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Cultural Studies on the International Manga Museum

Kaichiro MORIKAWA

Associate Professor, Meiji University

Meiji University has started preparing a multi-archive facility for manga, anime, and video games, tentatively named the Tokyo International Manga Library, to be completed in 2014. The Yoshihiro Yonezawa Memorial Library, a forerunning module library specializing in manga and subculture, was opened in October of 2009. In this paper I would like bring into focus the relationship between manga, the library, the university, and government from the perspective of a writer who has been involved in this project.

First, I'd like to give a broad overview of the relationship between these four entities. In recent years, manga and anime have occupied a major share of the Japanese culture exported overseas, and even have started to receive influential prizes. In response, the government has labeled this as the promising "Content Industry," and several universities have started to make it the object of education and research. Among such universities, those establishing manga libraries have started to appear. This can be seen at Kyoto Seika University, which has a Faculty of Manga and has established the "Kyoto International Manga Museum".

However, this trend exhibits various contradictions.

For example, the name "university manga library" brings with it a sense of malaise, whether we like it or not. This malaise shares fundamentals with phrases repeated in the opposition party's criticism of the Aso administration's National Comprehensive Media Arts Center project: "Anime Palace" or "National Manga Café." What exactly is this ?

In the first place, the teaching of manga at university in itself is not above suspicion. Older people are especially likely to hold the opinion that manga is not something worthy of university study. Due to the fact that manga have been considered to be of lower rank than even general popular culture, one can say that this is a natural reaction.

Conversely, it is also not always true that manga artists and manga fans themselves are happy that manga is being taught in universities. While some welcome this development, we also often hear criticisms that a university education in manga doesn't necessarily make a good manga artist, and that the vitality of this subculture will be lost through the authoritarianism of academia.

These seemingly differing skepticisms both emphasize the point that universities hold a type of authority,

and in this respect share a common belief; manga and anime are not compatible with the authoritarian nature of universities. This really sums up our feeling of malaise.

So, how are universities basing this transition of manga and anime into a formal study? I collected the following from the web sites of universities, and their information for prospective students.

“Evaluation of domestic animated film expression and characteristics from an international perspective.” (Tokyo University of the Arts, Department of Animation)

“Now highly praised around the world, we can now start truly Japanese projects in manga and anime.” (Kyoto Seika University, Faculty of Manga)

“Manga is the new international language.” (Nagoya Zokei University of Art and Design, Crafts Course, Manga Class)

“Make a science of ‘Cool Japan’? Japanese Culture as the focus of world attention?” (Meiji University, School of Global Japanese Studies)

What rises to attention from these is the framework of “Japan” and “the world,” and the fact that the manga of “our country” holds “international” recognition. These are basically the same keywords introduced by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, and used in promotion by the government. If we highlight the fact that the government is in control of permission of universities to start new departments, we can see that an aspect of the transition of manga and anime into formal study is tinged with national policy.

The university system in Japan was originally transplanted from the West in order to construct a truly Japanese system in opposition to Western influence in a time of overwhelming external pressure after Perry’s arrival in the Meiji Period. The system of five departments (law,

medicine, engineering, literature, and science), degrees, and professorships is basically a copy of universities in Europe and America, in particular Germany. The custom of calling classes of limited enrollment “zemi” is evidence of these roots.

The previously imperial universities are training facilities for the bureaucracy in a centralized nationalist system, while other universities crank out resources for the corporate system in an effort to divide the country into the two classes of white collar workers and manual labor working in family-owned businesses. The corporate system has made the perspective on life of “Study hard, enter a good university, enter a good company, and make your hometown proud,” the norm all throughout the country. Both are national policies enacted by the government in utilizing foreign influence under the banner of joining Western industrial economy. As a result, while Japan has accomplished unprecedented economic growth and become a power in industrial technology, the process has dismantled the cooperative systems and family structures of the different regions and lost remnants of history in our city streets – the sudden influx of Western culture and lifestyle has driven previous traditions to extinction. Universities have functioned as mechanisms to facilitate this modernization.

Along with universities, libraries are also facilities that have a similar historical context. The Japanese word for library itself, *toshokan*, is a Chinese character construction made as a translation of the English word “library,” and is said to have been first used for the University of Tokyo Faculty of Law Library, built in the tenth year of the Meiji Period. Needless to say, starting with the concept of “nation,” the various government facilities and the institutions of justice, legislation, and government themselves are prime apparatuses of this sort.

In other words, of the four aspects of manga, li-

braries, universities, and government share roots of having come about as a result of foreign influence. This is not something of the Meiji Period, but rather is still deeply embedded today. The change in administration of this past August, an attempt to recreate the matured British two-party system in Japan, shows that nothing has changed at all since the Meiji Period. This deep-rooted nature shows its true self with the tendency to invoke “world acclaim” when attempting to incorporate manga and anime into an establishment. In final analysis, such institutions are aiming to bring in not simply manga and anime, but rather “world acclaimed manga and anime.” What we need to beware of here is that such usage is actually exerting strong foreign influence.

If we unfurl Japan’s history even further in the past, we can see that Japan has been repeating time and again the phenomenon of changes in culture due to foreign influence. Even the country called “Japan” itself was formed due to the sudden pressure to form a country caused by expansion of the T’ang Dynasty in the second half of the seventh century. In this age, technology imported through the Korean Peninsula enabled the building of defense installments in each region of Western Japan, and over the course of the eighth century Todaiji, the Great Buddha, and Kokubunji were built through yet another import, the religion of Buddhism, in order to stabilize the country. During that time, the technology, institutions, culture and Buddhism continued to be transplanted through envoys. The center of the country changed foreign pressure into political power, and the country of Japan came into existence through utilization of foreign culture as authority.

However, in the ninth century the T’ang Dynasty’s power started to decline, and in Japan the cultural center of gravity little by little started to change from T’ang-like to truly Japanese, and at the end of the ninth century the envoys were abolished. Surrounded by sea, Japan

naturally started to become isolationist. At that time, the literate class used characters introduced from China, but those broke down into the syllabary of hiragana, and it became possible to represent Japanese directly in writing. Then, as we entered the eleventh century, the Japanese literary treasures of *The Pillow Book* and *The Tale of Genji* were written by female authors. Culture ripens over a period of several hundred years alongside external pressure and decay, away from centralization. We can see this process happening with Japan’s cultural achievements.

On the other hand, when a nation’s culture develops, there is a decaying of previously imported skills to an inverse proportion. The aforementioned Todaiji and Great Buddha were lost to fire in the Genpei Conflict of the twelfth century. However, the skills of the metal casters and carpenters had deteriorated to the point that they could not rebuild the structures of four centuries earlier. In the end, the help of visiting Sung engineers and the Sung construction methods were then employed. Then in the thirteenth century, Mongolian invasion pressured military centralization, and even culturally Sung and original influences became stronger.

However, in the three centuries from the Mongolian invasion until the sixteenth century, once again there was an absence of strong foreign pressure. This led to centralized authority being dispersed back to each region, and paralleling this came a culturally bountiful period producing tea ceremony and tea rooms, Noh, the rock gardens of Ryoanji, and more. Coming into the sixteenth century, we see the appearance in Japan of guns and Christianity along with trade with Spain and Portugal, but due to a strong emotional response domestically, the Edo Period thrust the country into approximately 200 years of a policy of isolation. During that time, while unique culture was developing, military technology was stopped at the stage of the matchlock gun. In

this way, the history of Japanese culture and skills can be described as a repetition of foreign influence.

The isolation of the Edo Period shows development of culture of the common people, as represented by Kabuki and Ukiyo-e. Important to note here is the fact that rather than works of art supported by the authorities, led by the Karino School, it was Ukiyo-e, which was not considered fine art at the time, that was later acclaimed by the international community, and left a lasting impression. Surveying the cultural history of the world, we see that on a large part, representative cultural advancement occurs where there is authority concentrated centrally, and the strength of that authority is represented through art and architecture. China and France are archetypal of this. However, Japan shows an opposite pattern – the arts flourish during periods when authority is not centralized and influence from authorities is low. When influence is applied, technical skills increase, and foreign arts are practiced under authority. And with a decrease in influence, arts start to become more truly Japanese. Seeing the present day in this light, the shift in makeup of Akihabara shops from electronics to manga, anime, and video games foreshadows a repetition of this pattern in Japanese cultural history.

And it is just now that the government and universities are starting to consider manga and anime as a new rise in Japanese culture. While on the one hand, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry is considering promotion through the category of a “content industry,” the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japan Tourism Agency, and such are using manga and anime in their attempts to increase cultural exchange and draw in more tourists from overseas. The National Comprehensive Media Arts Center project mentioned above must have been one part of this.

However, as I have explained, when government and universities embrace manga and anime, they possess

a deep-rooted nature of applying strong foreign influence, which they very well may do. For example, they may start a suppression of the values of readers and viewers, and even artists, in favor of foreign evaluations of what are “good manga and anime” and what are “bad manga and anime.” Or, this may already have started. The common knowledge that “Hayao Miyazaki’s creation is superb, so it won an American Academy Award,” can be easily transformed to, “Hayao Miyazaki’s creation won an American Academy Award, so it is superb.”

What we need to read from history is that for advanced cultural achievement to occur, foreign influence needs to be comparatively lenient, and maturity can only be reached with time counted in the hundreds of years. Accordingly, if one wants to promote manga and anime, what is necessary is not to indiscreetly inject foreign influence in the form of “evaluation from the world,” but to construct a strategy where foreign influence on manga and anime is moderately controlled. Isolationism suppressed foreign influence in the past, but now a new method is necessary. In order to construct such a strategy, first, basic research of the current status and trends needs to be done based on massive amounts of materials.

Conversely, the embracing of manga by universities and libraries is not always for the purpose of industry promotion. Since the Showa Period, manga have comprised not a small percentage of the magazines and books that have circulated within the country, and have reflected and recorded the citizens’ values, interests, and diversity of lifestyle. Likewise, they can be rich source materials for digging into not only manga themselves, such as theories about manga writers and works, but also history and sociology when studying post-war Japanese or the transitions in society. In order to support such a wide range of scholarly research, while at the same time

keeping foreign influence on manga to a minimum, the very best method is first to discard to one's best ability the selection of books due to value judgments, and build an all-inclusive archive comprising both major and minor works, as well as those considered to be inferior as well as superior.

Then, when such research infrastructure has been completed, the government and others can then for the first time undertake the basic research needed to carry

out effective promotional programs. We are now in the process of creating such infrastructure, in the form of an archive institution.

Details concerning the tentatively named Tokyo International Manga Library and the Yoshihiro Yonezawa Memorial Library can be found at the below Web site.

URL: <http://www.meiji.ac.jp/manga/>