and when Konishi bragged to Satō, “This one is *Big* itself, you know!” Konishi went so far to thank Satō, who was utterly befuddled by that kind of thanks, and had no way to respond to Konishi. So even after he was no longer the editor-in-chief of the magazine, Konishi still remained curious to know how *Big Comic* was doing. Satō said he was surprised because not only had he never known Konishi to talk like that, but also he had heard that Konishi often would get angry at the other editors-in-chief at *Big*, reprimanding them for publishing such work and even saying to them, “I don’t remember instructing you to make the magazine like that!”

Of Taniguchi’s *Raising a Dog*, Satō said, “It was the first time in a long time that I saw us creating a real work that could compete with the works of literature and art (*bungei*).”

It is often said that Konishi is a person who skips detailed explanations of things and relies on his intuition when it comes to conversations, and, that he can often blur his own actual opinions. Considering that, I can only imagine how happy Satō must have been when he got this kind of complement from Konishi. Taniguchi Jirō thus became a landmark in the world of manga, a signpost for the “quasi-novel” of manga, a signpost for “literary-arts (*bungei*)” manga.

This upper stratification, or this “artistification” (*bungei-ka*), of postwar manga properly begins in the late 1960s as manga “grows up” (*seinen-ka*) and increasingly grows toward an adult male audience at that time. I know I am repeating myself, but let me add to this by talking a bit about the postwar baby-boomer generation: they are the ones that take up this new kind of manga as a kind of ally in the “movements” (*undo*) of the youth culture at that time; they themselves participate in this new manga creation, which only further adds to its appeal for them; and then they soon become this new large-scale consuming market for such manga. The next generation (those born in the 1960s) will then pick up the torch, becoming the first “otaku” (geek) generation.

The manga that these young people read as young children then undergoes a kind of maturation as it become more “young-male” focused (*seinen-ka*). In the 1960s, as manga matures, it also begins to attract a broad appeal at the same time it shows both a great diversity of genres and new, original stories. It is here that we see the establishment of “artistic” manga such as that in *Big Comic* and others like it. Baby boomers experienced this whole thing. And this is the “postwar manga history” for them. Including myself, people who talk about manga theory in my generation [born in the 1950s] have very much promulgated this narrative. On the other

hand, after 2000, a new kind of manga critic and manga scholar has come forth to begin to criticize our bias, which comes from believing in such a linear development of manga history. Even so, it is safe to say that this image of manga's development is something shared by the previous generation.

Taniguchi Jirō was born in 1947. He most certainly was a postwar baby boomer and grew up in that era of youth culture and “artistification” (*bungei-ka*). In this sense, he has an ideal background as an artist. In *Blue Fighter (Ao no senshi*, written by Tsuchiya Garon [the aforementioned Karibu Mārei, also known as Marley Caribu] and published in *Big Comic Spirits* in 1980), when he drew the large amount of sweat flying off the protagonist's body, it was to show the speed of the character and the direction of his movement. But it is also Taniguchi's gesture of his war with “society” at that time. Perhaps one can say that his attitude had been touched by the zeitgeist of 1960s *gekiga*. Starting with “New” *Trouble Is My Business (Shin jikenya kagyō)* all the way through his *Times of Botchan (“Botchan” no jidai)*, Taniguchi has successfully sidestepped social concerns; even though he can be a clumsy kind of guy, he always brings to his work something quite elegant. He often deeply immerses himself in the idea of “time” (*jikan*) -- time that one can never go back to -- whether it is in the manga *My Father's Journal (Chichi no reki)*, published in 1994 in *Big Comic* or in *A Distant Neighborhood*. Then, in the much later *Furari* (published in 2011 in *Morning* magazine), Taniguchi shows how he can entirely revisit the time and space of the Edo period (1603-1868), understanding that distant place with a sweeping eye, taking in old Tokyo with a bird's-eye view.

It is in those works that Taniguchi developed his sense of values and perspective that can only be called “adult” (*otona*). In Japan, it has become harder for us to value this “adult” view. That is all the more reason to now take up a full re-evaluation of his oeuvre. We need to question the sense of values we have so we can begin to consider the values of “adult.”

* * *

Front page detail from a promotional poster for Taniguchi Jirō's World of Drawing: Featuring Tottori, a 2021 exhibition held at Birds' Gallery Tottori.

WRITTEN BY

Natsume Fusanosuke

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