



## Core presentation

# Manga as an Engine of Global J-POP Culture, with Comments on its Future

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In March of 2010, I visited the Tokyo International Anime Fair at the giant facilities of the Tokyo Big Sight exhibition halls. It seemed to be a huge success, with over 130,000 people jammed into multiple halls over a four day period, crowding booths of anime production studios and merchandise companies. Given that this is primarily an industry-oriented event, with only two days for general fans, the attendance figures seemed to underscore the success of “Cool Japan”—of commercialized Japanese popular culture—not only in Japan, but around the world.

Yet there were subtle signs of some big changes. In a corner of one giant hall, on the wall of a relatively unnoticed booth, I saw charts illustrating an odd trend in Japanese anime in the United States. One graph showed attendance by fans at anime conventions around the United States increasing during a nearly ten year period up until 2007. Another showed declining revenues from anime in the same region, in the same period. Together, they reinforced what I had suspected for some time—

the seemingly paradoxical fact that while anime and manga fans may be increasing in the United States, business revenues are declining. In other words, Cool Japan may be a popular idea, but it is not likely to create the giant revenue stream that many people in Japan once hoped would off-set the declines in traditional manufacturing industries. More broadly, there is strong evidence to suggest that the recent boom in Japanese culture may have peaked, at least in North America.

How did manga and anime come to be so accepted? Japanese manga are based on the basic “grammar” of American comic books (sequential panels with word balloons that tell a story), and Japanese anime is also based on techniques pioneered in the United States. But starting in the 1950s for manga, and the ‘60s for Japanese animation, the Japanese variant of these quintessentially American art forms began to develop quite independently. With artists like Osamu Tezuka and others, the long-arc, quintessentially Japanese “story manga” became the norm. And when manga styles were increasingly absorbed into

TV animation in Japan, both manga and anime developed a synergistic relationship, so that publishing and broadcasting industries jointly prospered and came to depend upon each other. These new Japanese styles allowed a richer development of both stories and characters, and resulted in sophisticated stories that increasingly appealed adults as well as children.

When young Americans encountered these new Japanese styles in the 1980s, many of them were understandably fascinated. And what began as a tiny cadre of dedicated fans therefore quickly began to grow. With very little help from Japanese rights-holders, these fans began to proselytize the merits of Japanese manga and anime to others around them, to in effect advertise them



Photo 1: Tezuka (left) and I

for free. In 1978, I visited members of the Cartoon Fantasy Organization in Los Angeles—one of the first groups of American fans of Japanese anime—with Osamu Tezuka (photo 1). It was a tiny gathering of people, many of whom were still watching anime on sixteen millimeter film. In 1980, Tezuka accompanied other Japanese artists such as Monkey Punch, Yumiko Igarashi, and Go Nagai, to the San Diego Comics Convention. Tezuka had name recognition because of the *Astro Boy* series of the 1960s, but American anime and manga fans attending the convention were few in number. I think it is also fair to say that the Japanese artists were pleasantly surprised to see that there were any fans of manga and anime at all.

One of the most striking things about early American fans of manga and anime was their dedication. Often they were intelligent, nerdy misfits—the sort who would become known later in Japan as “otaku.” They were willing to travel vast distances to meet other fans at conventions and to exchange information, and they welcomed the chance to convert others to their cause and to share information. I attended one of the first anime conventions in America, called “AnimeCon ‘91,” in San Jose, California, in 1991, and was amazed to see nearly 2,000 fans there. Some had come all the way from France, England, and Australia. Two French Canadians drove nearly three thousand miles from Montreal.

By around 2000, Japanese anime and manga had started to become truly mainstream in American society. Hugely popular works such as *Pokemon* and *Dragon Ball Z*, in manga and anime format, had captured the hearts of younger fans. The *Sailor Moon* anime series had been broadcast on television (including on the popular Cartoon Network), and published in translation by an American publisher manga publisher. Its popularity

had helped expand the community of fans beyond young males, to females. And all fans were being exposed to an increasingly broad array of works from Japan, in both manga and anime formats.

The media in Japan were quick to take note of the growing appeal of Japanese popular culture in North America. Japanese anime and manga had long been popular in Europe and Southeast Asia, but to succeed in the land where both comics and animation had originally come from was understandably big news, and it understandably evoked feelings of national pride, in addition to surprise. Douglas McGray's article on "Japan's Gross National Cool" in the May/June, 2002, issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine, in which he asserted that Japan was inventing a new type of "soft power" with its success in exporting its popular culture, seemed to give an American imprimatur to these feelings.

But then came the recession of 2008 and 2009. What had seemed to be a steady and steep growth vector in the manga and anime business in the United States underwent a rapid change in trajectory. According to an April 18, 2010 post on the website, ICV2, which tracks pop culture and comics industry trends in North America, manga sales in the U.S. and Canada suffered through "a second straight year of double digit declines in 2009." Sales fell 20% from an estimated \$175 million in 2008 to \$140 million in 2009. And this followed a 17% decline from manga's peak in 2007 when sales reached \$210 million. In all, this means that sales of manga in North America experienced a jaw-dropping decrease of between 30 and 40% from 2007 to 2009.<sup>1</sup>

This same report came on top of previous announce-

ments between 2008 and 2010 from the largest manga publishers in America, of huge layoffs and reductions in their publishing lines. Tokyopop slashed its workforce by over 30%, and Viz Media cut 40% of its staff. Sales of anime DVDs, moreover, had already been in a slide for several years. And during that same period numerous companies that had specialized in either manga or anime had gone out of business or cancelled titles, and the amount of anime being broadcast on TV had dropped precipitously.

Reflecting on the problems, here are some possible answers, in no particular order.

The manga and the anime markets in the United States cannot be viewed in isolation. They are deeply affected by the state of the industry in Japan, and in recent years Japan's domestic industry has suffered from declining sales, and complaints about a lack of hit works and over-commercialism. And there are also many complaints in Japan that young people's focus has shifted to other forms of entertainment, such as cel phones, games, and the Web. It is naive to think that American fans would not be affected by these same trends.

There was a bubble in the market. As with every boom, there is usually a bust. And having started from such a low point (essentially zero until around the 1986 for manga), in North America the manga and anime markets for years grew exponentially in sales and revenues. That they hit a wall should surprise no one, but it is human nature to expect a good thing to continue forever. It's also probably fair to say that a lot of the publicity about "Cool Japan"—in both North America and in Japan—resulted from an initial astonishment. Older Americans

<sup>1</sup> "A Second Bad Year for Manga," ICV2. Com, 16 April 2010. <http://www.icv2.com/articles/news/17292.html> (As of 30 August 2010).

have tended to view American popular culture—whether music or movies or animation or comics—as something with infinite universal appeal around the globe; the idea that a foreign popular culture, and especially the popular culture from a place as different as Japan, could have any appeal among youth, came as a big surprise. Conversely, in Japan many older people have also been amazed because they thought of America as the source of both comics and animation (アニメやマンガの本国) and also because they assumed the same thing as older Americans—that what seemed to be rather in-grown Japanese popular culture was essentially not exportable. In other words, on both sides of the Pacific, expectations for the success of manga and anime in the American market were so low to begin that it didn't take much success to amaze anyone. This amazement also helped distort the reality that—even at their peak—in America both manga and anime have never been more than niche industries, with nothing approaching the scale they enjoy in Japan.

The economic recession, which probably began at the end of 2007, clearly has had a major impact. With an unemployment rate hovering between 9.4 and 10 percent in 2008 and 2009, Americans were forced to cut back on discretionary spending. And expenditures on entertainment like manga and anime are fairly easy to forgo, especially when other essential payments, such as rent and food, cannot be reduced. Among young people, who are the largest consumers of manga and anime, this is particularly true, and in North America, unlike Japan, neither manga nor anime DVDs have ever been particularly cheap. Licensing costs are high, and so are the costs of localization—of translation, editing, printing, publishing, subtitling or dubbing, and marketing. For a fan to acquire all eighteen volumes of Naoki Urasawa's popular Monster mystery/thriller manga at list price, for

example, requires shelling out over \$180.00 dollars. Translated into yen, this may not seem like much for Japanese readers, but for a young person in today's America it is a huge sum. And the same thing is true for anime DVDs.

As more industry people in Japan learned of the seeming "success" of manga and anime in the United States, their expectations for revenues outpaced reality, and for American publishers and localizers the cost of acquiring properties became higher and higher. Statistics for acquisition costs are generally tightly held, but I frequently hear such complaints from representatives of U.S.-based companies. For smaller U.S. companies publishing manga, moreover, the titles available for localization have over the years become more limited, partly because larger Japanese manga publishers can effectively control the licensing of their most popular and profitable anime-linked manga. Shogakukan and Shueisha manga titles, such as *Naruto*, *Dragon Ball Z*, *Bleach*, or *One Piece* are now almost always published in North America by Viz Media, their San Francisco-based subsidiary. Kodansha used to license many of the popular titles it controlled, such as *Sailor Moon*, to Tokyopop, one of the largest and most pioneering North American manga publishers, but in 2009 it decided to publish mainly under its own imprint in America. The same move deprived Dark Horse Comics of *Ghost in the Shell*, which had long been one of its better-selling titles.

In North America, feature films can greatly help drive the popularity of comics-related properties. In recent years, there have been several attempts by Hollywood studios to capitalize on the anime/manga boom. But despite great expectations, these anime/manga based films have largely been failures. *Speed Racer*, *Dragon Ball*, and *Astro Boy* were all high-profile flops that have unfortunately made

American studios increasingly leery of touching Japanese properties, and—along with a reduction of anime programs on television—on their own probably contributed to a cooling of the “Cool Japan” fever.

I may be in a minority in my opinion, but I believe that the manga market in North America has also suffered from confusion among the public about what “manga” really are. In Japan, “manga” and “anime” are generic terms for what Americans loosely call comics (or cartoons) and animation. In North America, however, both “manga” and “anime” have until recently referred to comics and animation from Japan. But what are Japanese comics and animation? True fans can extol the merits of both for hours, and discuss how they prefer the Japanese-style story-lines and characters over American-style works. They can also explain how they like the Japanese visual style. But to many Americans manga and anime are still defined only by a visual style; by big eyes, big bosoms, very young-looking female characters, and a cute-quality not native to America. And this visual style is easily imitated, with the result that in my neighborhood comics shop there are, in addition to shelves of translated Japanese manga, sections of translated Chinese *manhua*, and Korean *mahnwa*, both of which are referred to by most people simply as “manga.” Making matters even more complicated, there are also now what are called OEL manga, or “Original English Language” manga, created by English native-speakers in a Japanese style. Anime has not yet become so confusingly diversified, but with the efforts that both China and Korea are currently putting into their own, domestic industries, it soon will be.

Another source of confusion in the manga market in North America revolves around publishing style. In the late 1980s, when commercial publishing of translated

manga began, most publishers felt that American audiences would not accept anything other than a standard American comic book format. What were originally paperback volumes in Japan were therefore broken up into short, American comic book, or magazine-style, lengths of thirty or forty pages. Pages were also flopped, creating a mirror image of the original Japanese, so that stories could be read from left-to-right, just as English readers normally expect. Lettering of speech inside word balloons (and sound effects outside) was hand-done by professional American comic book letterers. And in the beginning, some stories (such as Otomo Katsuhiro’s wildly popular *Akira*, issued under the Epic Comics imprint of Marvel Comics in 1988) were even colorized, just like mainstream American superhero comic books.

Around 2000, as the market for manga grew, this trend began to reverse. Instead of trying to make Japanese manga look more and more like American comic books, there was more pressure to keep them in a more Japanese format. This pressure came from three distinct sources, and created an ultimately irresistible force in the industry. First, artists in Japan, many of whom had become rich and powerful, were increasingly able to dictate terms to publishers, and they did not want their art work to be flopped. They often had legitimate reasons. When a manga about baseball is flopped, for example, first base suddenly turns into third base, throwing the entire story into confusion. And flopping pages makes kimono folds reversed and samurai swordsmen suddenly all left-handed. But often artists’ fears were exaggerated, because most Americans live in a world where kimono-folding or left-handedness is not at all an issue, and they usually never notice such things. Second, for North American publishers of manga, eliminating the flopping of pages (and the tailoring of speech balloons and sound-effects for American readers), helped reduce

costs, which were already high because of acquisition rights and translation. Third, as anime and manga became more and more popular in North America, more and more hard core fans, or *otaku*, wanted to read manga in as original a format as possible (without, of course, having to learn Japanese). When Tokyopop, in 2002, began issuing un-flopped manga and labeling them “Authentic Manga,” such fans were overjoyed. To the joy and surprise of the industry, there was a market for low-cost manga that required little tailoring for American audiences, beyond the simple act of translation.

The result, however, has been confusion in the marketplace today. With a few notable exceptions, such as the more literary works of Osamu Tezuka and artists, most popular manga published in North America today are no longer flopped. On the contrary, publishers increasingly cater to the ultra-otaku, and make as little alteration to the original manga as possible. Pages are not flopped, sound effects are not translated, and the English used in translation has started to become a bastardized English, which retains as many of the original Japanese terms as possible. Japanese honorifics, such as “*onii-san*,” or “*tono-sama*” are left in the original. And this last trend has also infected the translation process of anime, as well. When Hayao Miyazaki’s *Ponyo* animation was released in North America in 2009, the school teacher was referred to as “*sensei*,” even in the English dialog.

The problem with this trend is that it alienates people who have little knowledge of Japan or manga and anime. Average Americans—who have to be targeted if manga and comics are ever going to become the mass-media they are in Japan—will never read manga “back-

wards.” Nor are they ever going to accept the idea that characters in a story should be addressed with Japanese honorifics. Even more confusing, as mentioned before, not all manga are presented in the Japanese right-to-left format. Moreover, the increasingly popular Korean *mah-nwa* are always published in left-to-right format because Korean, like English, is a left-to-right language.

As manga and anime have become more mainstream, it should not be surprising that they also have faced more criticism in America. In the early days, criticism was often leveled at fans, who were regarded as a tad weird, or immature, but there was little scrutiny given to what was actually being read or viewed. Today, both manga and anime are far more visible in society. The former are now sold at not only comic specialty shops, but in major bookstore chains, and on the internet, and they are increasingly available in public libraries. Anime works, similarly, are widely available in DVD at rental shops, public libraries, and Internet stores, and they can be downloaded legally or illegally from the internet. Even if someone does not like manga or anime, they usually at least know someone else who does.

One result is that complaints about both manga and anime have developed a more serious edge. On March 24 of 2010, a state representative in New Hampshire inflamed the American manga and anime fan community by stating on his Facebook account that, “anime is a prime example of why two nukes just wasn’t enough...” He may have written his comment as a type of black humor, not intending it to be widely read, but the reaction was strong enough that he soon issued a public apology and denied that it was his true opinion.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “New Hampshire Legislator Apologizes for Anime Comment,” *Anime News Network*, 27 March, 2010. <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2010-03-27/new-hampshire-legislator-apologizes-for-anime-comment> (as of 30 August 2010)

In July of the same year, a Florida woman, who founded an organization called “Protect Our Children,” also generated negative publicity when she complained to the local city council that her son had “lost his mind” after reading some more mature manga borrowed from a local public library, and that he was in “home for extensive therapy.” It seemed laughable, but she had earlier circulated a petition with 226 signatures protesting the availability of manga in the library and asking for their banning.<sup>3</sup>

The Internet and the World Wide Web are agnostic technologies that transmit any information that can be digitized, and as such they can be a force for both good and evil, at the same time. And therein lies another problem for manga and anime that manifested first outside of Japan, in countries such as the United States and China, where the World Wide Web is more heavily used by highly computer-savvy manga and anime fans. The same technologies which have helped create “Cool Japan” are also helping to undermine it, by facilitating not only a diffusion of questionable material, but also digital piracy.

The manga and anime industries are particularly susceptible to the same forces of change that have affected other contents industries. Japan’s manga and anime businesses have also been very conservative in its adoption of new technologies and business models, and sheltered by the size of Japan’s domestic market, so I anticipate they will also face extra large challenges in adapting to the new digital world. Major disruptions are likely to continue to occur in the current distribution and production system until new strategies are developed for a new

age. Among the challenges for Japanese anime are stiff competition from Korea and China and the United States, and digital downloads. Manga faces the same challenges, but also an entirely new, and different one.

Manga, and comics in general, are an art form that has until now been developed entirely on paper. Even more than ordinary books, comic book layouts and designs are dependent on the concept of pages, and pages are a result of using paper. As comics and manga transition to a digital format, and are increasingly read on e-readers such as the iPad or Kindle, there will be no reason to retain the original paper-based format. Artists will compete to add music, and movement, and may eventually create something of a hybrid between animation and comics. In other words, manga and comics as we know them may soon transform into something entirely different, and entirely new.

In conclusion, I would like to reassure you that I’m not going to finish with an end-of-the-world scenario. I do believe in Japanese pop culture. I believe that through the power of pop culture, something new will surely arise. It may come from the world of magazines, or from somewhere else. In either case, it will be a third wave of Japanese popular culture, following the Japonisme of the 19th century, and the manga/anime boom of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Osamu Tezuka wrote the foreword to my first manga book in 1983, and in re-reading it, I think he had amazing foresight. Manga may be the engine of Japanese popular culture today, and the wellspring of creativity from which anime springs. But Tezuka said, first, that

<sup>3</sup> “Crestview mom targets manga; calls it ‘shocking’”, *Crestview News Bulletin*, 2 July 2010, <http://www.crestviewbulletin.com/news/crestview-10478-genre-raised.html> (As of 30 August 2010)



*Photo 2: I am the third person from the left on the back row.*

Japanese anime have opened the door for manga overseas, where printed materials have in the past failed. Anime, rich in international potential because of its visual nature, has been a true goodwill ambassador, making friends for Japan around the world, and opening the doors for manga. And this has been the case, not only in America and other Western nations, but the Middle East and Africa, South America, Southeast Asia, and even China. But Tezuka also wrote that manga culture and the circumstances of manga culture will change with the times. I think that is exactly what is happening.

So I shall not end on a pessimistic note. I believe in Japan and its people. I have hope in the younger generation. So to all the younger members in the audience, I hope you will go out there and do your best to create

something new, which will amaze the world again. This is your chance. We are counting on you.

In conclusion, if anyone is interested, I have a website ([www.jai2.com](http://www.jai2.com)) and I'm also on Twitter as well, at [@fschodt](https://twitter.com/fschodt), so feel to take a look. Also, I also have a strong personal connection with Okinawa, and many fond memories of the island. As a result, I was not only delighted to receive the invitation to speak here by the Japan Society for Intercultural Studies, but also overjoyed to be able to see the Okinawa again. Many decades ago, I had a summer job here, doing construction work on the Naha Bypass (photo 2). I don't know if the highway is still used very much, or even if it still exists, but I have heard that after heavy rains the water sometimes failed to drain properly from the road surface. If true, I apologize, because I may have had something to do with it.

Thank you for listening.

**Note:**

The lecture was performed in Japanese. This rendition of the talk primarily based on the original English text contributed to *Hitotsubashi Business Review* 2010 winter, vol. 58 no. 3.