

Jaqueline Berndt

Manga, Comics and Japan: An Introduction

This issue of *Orientaliska Studier* collects 15 papers which were initially presented during the conference *Manga, Comics and Japan: Area Studies as Media Studies* held in September 2018. Hosted by Stockholm University's Department of Asian, Middle Eastern and Turkish Studies, the primary objective was to critically interrelate the study of Japan and the study of manga, i.e., graphic narratives, or comics, associated with Japan. Manga has attracted attention from the institution of Japanese studies since the beginning of the 21st century, when Japanese comics and related fan cultural practices went global and, a little later, Japanese authorities advanced nation-branding campaigns using manga as a vague umbrella term. But whereas Japanese studies is, by its institutional nature, inclined to foreground national aspects of a transnational media like manga, the majority of contributions to this issue approaches manga as a transcultural phenomenon, whether explicitly or implicitly.

This is not to say that references to Japan get left out. Admittedly, historiographic investigations, especially with regard to manga's evolution in 20th century Japan, are lacking. Yet, almost all papers address manga discourse, or to rephrase, the use of the word *manga* as a label, which according to the most often cited article falls into two main positions: on the one hand, manga as "style" (or as contributor Fusami Ogi puts it, "pure content"), creatively, and often ambiguously, adopted beyond Japan; and on the other hand, manga as "Made in Japan," a media that is shaped by the historically formed Japanese system of production, distribution and consumption (see Kacsuk, 2018) which warrants recognition and authenticity now, as contributor Ylva Lindberg demonstrates. To these two (often complementary) counterparts, contributor José Andrés Santiago Iglesias adds a third variant: movements or taste communities which promote certain notions of the mangaesque.

Many papers employ the term *mangaesque* (although not necessarily in relation to the Japanese counterparts *manga-teki*, *manga-rashii*, *manga-chikku*). Inside and outside of the Japanese language realm, the

notion of the mangaesque has been used mainly in two ways: on the one hand, to demarcate prototypical manga, be it motivated by denigration, advocacy, or fan-cultural gatekeepers' policing; on the other hand, to mark not just comics but a whole culture, often called *sabukaruchā* (sub-culture) in Japanese, and Japanese popular culture abroad.

In this issue, manga is, by and large, regarded less as Japanese culture, or Japanese popular culture, than as a popular media¹ which works above and beneath the national — a media of fan cultures and cross-cultural creations interrelating local needs with global formats; a tool of education and self-determined learning; a media that has promoted a bottom view and through it marginal social experiences in postwar Japan; a controversial media due to representations of violence and sexuality; a media of queering binary notions of gender, sex and sexuality and – in extension – cultural as well as ethnic identities; a genre-prone media which foregrounds aesthetic conventions, characterized by open rather than bounded structures ranging from narrative seriality to networked environments. The general image of the manga media, at least in Japan, has been dominated by magazine-based serialized narratives which target age- and genderspecific reader demographics, not rarely with stories that appear “escapist” to literary critics because these stories themselves recommend not so much interpreting as sharing among like-minded users. Due to its resting on such user communities (and also its fundamentally private mode of consumption), manga has been less connected to the public sphere of society at large than TV-based media. Consequently, its workings are often more of a micro-political kind, unless bigger forces intervene.

As a matter of fact, manga has been addressed academically more as a media rather than a form of sequential art or graphic novel; publication sites and formats, readership and “literacy,” gendered genres and “media mix” affinity have attracted more attention than narrative structures, drawing styles, or page compositions. Whereas the field of (non-manga related) comics studies is firmly rooted in English, or French, university departments and thus not only inclined to literary studies, narratology, and textual analysis, but also theory-savvy, manga studies (in both Japanese and English) has been informed by cultural studies and gender

¹ The word *media* is used here in the collective singular in line with art historian W.J.T. Mitchell and media theoretician Mark B.N. Hansen who go beyond technical mediums to include aesthetic forms and social contexts in equal measure (see Mitchel and Hansen, 2010).

studies, as well as a type of media research that differs from the traditional emphasis on mass communication, news journalism, and the national public sphere in favor of local and global communities that occupy spaces between society at large and the individual.

Approaching manga as media holds potential for Japanese studies, namely, to reconsider the traditional privileging of subject matter, or objects, according to which research and teaching have been mainly categorized so far: Someone who discusses manga – no matter how – is easily identified as belonging to the field of manga studies. This object orientation, that is to say, a focus on *what* is chosen to be studied rather than on *how* it is studied, manifests itself even in a recent article by a literary scholar who pioneered critical attention to Japanese popular culture.² By now he maintains that in Japanese studies courses “‘pop culture’ is largely only the highly capitalized, highly commodified parts of it. Anime and manga, easily imported to wherever we are, are deployed to stand in for the whole of pedagogic object ‘Japan’” (Treat, 2018, 427).

The methodological shift from objects (like manga) and areas (like Japan) to modes and mediations becomes vital whenever cross-departmental communication is aspired, as discrete objects and areas imply confines that may hamper mutual interest. Relatedly, the study of Japanese culture finds itself *vis-à-vis* two major options: tackling the challenge of how to feed Japan-related expertise into, for example, media studies, or practicing, in a defensive move, “strategic Orientalism,” as Toshio Miyake, one of the invited conference speakers, put it.

It goes without saying that it depends on the specific institutional conditions whether a shift of orientation is possible. Since the mid-1970s when the first professor in Japanology was appointed at Stockholm University, international demand towards research on Japanese culture has changed fundamentally, from the philological orientation of the past to a predominance of social science approaches. At Stockholm University the name “Japanology” was replaced by “Japanese Language and Culture” around 2015, and the Department of Oriental Languages, too, abandoned its old name, leaving it to this journal to reminisce about the tradition. Undergraduate research and teaching are still specialized in primary accordance with the respective language, for example, Japanese, while beyond language education and linguistics, the Japan-specific focus is dissolving in “Asian Languages and Culture.” Under such conditions, calls to join the recent third phase of Japanese culture research, which priori-

² See Treat, ed. (1996).

tizes media, circulations, platforms, and creative industries, may appear to be promoting the third step before the second. But the continued viability of the second step, that is, the social science-based commitment to area studies, is now being queried anyway.³ Rather than merely including new and allegedly topical objects (in the form of popular media),⁴ it is the methodological focus on mediation which manga studies may contribute to a future-oriented vision for Japanese, and Asian, studies. As most of our contributors evince, this includes attention to the transcultural, while situated, working of forms including the situatedness of theoretical concepts.

Not area, but space, is a recurring term in the contributions to this issue which shall be introduced briefly in order of appearance. From the perspective of media studies, Fabienne Darling-Wolf (Temple University, Philadelphia) problematizes widely shared assumptions about Japan's global resonances in a twofold way: spatially, by highlighting differences *within* the "West" demonstrating, for example, that Franco-Belgian comics, as a media culture, resemble manga more than American comics; and temporally, by revisiting the impact of 19th-century Japonisme in order to question the "amnesia vis-à-vis Japan's history as a culturally influential nation." This does not serve a claim of "origin," but rather a critique of the European, or specifically French, inclination to deny being influenced by a non-European culture.

The focus on individual authors and readers on the one hand, and national (publishing) cultures on the other which takes center stage in her paper is shifted by Karl Ian U. Cheng Chua (Ateneo de Manila University) in view of Southeast Asian research on Japanese popular culture and its difficulties to come to terms with the associated local fandoms and hybrid creations. Taking the works of Koichi Iwabuchi⁵ as his example, Cheng Chua demonstrates how landmark theories of an assumed universal validity are actually shaped by a focus on global centers, and a focus on the national scope at that, which implies not only the risk of

³ See the discussion by political scientist (and Japan specialist outside of institutional Japanese studies) Claudia Derichs (2015), and as a more recent symptom, the *Monumenta Nipponica 80th Anniversary Symposium* "Changing Perspectives on Area Studies," held at Sophia University, Tokyo, on October 6, 2018.

⁴ And the topicality of manga (rendered as it is in still, mute, and monochrome images) is increasingly questionable anyway.

⁵ The most influential publication has been the early monograph Iwabuchi (2002); it also appears in numerous contributions to this issue.

overlooking the diverse situatedness of local community-based practices, but also, on part of local research, an overemphasizing of national places that may easily be at the expense of considering transnational spaces. In a similar way, Ana Došen (Singidunum University, Belgrade) draws attention to the questioning of universal theories as advanced by the spatial turn in the humanities, and discusses possibilities of reading manga within area studies as “a form of spatial scholarship.” Looking at the character of Branko Vukelić, the Serbian collaborator of Richard Sorge, in Tezuka Osamu’s manga *Message to Adolf* and the readerly perspective from the Balkans as another periphery, she demonstrates how manga offers multi-spatialities which are conceptually accommodated best by the notion of “migrant” reading, i.e., acknowledging the state of being out of place when reading manga and doing manga studies.

Fusami Ogi (Chikushi Jogakuen University, Dazaifu) introduces meanings which the term manga has assumed in Japanese and English over the last two decades and points out misunderstandings. Similar to Cheng Chua she sees non-Japanese artists using manga style in a way that goes beyond the framework of the national (or “Made in Japan”), and she highlights the global potential of these hybrid productions. Like Ogi, Ylva Lindberg (Jönköping University) takes her departure from an analysis of the International Manga Awards, established by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2007, when she discusses non-Japanese artist-authors in their relation to the Japanese market. From the perspective of critical world literature studies, she investigates central and peripheral, or subordinate, spaces of the global manga field: Japan as the dominant one, and at the counterpole of productions which seek recognition by the center or bypass it, the Francophone and Anglophone spaces as well as the Swedish one as an example of less resources. The interrelation between global formats and local needs is specified by Swedish comics artist Lisa Medin in her contribution which looks back at what attracted artist-authors like her to the medium in the first place, namely, the infusion of magic into experiences of everyday life by means of Japanese as exotic elements in line with narratives that develop over long arcs, characters who invite empathy, the mix of humor and serious action, the intra- and paratextual presence of the author and the power of the reader to influence the continuation of series as well as the active involvement of female audiences.

Ananya Saha (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) introduces manga-style short stories published outside of Japan in the mid- to late 2000s, when printed manga in translation as well as original non-Japanese productions saw their peak. In terms of visual style and narrative

approach, these examples, which appear not to aspire to the commercial mainstream but rather to something like alternative comics, exemplify the strategies of the periphery towards the center introduced by Lindberg: stretching from apparent imitation and attempts at integration to actual bypassing. In a different way, Argentinian artist Berliac deviates from globally shared notions of what constitutes “manga proper.” José Andrés Santiago Iglesias (Universidad de Vigo) shows how Berliac’s conceptual *gaijin gekiga* narratives cleverly challenge the duality between transnationality and Japaneseness by distancing themselves from both Japan and contemporary manga as markers of identity. *Gekiga* is a form of Japanese comics that is highly appreciated by Euroamerican aficionados of the graphic novel, but is regarded as an outdated genre of graphic narratives, and not sufficiently mangaesque by contemporary manga fans. As a foreigner (*gaijin*), Berliac pays homage to the historical *gekiga* and adopts its form without any claim to Japanese culture. The fluid cultural identity promoted here bonds congenially with the fluidity of the comics medium.

The appearance of iconic manga characters from Japan in contemporary art is at the center of the contribution by gastón j. muñoz j. (The University of Chile). He demonstrates how a recent painting by Marco Arias uses citations from the global manga bestseller *Dragon Ball* to comment on Chile’s post-dictatorial society, the affective necessities of children under increasingly neoliberalist conditions that affect family life, but moreso persisting and renewed homophobic and racial stereotypes. Manga, or more precisely, elements which evoke manga, are interpreted here as an interface; a subcultural code of alterity which allows the artist to subvert both naturalized media tropes and fundamental social issues.

Lukas R.A. Wilde (University of Tübingen) approaches the “manga-ization” of Japan, that is, the abundance of manga pictoriality in everyday public spaces, through the example of character street signs (*hyōshiki*). Informed by theories of mediation and Japanese manga studies, he highlights the communicative function of such signs: Mangaesque forms evoke established schemata of comprehension, including manga-related institutions, practices and conventions, and by mediating between virtual actors (*kyara*) and viewers they facilitate the regulation of proper behavior in public spaces. Likewise theoretically inclined in a way that is exceptional in manga studies, but, against the backdrop of literary studies and aesthetics, interested in the agency of comics themselves rather than human interaction, Per Israelson (Stockholm University) discusses Itō Junji’s manga as horror comics. The concept of media ecology, with

respect to manga usually confined to industrial accounts or intermedial adaptations, is applied here to the horror genre and explored in regard to how this genre is not just narrated or interpreted but materially performed by individual comics in interaction with their mediatic environment. Conceiving genre as an “ecosystem of collaborative feedback,” which rests, among other things, on publication in magazines and a transmedia network of narratives, approximates crucial characteristics of contemporary manga without reference to Japan or even the word manga. In addition to the insightful close readings of Itō’s horror manga, Israelson’s contribution thus points to a way in which manga studies and comics studies could interact in the future.

With her paper on queer characters in Japanese manga and their employment in North American Japanese studies courses, Sharalyn Orbaugh (The University of British Columbia) provides a stimulating account of what manga pedagogy can be besides a “certain kind of reified popular culture studies” (Treat, 2018, 426). Similar to Israelson and other contributors, the emphasis is on close readings in order to specify *how* manga does things, instead of foregrounding interpretations of *what* manga narratives mean and how these meanings are grounded in Japanese culture and society. Rather than teaching Japan-related knowledge one-directionally by means of manga, students are involved in a dialogic relation which is aimed at analyzing texts, responses and the assumptions behind them, including stereotypes about Japan as well as gender and sexuality. In a similar attempt to undermine stereotypes about Japan, Patrick W. Galbraith (The University of Tokyo) advocates an ethics of encounter through the account of how he himself met a now forgotten creator of erotica who played a vital role in the shift from photo-realist, seriously pornographic *gekiga* to cute, round, and as such mangaesque, *lolicon* manga in the early 1980s. According to Galbraith, manga studies requires not just more field research but situated knowledge, resting on a respect for artists as real people who deserve being listened to, in order to challenge the binary of “them” and “us” in particular with respect to sexual representations.

Kazumi Nagaïke (Oita University) has been engaged in research of another manga genre that foregrounds sex, gender, and queering, i.e. boys’ love (BL). Initially targeted at heterosexual female readers, these representations of male-male couples have also attracted male fans (*fudansha*). In her contribution, Nagaïke describes their attraction and recapitulates how the notion of mobility in minority studies helped her realize that such fans are not a distinctly Japanese cultural phenomenon,

in other words, that specific places like Japan are less relevant to their community than the transnationally shared uneasiness concerning hegemonic masculinity which is mediated through BL. In contrast, Natalia Samutina (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow) suggests going beyond specialized fandoms, and acknowledging the importance of participatory cultures in a broad sense as agents who spread information, generate knowledge, and develop criticism, especially in national spaces like Russia where both resources and societal recognition of manga are lacking. In regard of *Made in Abyss*, Samutina highlights how these cultures undermine clichés about “disturbing productions from Japan”: by not shying away from controversial issues but generating discussion about them, and in order to facilitate such discussion, crossing borders on their own terms, not censoring sources, and providing access to different meanings. The specifically situated transcultural identification with Japan-derived fan practices accounted for here echoes Cheng Chua’s observations about fan activities in Southeast Asia which call into question established theories of the center, in this case, related to fandom studies modelled on Western Europe, North America, or Japan.

Before concluding, a word about transcription is in place. In principle, the romanization of Japanese words follows the revised Hepburn system. Japanese names are indicated in the Japanese order, that is, surname preceding first name without separation by comma, except in the references and in cases of publications in English which render the author’s name in the Western manner. Globally used Japanese terms (such as manga or otaku) are not italicized. However, authors who do not have a background in Japanese studies and are not in command of the Japanese language were free to employ the Western name order and to refrain from adding macrons to vowels.

I would like to acknowledge the conference funding by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) and The Japan Foundation as well as the Department of Culture and Aesthetics/Literature as a leading research area at Stockholm University. With regard to the organization of the conference I extend special thanks to Axel Thiel, Ida Kirkegaard, Anni Ström, Sofia Ström, Carolina Lindström, Mitsuyo Kuwano Lidén, Gunnar Jinmei Linder (all Stockholm University), and Watanabe Kazuya (Keio University, Tokyo). My thanks go further to all participants in the conference, both from the speaker’s desk and the floor, especially the presenters Yoshimi Shun’ya (The University of Tokyo), Fujimoto Yukari (Meiji University, Tokyo), and Toshio Miyake (Ca’ Foscari University of

Venice) who due to their work load were not able to contribute to this special issue.

References

- Derichs, Claudia. 2015. "Shifting Epistemologies in Area Studies: From Space to Scale." *Middle East - Topics & Arguments*, vol. 4 (May): 29-36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/meta.2015.4.2981> (last accessed: December 10, 2018).
- Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2002. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kacsuk, Zoltan. 2018. "Re-Examining the 'What is Manga' Problematic: The Tension and Interrelationship between the 'Style' Versus 'Made in Japan' Positions." *Arts* 7 (3): no pagination. <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/7/3/26> (last accessed: December 10, 2018).
- Mitchell, W.J.T., and Hansen, Mark B.N., eds. 2010. *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press [Kindle].
- Treat, John Whittier. 2018. "Japan is interesting: modern Japanese literary studies today." *Japan Forum*, 30 (3): 421-440. DOI: 10.1080/09555803.2018.1441171 (last accessed: December 10, 2018).
- Treat, John Whittier, ed. 1996. *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, Richmond: Curzon Press.