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Unexpected Wins: Curating Comics and Teaching Manga from the Dark Horse Comics Collection

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Introduction

A familiar staple of entertainment for a wide variety of readers, the comic book has not always held a regular place in the academic library. Concerning themselves with collecting more traditional expressions of scholarship, libraries have not historically dedicated much of their acquisitions budgets to this area. Therefore, the comic book or graphic novel was largely relegated to someone’s personal collection and would more likely be found on the shelves of a comic book store than the shelves of a university library.

Fast-forward to the present day, where library collections more commonly provide access to comic books, either in regular story-arc paperbacks or deluxe full hardcover omnibuses. Some are privileged to host special archival collections for a new generation of readers as well as a new breed of academics: comics studies scholars. Portland State University (PSU) Library is the repository for Dark Horse Comics (DHC), housing all the physical content produced by America’s third-largest comics company.¹ The library is in a unique position to support teaching, learning, and research in the field of comics studies, related fields, and language instruction.
The following chapter explores the use of the PSU Library’s DHC collection to support teaching in the World Languages and Literatures department, considering the benefits and limitations of its print copies. In it, we discuss the example of teaching Japanese comics (manga), a successful branch for DHC, and consider how manga are important resources in foreign-language or world culture courses. The collection and cataloging of this material are of particular importance in the academic library, warranting substantial interdepartmental collaboration. This chapter also investigates the processing and technical services aspects of housing this material. We also include reflections from professionals associated with the archive as PSU enters its fifteenth year stewarding this repository.

Origins of Dark Horse Comics

The founder of Dark Horse Comics (DHC), Mike Richardson, graduated from Portland State University (PSU) in 1977. He went on to open his first comic book store in Bend, Oregon. Two years later, he opened a second store in Portland, Oregon, and, subsequently, five more stores in Oregon and Washington. From the success of his enterprises, he founded Dark Horse Comics in 1986. Neil Hankerson, another PSU alumnus, became executive vice president in 1987. Now Dark Horse is easily one of the top three comics companies in the United States, but in the beginning, they never “aim[ed] to become an industry giant,” stated the company’s original editor Randy Stradley in 1988. Even so, at that time, he further mused, since “we’re getting bigger pretty soon, Dark Horse isn’t going to be a fitting name for the company anymore... well, when we reach that point we’ll just enjoy the irony of it.”

The irony must have immediately worn off for Stradley and Richardson. DHC quickly and substantially evolved over the following decades to become the biggest comic-book company in the United States outside of Marvel and DC. Its success is due, in part, to the fact that artists and authors are able to retain copyright ownership of their work. This has been a fundamental goal of Richardson and Stradley at the company where they defined their books as either “company owned” or “creator owned.” The two publishers explained, in 1988, their very original business and creative vision: “When we say a company owned book, Dark Horse never has and never will take any creation by anyone else and become the owner of that creation as other companies do. Anything that ever is created by someone else, that person owns that property” (emphasis in the original). This fair and ethical business approach attracted very talented creators, and the result was that the company continued to grow and became home to some of the most well-known and successful comic titles in the industry, such as Sin City, Hellboy, and The Umbrella Academy, just to name a few.

Dark Horse and Manga

Not only did American artists enjoy the benefits of Dark Horse’s progressive business and creative model, but Japanese writers and artists also found a good home for their manga to
be produced in translation for English-speaking audiences. Dark Horse jumped into the fray of manga translations, starting as early as 1987, when Dark Horse licensed properties such as Tōhō Movie Studios' *Godzilla* for translation (illustrated by Iwata Kazuhiko) and the “original material” adaptation by DHC editor Randy Stradley and artist Steve Bissette (of *Swamp Thing* fame). As for Dark Horse's English adaptations, they marked “the high point to date in Godzilla's comic book history.” The next year, they published their first two regular manga series, the aforementioned Iwata *Godzilla* series (May 1988–March 1989), based on the film *Godzilla 1984* (Tōhō, 1984), and the then-popular *Outlanders*, written and drawn by Manabe Johji and translated by Dark Horse’s future regular manga localizer, Studio Proteus (headed by Toren Smith). At this time, Stradley and Richardson attempted to obtain rights to translate and publish the ground-breaking manga *Akira* by Ōtomo Katsuhiro as their first “Japanese series,” but Marvel (Epic) beat them to it. “*Outlanders* was our next choice, it’s a good story and good art,” they proudly said.

*Outlanders* was “an epic, over 1200 pages long, of interstellar warfare and romance,” and with it DHC had a sci-fi hit that soon made it impossible, according to Mile High Comics president and Dark Horse Comics collector Chuck Rozanski, or “almost nil,” to find back issues of this early manga series of Manabe, whose fans acclaimed him to be “one of the best, and *Outlanders* is considered to be a classic of the genre.” Despite the scarce availability of this 1980s hit, all copies of *Outlanders* can be discovered in the DHC archives at PSU. These early issues and trade paperbacks, with their experimental formats and production (e.g., colorizing the black-and-white pages, flopping the pages opposite from their right-to-left orientation, and publishing their manga comics in larger, forty-page issues), form a kind of sedimentary layer in the strata of early manga production and localization in the United States. DHC’s *Outlanders* shaped the early direction of manga’s impact on the American comics industry.

In the new millennium, Dark Horse was publishing some of the biggest names in manga, such as Tezuka Osamu (*Astro Boy*, *Lost World*, and *Next World*), Koike Kazuo, Kojima Gōseki (*Lone Wolf and Cub*) and Miura Kentarō (*Berserk*), just to name a few. Mike Richardson noted with pride that they published Masamune Shirow’s *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kōkaku kidō tai*), “one of the key manga series published by Dark Horse.” Although Viz Media, a subsidiary of Shōgakukan, has been by far the largest manga translation company in the United States, most if not all of Dark Horse’s titles, with their careful editorial choices and taste, have made a large impact on American readership, artist influence, and even curricular development of Japanese and Asian studies in university programs in the United States.

**Comics Studies at Portland State University**

Portland State University began offering a certificate in Comics Studies in January 2015 for post-baccalaureate students to “test the waters,” in the words of its director, Dr. Susan
Kirtley. In January 2017, it became an option for all PSU undergraduate and graduate students, which has been advantageous because both groups of students enjoy completing the certificate to enhance their degree portfolios. Even though Comics Studies at PSU is not a minor, it still has generated considerable interest from students. Dr. Kirtley states, “Our comics classes typically fill to capacity each quarter.” Professor Jon Holt, who teaches three manga courses within the Japanese program and for the certificate, attests that this has also been the case since he began teaching his first manga course in Summer 2014 despite his courses being offered back-to-back each quarter even in the same academic year (table 12.1). Students from all PSU departments take these courses and pick up the certificate whether they are graduate students in English or World Languages, undergraduates in Japanese, Art, English, and so on, or returning post-baccalaureate students.

The certificate program itself is administered through Dr. Kirtley and the English department. However, instructors from other areas teach courses that fulfill the requirements of the certificate, including, notably, the World Languages and Literatures department. Typically, those comics courses, such as on French bande dessinée or Japanese manga, cover the history and formal aspects of their culture’s genres. Art classes within the program have students creating and publishing their own mini-comics—with the help of their creator instructors, such as Shannon Wheeler (Too Much CoffeeMan). Other guest instructors who have taught the program’s courses include a wide range of creators from the “Portland comics community,” says Dr. Kirtley, including the award-winning writer David Walker (Luke Cage, Cyborg), the uber-ubiquitous Marvel/DC writer Brian Michael Bendis (Spider-Man, Avengers, Superman), comics historian Douglas Wolk (Reading Comics), and one of the industry’s legendary editors, Diana Schutz (Comico, Dark Horse). But that list is inexhaustive.

Despite the fact that Comics Studies at Portland State is not degree-granting, the PSU Library nevertheless collects to support this subject, and when the program began, it was assigned a library liaison to provide any needed library instruction and to coordinate

| Table 12.1. A snapshot of Holt's JPN manga enrollments indicates by example the steady interest in the Comics Studies program as it has grown since 2014. | 168 |
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collection development in this area. Primary collecting was related to scholarship about comics, with less concentration on actual comics themselves. But destiny had other plans, and the library continued to receive DHC material, continuing persistently, evolving into a large collection.

The Dark Horse in the Library

The PSU Library’s relationship with Dark Horse Comics began at a dinner honoring Mike Richardson in 2005. It was there that discussions began regarding PSU Library housing the complete collection of the publisher. A gift agreement was executed later in 2007, which outlined the library’s and the donor’s responsibilities. It acknowledged that the collection at the PSU Library will be a “lasting tribute to the work of Portland State University alumnus Michael Richardson and the company he founded, Dark Horse Comics, Inc.” It also goes on to acknowledge the importance of the comics format and the priority to make the works available to students, faculty, and researchers.

The gift agreement established that the library would receive copies of each item that DHC produces, and has ever produced, including back issues from the company’s founding in 1986, “resulting in a complete and preserved collection of the Dark Horse corpus in the Portland State University Library Special Collections” (quote from the gift agreement). The first copy of a work would go into the Library’s Special Collections. If a second copy was given, it would go to the circulating collection. Any third copies would go into “dark storage,” meaning it does not appear in the catalog and is not available for checkout or use. Dark storage items are effectively additional preservation copies. It became common practice for the donor to give items in triplicate so that each area was provided with a copy.

In addition to copies of individual comics, DHC, a very prolific publisher, creates compilation editions, omnibus collections, special editions, and foreign-language translations. Further, DHC releases a great deal of realia, often in the form of statuettes, figurines, and other paraphernalia that is housed in off-site library storage. Occasionally, the realia are used by Special Collections staff in exhibits. One notable example is a collection of cigarette lighters from Dark Horse, which were on display in one of the display cases outside of the Special Collections department.

Because the collection is ever-expanding, it requires consideration of space issues, both in storage and on library shelves. PSU Library places its circulating collection in a prominent location in an attractive area of the library (a concave windowed area at the front of the library on floors two to five). These areas face large study tables, where students can readily browse and enjoy the titles while visiting the library for reading or research. The collection is about to be moved to accommodate its growth to a high-traffic area on the third floor, next to a flexible study area. Because additional preservation copies exist in Special Collections, the circulating copies are allowed to be near the windows, and there is less concern regarding light damage to the circulating collection.
Anecdotal evidence based on conversations with library staff indicates that the circulating collection is well-used in-house, as it requires consistent upkeep and reshelving. One colleague notes that it is well-used because it is so accessible and visible, adding, the “amount of time it takes to maintain tells the story that it’s used a lot, usually every [study] table at the library has them out.”

Circulation statistics support the consistent use of the collection in recent years as well. When reviewing the library’s statistics back to 2014, when it migrated to the current integrated library system, it is clear that usage was relatively low in 2014 and 2015. But there was a dramatic 182 percent increase in 2016. Since then, circulation levels stayed relatively constant until the library’s temporary closure due to COVID-19 in March 2020. Individual checkouts of material in the Dark Horse Comics Collection have ranged from 3,200 to 3,500 annually since 2016. The phenomenon of increased and sustained usage does coincide with the launch of the Comics Studies Certificate, which would indicate that scholarship and study in the program attracted further interest in the DHC collection in the library (refer to table 12.1.).

The PSU Library is a member of the Orbis Cascade Alliance, a consortium of thirty-seven college and university libraries in the Pacific Northwest with whom we share a

Figure 12.1. A portion of the Dark Horse Comics and Manga Collection at Portland State University Library. (Photograph by Elsa Loftis, January 22, 2021, used with permission.)
catalog and make our collections available to each other through our Summit courier. Summit loans account for very little of the collection’s circulation, and Interlibrary Loans account for even fewer. Most of the collection’s use is from the local PSU community, which may be in part due to the fact that PSU is one of the few colleges and universities in the Pacific Northwest area with a Comics Studies program (with the notable exception of University of Oregon, which has a Comics Studies minor).

As mentioned, the first copy of any DHC title is prioritized to go to the library’s Special Collections Department for storage and preservation. According to staff, the copies in this department rarely get used, due to the fact that the circulating collection is so robust and the content is easy to find. However, there are occasions when a circulating copy is checked out, lost, or damaged, so the preservation copy is called upon. Cris Paschild, university archivist and head of Special Collections, points out that the work in this collection is very contemporary (being from 1986 to the present), so, at this time, the material has yet to be scarce in the same manner a more traditional item in a Special Collection might be, such as manuscripts or historical monographs. The housing of DHC in Special Collections is a preservation effort, but the material is widely available. That may change as time goes by.

In the spirit of this preservation effort, copies that go to Special Collections are processed differently than the titles in the circulating collection. Comics are bagged in mylar, and they do not get stamped, barcoded, or tattle taped. Non-comics are housed onsite in compact shelving, and comics are filed in cabinets. Each title has a bookmark with an accession number, spine label, and barcode, but the copy itself is untouched.


Behind the Scenes at the Library

The Dark Horse Collection started arriving at the library’s acquisitions and cataloging department in 2008. At that time, this department was housed outside of the main library in a nearby building. Since the gift included all publications, there was over two decades of material to receive, catalog, and process. Originally, there was a cataloging technician that was entirely devoted to the Dark Horse Collection. Often, the PSU Library was the first library to catalog these items; therefore, many of the bibliographic records in our system consisted of original cataloging. These records are greatly detailed, containing fields for creators beyond authors and illustrators but also penciler, cover illustrator, inkers, translators, engravers, and colorists. Gary Markham details the cataloging and processing decisions made in the earlier days of the agreement in his 2009 article. As he asserts, this was a true added value to the collection and to the field of comics studies in general.

Ultimately, the library determined it could not dedicate an entire staff member’s time to this work in perpetuity. However, cataloging procedures for this material remain very high in quality. Eventually, all catalogers on staff received training to keep up with the arrival of incoming Dark Horse comics, graphic novels, and manga material. The head of Cataloging and eAccess wrote up a detailed procedures document and provided an OCLC template to use when performing original cataloging. Often, the bibliographic data is not supplied on the verso of the title page like a traditional monograph, so the cataloger searches for the comic title on the publisher’s website for information about the title, including variant covers and genre headings. Bibliographic information is also found in the indicia, such as title, number, and date information, as opposed to the cover. When the material is English-language comics translated from Japanese and is printed to be read “back to front” in imitation of manga, a note is added in the 500 field of the MARC record that indicates it is to be read “manga-style, right-to-left.” 700 fields are included for the penciler, letterer, and cover artist.

Library of Congress call numbers were standardized to the entire collection. It was decided that the call number would always be PN6720 .D3, followed by a three-letter abbreviation for the language (such as ENG for English) followed by an accession number. These new numbers are kept track of in a shared file. Because the accession numbers refer to all material donated, it is of little use for the browsing/circulating collection. Thus, the circulating collection is arranged alphabetically by title name, not by LC call number. By and large, this is an effective practice and mirrors what browsing would look like in a comic book store. There are difficulties with this practice, however, and staff often need to make difficult calls when faced with variant titles or compilation works of a particular artist.

Additionally, concerning shelving in alphabetical order by title, it should be noted that the comics and graphic novels of the Dark Horse collection are predominantly in the English language. Foreign-language titles are grouped by language for additional ease of
discovery. PSU Library has received copies of translated titles in twenty-three languages, such as Czech, French, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

Fundamentally, the library choices made in call number assignments and shelving strategy reflects that the DHC is being treated as an independent corpus, warranting its own unique shelf space. Had the items from Dark Horse for the circulating collection been integrated into the main print collection, the call number issue would have been approached in a different way. Fortunately, library staff had the foresight to feature this as a collection of works that would stand alone in its own area of the library. Not only did this give cataloging and processing staff some relative freedom of choice when working with items in the collection, but it allows browsing by visitors to the library and, ultimately, the ability for these titles to leap off the library shelves and into the classroom.

Teaching Cultural Competency with Dark Horse Comics: Looking at the Left-Hand Flop

For manga to serve as a tool to promote and develop Japanese cultural competency, there are a number of factors that must be considered in choosing texts to use in the classroom. At Portland State University, we teach a wide range of classes on Japanese culture that fall within the main Japanese (JPN) program for majors and minors, the department’s general World Languages and Literatures (WLL) course offerings, and even classes within our institution’s general education requirement, University Studies (UNST) for juniors. As an instructor of all of these kinds of courses, Holt must carefully choose texts that can either open up fresh new understandings of Japanese culture or deepen an already existing knowledge base for Japanese majors or minors. Manga is the perfect tool for the inexperienced and experienced alike, but one must be aware of trends in manga localization and publishing to successfully deploy even the best of texts. Both Dark Horse’s available manga and their archive provide excellent examples to promote productive discussion in the classroom of small but important cultural differences.

One of the company’s most important translations of manga is Koike Kazuo and Kojima Göseki’s *Lone Wolf and Cub* (*Kozure ōkami*), which is an epic manga story of revenge set in Edo Period (1600–1868) Japan. Perhaps better known in the West to its Japanese aficionados for its film version, *Shogun Assassin* (1980), it tells in simple episodes the step-by-step process of how a former executioner, the honor-bound family man, Ōgami Ittō, carries out assassination jobs for hire while traveling with his toddler son, Daigorō, on these dangerous missions in order to accumulate enough wealth to finally avenge the death of his wife and dishonor to his family name by eradicating the evil ninja Yagyū clan.

Originally, First Comics published *Lone Wolf and Cub*’s translated adventures from 1987 to 1991 until the company went bankrupt. Dark Horse then acquired the rights to continue translating the entire series, carrying it past the initial one-third of First’s
translation to the full completion of the epic in English. Unlike First, Dark Horse did not publish its versions in single-issue forty-page comics but released it instead in bound, pocket-sized trade paperbacks, ultimately becoming twenty-eight volumes in length. (Current editions of the series by Dark Horse are in larger “omnibus” editions, which is part of the current trend in manga translations.) Originally written by Koike and drawn by veteran gekiga artist Kojima from 1972 to 1976 in Manga Akushon (Manga Action) weekly magazine, this series is one of the most visible and well-known manga series in both Western readership and scholarship.\(^{27}\) The most famous American acolyte of the Kojima’s visual storytelling style is the comics auteur Frank Miller (Marvel’s Daredevil, DC’s Ronin and The Dark Knight Returns, Dark Horse’s Sin City and 300), who also did the covers for many of the early First issues of the series (later recycled by Dark Horse for its trade paperbacks, too). Buoyed by Miller’s popularity in the American superhero market, Lone Wolf and Cub reached those hardcore audiences in the late 1980s: comic readers were hungry to directly know the inspiration for action and style that fueled fan-favorite Miller.

Translating and localizing manga for Western audiences, who read opposite to the Japanese right-to-left format, was an initial challenge for First and later Dark Horse. First Comics’ art director, Alex Wald, who assisted Dana Lewis in translation and adaptation, initially argued that the comic should be published in its original format of running from top right to bottom left, but management at First disagreed. Wald explains in a 1988 interview, “It was a [company] group decision to make them read left to right as all other American comics book do,” admitting that had First not done that, “it would make the action actually easier to follow, and it would give us less to do in production.” They ultimately “flopped over [a] page [and would] go back to an original unflopped panel once in a while,” Wald explained, because of pressure from their licensing company, who was “adamant about historical accuracy. It’s very important to them that none of the swordsmen, in particular, are left-handed…. Left-handed swordsmen do occur, but they are unusual enough that whole stories are written about them.”\(^{28}\) Wald thus explains First’s localization strategy being a compromise where images were “flopped” and re-sequenced so American readers could enjoy it in the typical left-to-right reading order. (Another reason why this was done was to prevent the comic from being put back on the shelf backward and thus losing its shelf appeal.) This decision to flop the comic set a precedent for manga translation for years and would not be undone until the late 1990s. In terms of visual flow and cultural understanding, it also greatly affects reader perception of both Japanese culture and the artistic spirit of the manga. Japanese, who typically are more right-handed than left-handed, suddenly became almost entirely left-handed—samurai and yakuza inexplicably (to the cultural cognoscenti) wielded their weapons with their left hands; kimono were folded opposite the traditional top order, which, for a Japanese, meant a person was dressed for their funeral instead of daily life.\(^{29}\) Moreover, and most importantly, the visual flow from panel to panel was interrupted and created discontinuity in the dramatic action.
An example of this bending of social norms can be seen in a comparison of the chapter 11 episode “Unfaithful Retainers,” where we see yakuza gamblers become left-handed and the visual cues of the left-to-right flow become bungled—until Dark Horse remedied some of the flopping from the original “Lawless Samurai” (1988) from First Comics’ version.

Observe in the three versions (original, First, then DHC) both the flow of the gambler’s dice rolls and how his rolls are observed by the interested parties. In this sequence, Kojima takes pains to have the flow of the reader’s perception match the flow of his gamblers’ point of view of the dice action. If the characters look left to the next panel to see where the dice fall, we (as Japanese readers) too must look left. (Or, if we are English readers, we would more naturally look right.) In Kojima’s original page (figure 12.3, on the left and meant to be read from top right to bottom left), the eye follows the direction...
of the Edo-period croupier’s toss of the dice. In the 1988 English translation done by First Comics (figure 12.4), the production unit not only inverts the page so it can be read in English-reading order (from top left to bottom right) but also flopped certain panels as part of their correction process, which disrupts the eye’s ability to follow the interested gamblers’ eyes on the dice. In Dark Horse’s 2000 revision (figure 12.5) to First’s English edition, they have maintained the left-to-right reading order—and thus a mirror image of the Japanese original—but they unflopped the unnecessary flopped panels so that the characters’ eyes on the dice match the flow and order of the reading eye.

In the American flopping of the page, small inconsistencies stand out: the gambler is left-handed, which is highly unlikely. The characters in both versions have their kimonos dressed with the right side over the left, which is the opposite of the standard order, but the First Comics’ version, in their attempt to preserve the integrity of the images, has it both ways: the croupier at times is left-over-right or right-over-left. In the Dark Horse version, living in a more consistently mirrored reality, all the Japanese characters consistently have their kimonos layered with a right-over-left dressing, which is how one would dress the dead for burials, but the reversed world here at least is consistent. These are among some very compelling reasons that the Dark Horse collection housed at the PSU Library is a great benefit to students of comics and culture.

Manga critic and scholar Fusanosuke Natsume points out in his early discovery of 1990s English translations of manga of an “opposite logic” in comic reading order, which often created discrepancies in localizations for non-Japanese markets. Other publishers—both in the United States and Europe—have struggled with how best to localize Japanese manga for their reading audience, and Dark Horse is no exception. Natsume felt that the reading flow, which is consistently localized (through reversal) in the Dark Horse edition, was something that was crucial to the mindset of its reader. Those cultural assumptions surface in the reading of the text and, Natsume argues, “When you think about it, these differences can be quite important” because the Japanese reader of manga assumes that the protagonist, as [he] grows more aware of the unfolding scene, will naturally always face left in all the panels. The protagonist does this because manga establishes a complicit agreement with his reader, knowing the reader will read to the left as it is the direction to move forward, but one will always move to the right either to go backward or to return. And that is also why manga are drawn with the protagonists generally facing left when they are going toward an event in the future. Natsume was thrilled to see the same kind of mentality described by Wassily Kandinsky in his theory of art, and he quotes Kandinsky from his Point and Line to Plane (1926): “The one to the ‘left’—going outside—is movement into the distance…. The one to the ‘right’—centered inwardly—is a movement toward home.”

Clearly, the Dark Horse edition restores a sense of “home” for the English reader as there is no disjunction in how the previous panel’s characters follow the action to the page’s final panel and exit before we all turn the page and pivot to the next scene in the drama. Ultimately, Natsume believes that the orientation of the page—for Japanese readers, but most likely for readers of English, too—involves a fundamental orientation
for either inner reality or outer, objective reality. As panels function to establish “order” or “sequence” to the story, character position clues us into either a personal world or a shared moment in time. Look again at Kojima’s original panels and notice the direction of the characters’ looks, which conforms to Natsume’s point: “When you have situations where the focus is on inner meaning, manga artists usually have the characters face right. So, when the characters deal with external reality, the artist tends to have them facing left.”³³ In our Japanese original, they face left—they face the results of the shared gamble—and the only right-facing scene is before the roll, where the gamblers are presumably in their own thoughts, hoping for and imagining a win. In our two English translations, only the Dark Horse version has the gamblers facing the natural (reverse) “home” of external reality for Western readers: the panel-exiting page on the bottom left. It is telling that in a 1988 interview Kojima and Koike gave to artist Frank Miller, in their final words, they praised First Comics and their effort to present their story in an English version, but Kojima parted by saying, “Oh, I love it—especially [your, Mr. Miller’s] cover art. I don’t like to read left to right, though.”³⁴ Ultimately, there are weaknesses to any localization of a cultural product—little details of a person’s mental-image “home” cannot be resituated without some sense of estrangement or displacement.

Putting aside the larger theoretical and practical considerations on panel flow and positioning in localization, the content of many Dark Horse Comics offers the teacher of Japanese literature and comics courses many opportunities for helping students recognize and learn authentic culture. Certainly, Lone Wolf and Cub, with the story’s extensive exploration of the look and world of Edo-period Japan (not to mention Dark Horse’s superb supplementary glossaries in each volume), offers a rich textbook for classroom discussions of governmental practices, developments in an early-modern form of capitalism, the social structure of families (of both elites and commoners), and even aspects of childhood life. It also offers nitty-gritty trivia about ninja and samurai weaponry. The author Koike was a superb researcher, and these stories, even with their flights of fancy as historical fiction, can greatly deepen students’ knowledge of Japanese history, often acting as a kind of Trojan horse to new learners of Japanese culture, transferring knowledge in the guise of thrilling entertainment.

Koike presents the realm of Culture, but he also includes daily-life practices of Japanese culture (lower-case “c”) that are often overshadowed by the comings and goings of its rulers, its generalissimos, and the like. Matthew B. Christensen and Paul J. Warnick argue for a new cultural-competency pedagogy that sees the promotion of “cultural authenticity” that can be effectively learned in the classroom, shifting away from the traditional in-class focus on big “C” “achievement culture” to “behavioral culture,” which a native-speaker “does on a daily basis to negotiate various events and situations in society.”³⁵ Manga, even used in the English classroom, can help do this, too. In “Risk and Potential: Establishing Critical Pedagogy in Japanese Popular Culture Courses,” authors Sally McLaren and Alwyn Spies warn that popular culture, like manga, has advantages in teaching a culture like Japan’s, but its instructors must be vigilant and rigorous in their application of manga in the classroom. After all, college students in these classes
should not and “cannot just sit around talking about their favorite manga characters of anime and get university credit for it.”

It is incumbent on instructors of these materials to inspire students to develop “knowledge of the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which these texts were created through clearly communicated learning outcomes.”

The “performed culture” approach, argued by Christensen and Warnick and used in conjunction with manga, can do just that. Even texts that seem, according to Iwabuchi, “chauvinistic,” like Dark Horse’s LW&C, can, if presented critically, nonetheless achieve such goals while avoiding pedagogical pitfalls.

In their fifth category of instructional pedagogies, McLaren and Spies argue that the “pop to prep” approach can positively impart much-needed intercultural communication skills to prepare students for future employment in the global economy. They are careful to question the “purported” value of such preparation or whether it can even be achieved in our classrooms, suggesting that, instead, pop culture classes fall back into the “typical kinds of ‘university learning,’” such as learning about culture through literature, history, or art… and do not on their own directly lead to the development of measurable intercultural skills.

However, one can equally make use of Christensen and Warnick’s “performed culture” approach in teaching the target culture as well as the target language. “The goal” of learning a language like Japanese, argues one of Christensen and Warnick’s informants, “is to have the Japanese [person] feel comfortable with the students when they speak in Japanese.”

One must not only know the linguistic code of the target language but also the “cultural code [that] includes many kinds of nonlinguistic communication, such as

**Figure 12.6.** The twins do a proper seeing off (mi-okuri) of Lone Wolf and Cub until they can see them no more. (Koike and Kojima, Lone Wolf and Cub, [Volume 4, 2000] 132.) © Dark Horse Comics.
Although their “performed culture” pedagogy is primarily envisioned for the language-learning classroom, it can also be used to prepare students for intercultural communication through discussion of cultural “performances” in English-language culture classes.

Authentic examples of everyday Japanese behavior can be taught through popular visual media; this is especially true for most manga. Although by no means exclusive to Japan, the “seeing off” (in Japanese, *mi-okuri*) of one’s guests or customers is vitally important in the country’s culture of respect. Perfect and authentic examples of it occur in any Koike manga. Even assassins Lone Wolf and Cub are entitled to basic expressions of respect by their grateful patrons. In the “Unfaithful Retainers” story, after helping two teens avenge the wronged death of their father, even on the turbulent waters of the river do the grateful children see off the father-and-son team until they vanish from sight downstream (figure 12.6). In the manga, this scene occupies the entire final page of the story in four wordless panels. Nothing is said, but the meaning is clear. Japanese readers know exactly the thanks and what respect the children feel. It is not important for Koike to say it with word balloons, but it is vital for Kojima to show it—to show the elegance of the twins’ actions—to the manga’s audience. Theirs is model behavior.

Such dedication to rendering these silent but poignant scenes, even through a full page, is something utterly natural and not uncommon in Japanese comics. When was the last time you saw Lois Lane patiently see off Superman as he flies off into the sky, thanking him for a job well done? Marvel these days never lets Spider-Man slow down enough to enjoy a wave of thanks from his fellow New Yorkers. Yet, the full treatment of such a scene in a manga like *LW&C* is the real justice for Japanese readers, for whom a thank you or a bow

of respect still holds much currency. Even in Dark Horse’s ultra-violent and hyper-sexualized manga *Lady Snowblood* (*Shura yuki-hime* by Koike and Kamimura), the long-suffering heroine Yuki is properly seen off by her new foster aunty as Yuki departs for the next leg of her journey (figure 12.7). Such slow, quiet, and underscored scenes are so common in manga because they reinforce “nonlinguistic” codes of behavior that Christensen and Warnick suggest, which, once learned and mastered, help even non-native speakers put the native speaker at ease. This is just one example of what manga learning can do to help foster a Japanese culture of respect, even in these English classrooms, for learners who may become potentially curious about communicating in a new language. Dark Horse’s manga translations, with their insightful notes or wordless scenes, like these examples, provide the educator with a full set of tools to encourage students to imagine how to “perform” culture and, perhaps, to inspire them to go on to learn the target language and practice it in real life. If either comes true, then manga like Dark Horse’s rich variety of creative works really can lead to unexpected wins in the classroom.

**Conclusion**

Portland State University Library seized the opportunity to steward a unique, vibrant, and ever-growing collection of Dark Horse Comics. As discussed above, there are both enormous opportunities and challenges that arise from the curation of this archive. PSU librarians creatively solved how to properly catalog items beyond trade paperbacks and hardcovers to include single-issue comics, graphic novels, manga, and omnibus editions. The sheer size of the DHC archive, which grows month to month due to the amazing publishing success of this Oregon company, is an issue for which PSU librarians will inevitably labor to maintain, even with limited resources in a post-COVID economy. PSU is proud to provide a home to this archive and is grateful to its generous alumni. The value of this collection not only for Comics Studies scholars but also for students at PSU is only now being recognized and discovered. As PSU’s Comics Studies Certificate program grows, we expect that the use of DHC comics for enjoyment, for classroom study, and for scholarship will continue to evolve. As evidenced in this writing, Dark Horse comics, particularly its manga, have much potential for Japanese culture instructors. Through the circulating collection, patrons at PSU and its Alliance partners have access to many groundbreaking DHC comics, including its first complete runs of translations of important manga like *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Lady Snowblood* (the latter available in eBook but out of print otherwise). The preservation effort in the Special Collections Department of the library will ensure the continued existence and availability to the full run of Dark Horse’s publications as far into the future as can be imagined. Much remains to be said and done with this vast resource contained on library shelves and its dark storage, in terms of its collection, its promotion, its cataloging, and its financial support because the edges of the Dark Horse Collection keep growing in both the well-lit and the dark spaces of PSU’s Millar Library. To quote Hellboy, one of DHC’s most famous characters: “How big could it be?” Big, Hellboy, big.
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**Notes**

5. "Overview," Dark Horse Comics.
6. On this point, DHC provided a clear alternative incentive to creators. Marvel and DC traditionally had unsaid work-for-hire arrangements with their creators, although that changed with the rise of fan-favorite artists in the 1980s. Sean Howe writes that DC “had beaten [Marvel] to the punch by introducing a royalty plan for comic creators: after 100,000 copies of a title were sold, DC’s policy stated, 4 percent of profits would be split between artist and writer. Marvel scrambled to match the terms, rolling out a similar announcement in the final days of 1981,” but, as Howe astutely points out, Marvel “was careful to avoid the word ‘royalty’” (Howe’s emphasis). Even so, today the situation for Marvel’s creators is clearly out of whack, given the disparity in royalties and credit its writers and artists should receive for creating characters and stories that fuel Disney/Marvel’s multi-billion-dollar film franchise. Instead of “work-for-hire,” the term now is rendered in Orwellian doublespeak as “equity”: “Comic creators are ‘work-for-hire,’ so the companies they work for owe them nothing beyond a flat fee and royalty payments. But Marvel and DC also incentivize popular creators to stay on with the promise of steady work and what they call ‘equity’: a tiny share of the profits, should a character they create or a storyline they write become fodder for films, shows, or merch.” Sean Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 246; Sam Thielman, “Marvel and DC face backlash over pay: ‘They sent a thank you note and $5,000—the movie made $1bn,’” *The Guardian* (August 9, 2021), accessed August 11, 2021, [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/09/marvel-and-dc-face-backlash-over-pay-they-sent-a-thank-you-note-and-5000-the-movie-made-1bn](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/09/marvel-and-dc-face-backlash-over-pay-they-sent-a-thank-you-note-and-5000-the-movie-made-1bn).
14. Dark Horse Comics was sold to Embracer Group, a European holding company in early 2022. Mike Richardson will continue to lead the company with existing management, and the purchase does not alter the PSU Library’s arrangement as the company’s repository. [https://embracer.com/release/](https://embracer.com/release/)
embracer-group-enters-into-an-agreement-to-acquire-dark-horse-and-forms-the-tenth-operative-group/.

15. Dr. Susan Kirtley (Professor of English and Director of Comics Studies) in discussion with the author, January 22, 2021.
17. Ibid.
18. Quoted from the gift agreement between Portland State University and Dark Horse Comics, Inc.
20. Conversations with several library staff and faculty reveal the complexity of housing the realia for the library. Due to very limited exhibition space in the library, the realia goes directly into storage. Library practice has been to not catalog this type of material, so it is of little utility for researchers, and is primarily being kept for posterity as was outlined in the original agreement. It is widely agreed upon that many of the items are interesting and appealing, and if the library were to add more exhibition space, perhaps the realia could be more prominently displayed.
23. Cris Paschild (associate dean, university archivist, and head of Special Collections) in conversation with the author, January 12, 2021.
38. Ibid., 34.
39. Ibid., 33.
40. Christensen Warnick, Performed Culture, 15.
41. Ibid., 32.
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