

Yoshi-warau: The Evolution of Humorous *Manga* in Japan

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If you ask an average Westerner what Japan is known for today, chances are good that you will get responses that highlight Japan's history as an industrial and technological power, such as computers, robotics, cars and Japan's ubiquitous salarymen. You might also get responses that emphasize Japan's awareness of its own history and, such as *samurai*, *ninja*, swordsmanship, and traditional Japanese dishes such as *sushi* or *mochi*. But the first answer you may get will often highlight Japan's creative industries. Beginning with Japan's economic boom in the 1980's, Japanese cultural exports have captivated the minds-and wallets-of the world, from the world's video game giants like Nintendo, Sony, Capcom and Namco to Japan's instantly recognizable *anime*, and its counterpart, the bound and printed comics known as *manga*. Japan's economic recovery of the 2010's, combined with a growing interest in comics in the West and instant distribution channels through the Internet, has made Japan's *manga* industry boom in size, commanding 420 billion yen in Japan alone, [16] over \$250 million in Europe, [9] and \$175 million in the United States.

Manga can be found today in nearly every conceivable genre, and has been influenced heavily by American comic books and animation. However, many historians, such as Frederik Schodt point out that Japan's rich artistic tradition has produced many direct antecedents to *manga*, [14] and that Japanese comic books existed natively by the end of the Edo Period, and merged with western cartoons and art brought in during the Meiji Restoration. [15] However, Schodt's research focuses primarily on epics and serious records and histories told through pictures. While this is an incredibly important contributing factor to Japan's *manga* culture today, there's a large component that's overlooked, namely that these stories are often *funny*, or at the very least, dynamic and action-filled in a style that resonates more with comic books of today than the serious and often static portrayal of events in most historical art. Japanese *manga* and story driven art often had huge humorous components that greatly enhanced its storytelling ability. This paper aims to examine the origins and evolution of humor in Japanese art, and follow that evolution up to the established

manga industry that began to flourish in 1868, when Japanese art was first made available to the world at large.

Origins of *Manga*

Since *manga* is descended from uniquely Japanese forms of art, we can place a clear beginning of the styles that would eventually lead up to *manga* at the beginning of the Heian period. The movement of the Imperial capital from Nara to Heian, combined with the falling out of trade missions and contact with China, fostered a sense of Japanese individuality that was reflected in increasingly elaborate ritual and ceremony at the Heian court. In addition to poetry, *go*, incense guessing, *sumo*, and uniquely Japanese form of noble dress, [7] we see the creation of a new kind of art called *yamato-e*, inspired by contemporary Tang paintings. However, as the Tang dynasty began to favor ink-wash as its preferred method of painting, [10] Japanese art acquired a new independence. (A humorous contemporary ink-wash painting can be found in Figure 1.) This departure from a Chinese aesthetic allowed Japanese painters to develop parts of Tang art that would go on to become uniquely Japanese, many of which can be seen in Figure 2. These include small detailed figures as opposed to large landscapes, and a huge attention to the accuracy of depictions of buildings, objects and people. To compensate, only some of any given scene is visible, the rest being obscured by a cloud, object or simply not painted. Perhaps the most telling features of *yamato-e* are its intensely stylized landscapes and its pressure to put narrative over setting-many *yamato-e* pictures show cutaways of roofs and cross-sections of buildings, techniques that look more at home in *manga* and comics of today than in paintings from the time of Charlemagne in Europe.

Yamato-e works often depicted famous natural scenes and beautiful places, as well as seasonal transitions as well as stories meant to be read in varying locations. As a result, we see some of the earliest works of distinctly Japanese art produced as hand-scrolls or portable wall hangings. [2] The ideas of detail, narrative structure and portability that are hallmarks of today's *manga* find their roots at the very beginning of Japan's cultural heritage. What's also interesting to note is their popularity during the Heian period, which stressed the "rule of taste" and high culture. While I wasn't able to find any evidence to support this conjecture, we can assume that, in the absence of any sort of lay culture, this means that *manga* and early comic-style art were considered high culture of the time, ensuring the survival and continuation of this artistic tradition. Even as early as the end of the Heian period, we can see that there's a clear emphasis on storytelling in Japanese art.

Evolution of *Manga*

The story of *manga* diverges from that of *yamato-e* surprisingly early, and we see indications of it separating by the mid-Heian period. By this point, the Japanese identity is very well defined, (We discussed in class how the *Tale of Genji* heavily stresses Japan's differences from China) and we begin to see art that celebrates Japanese history without the accompanying text that accompanied it in earlier periods. [3] The first real example that we see of this visual Japanese history is called the *Shigisan-Engi*, shown in Figure 3, which chronicles the life and miracles of the monk Myoren living on Shigisan Mountain, near Nara. This painting combines two themes, being incredibly active and incredibly serious, two themes that were typically separate in earlier Japanese art. The

combination of activity with a serious story becomes a hallmark of narrative prints that lead up to *manga*, yet is completely separate from other forms of Japanese art going forward, which show movement only as a brief flash of action, or show a static scene. This form of serious narrative becomes its own separate category in Japanese art.

Of greater importance to this paper, however, is the first use of humor in *manga*, in a scroll known as the *Choujuu-Jinbustu-Giga*, shown in Figure 4. This scroll shows animals dancing and fighting while wearing Buddhist vestments, as well as participating in actions that mocked the Buddhist clergy. [5] What's especially interesting to note is that there was clearly no fear of persecution for the author, as the work was made as an easily reproducible and distributable hand-scroll. In fact, the copies we have now were handed down through Japanese temples. We see that satire and pointed humor were acceptable, if not common, practices in Heian Japan. This is an extremely important precedent to set. Future historians and artists point to this scroll as the “first real *manga*” Japan produced, [12] and given the upcoming political climate, such a precedent would be extremely important for artists to point to.

This lighthearted, satirical form of artwork, much like elegant adultery, incense guessing and other such cultural pastimes, was confined to Heian by the political turbulence of the Genpei War and the establishment of the Ashikaga *bakufu*. The Ashikaga shoguns had no use for satire, but sequential storytelling was quite frequent. The rapid expansion of cultural pastimes to the masses, such as *No* drama and landscape gardening, as well as a return to the appreciation of nature that was the base of Shinto, fueled a huge demand for landscape painting, [4] which steered the course of Japanese art away from satire and storytelling. But there was one kind of narrative art in incredibly high demand by the relatively new *daimyo* and *samurai* classes. Pictures of samurai and famous battles, such as those shown in Figure 5 remained in high demand throughout the period. [4]

The quantity of prints and published documents drastically drops off over the course of the

Sengoku period, as the mobility of artisans is limited and most pictures portray landscapes and individual warriors, not any sort of narrative. While the Sengoku period produced amazing examples of Japanese art and depictions of individual scenes, it isn't a golden age for expanded narrative, and certainly not for humor, as all of Japan is drawn into near constant civil war.

The Edo Period

This period of history is when humor really emerges as a dominant force driving *manga*, as well as a time when *manga* becomes its own defined genre. As a result, this period is the main focus of this paper. *Manga*-style art in this period is no longer an artistic trend; it develops into a full scale industry. In addition, the return of unity and peace to Japan allowed people to have a much more creative-and humorous take on Japanese life. One example is the *He-Gassen*, a scroll depicting a fart battle of epic proportions. Aside from being funny due to its absurdity, the *He-Gassen* functions as political satire; poking fun at Japan's serious xenophobia and internal political strife, as well as expressing fears regarding potential cultural stagnation. [6]

There is no one form of Tokugawa art that led directly to *manga* as we know it today; that boom happened following the Second World War. While there was a definite *manga* industry operating in Japan by the end of the Edo period that served as the forerunner to today's, it was the result of several cultural phenomena.

Ukiyo-E

Modern Japanese cultural heritage owes an enormous debt to these “floating world” prints. The Tokugawa Shogunate’s tight class divides and population planning resulted in an urban boom rivaling that of England during the Industrial Revolution. As labor concentrated in the cities and wage labor became the norm, there grew a class of city-dwelling Japanese with disposable income, as well as mass production on a scale not previously seen in history. As workshops grew and money began to circulate, the demand for art skyrocketed. And much like theater, labor or sex, this art was a commodity, not intended solely for noble consumption. As a result of the massive demand for art, workshops quickly developed new woodblock printing techniques, and the market soon filled with cheap prints and posters. As a result of being demanded by a market of mainly urban merchants and artisans, these prints quickly found a subject matter that would sell-daily urban life, sports matches, folk tales and entertaining, poster like scenes. These were Japan’s first art form for the masses, and with proto-cosplayers such as Ihara Saikaku performing narrative art and *kabuki* theater enjoying a massive boom in popularity, the demand for narrative art and action scenes were clear.

Two masters would eventually step up to meet the demand and become some of Japan’s most famous artists in the process, providing prints to the masses that have influenced the popular perception of Japan for generations. Katsushika Hokusai and Utaga Hiroshige produced enormous amounts of serialized prints depicting stories and humorous situations. In the process of creating these scenes, these two masters developed techniques that are still widely used in *manga* production today, such as block colors, and innovative pattern techniques. These techniques are readily observable in the popular *36 Views of Mt. Fuji* series, and its most famous member, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, which has grown into a symbol for Japan in its own right. In these prints we

can see the use of block colors, large gradients and dynamic poses to capture movement. These large series often produced narratives, such as Hiroshige's famous *53 Stations of the Tokaido* series, which chronicled his journey from Edo to Kyoto, and showcased the people and things he saw.

Another extremely interesting aspect of *ukiyo-e* that precesses modern printing and comic techniques is its innovative use of new dyes. Many of the deep blues seen in prints like the *Great Wave* were achieved through use of a compound called ferrous methylamine, which had been synthesized in Berlin and brought to Japan, where it acquired the moniker *Purushianburu*, or Prussian Blue. [8] (Funnily enough, a byproduct of the production of this dye is cyanide, which started a booming black market in poison. [8])

The demand for *ukiyo-e* also supported growing horror and humor prints. (Figures 10 and 11, respectively.) These ideas of gripping narrative were enhanced by a new way of expressing dialogue and storytelling, which we can see in Figure 12. By the end of the Edo period, we can see that these serialized prints very closely resembled the *manga* of today in design and aesthetic, (see Figure 18 for an example) as well as plot and content.

Shunga

There was no taboo or prohibition on pornography in Tokugawa Japan, and it was considered by many to bring good luck. As a result, *shunga*, or “spring pictures”, the euphemistic name for pornographic *ukiyo-e*, became a household item. While not directly relevant to the idea of humor in *manga*, I did find it interesting that such a private commodity was so publicly explored. The themes in these prints ran the gamut from the extremely conservative scenes like Figure 13 to scenes like Hokusai's *The Dream of The Fisherman's Wife*, (Figure 14) which explored sexual themes we would find bizarre.

Hokusai himself analyzed which of his prints sold and apocryphally claimed Japanese people “enjoyed the strange and the cute, tentacles [...] and large eyes”. Regardless of the authenticity of the actual quote, (Hokusai wrote under several pseudonyms. [11]) there is definite evidence that prints of that subject matter were best sellers, [11] which I find amusingly prophetic of modern *manga*’s emphasis on cuteness and large eyes, as well as the infamous presence of tentacles in Japanese erotic art, to the point where it has become a popular joke at fan conventions and become the basis of a soft drink. [1]

Kamishibai

This form of art is still popular in Japan today, but these “paper plays” originated during the Edo period, and originally featured large eyed characters and *manga*-esque plots. [14] The immense popularity of these stories put pressure on artists to make sequential prints and scrolls that would keep audiences hooked. In fact, these shows are the reason we have the word *manga* at all; Hokusai coined the term, meaning “playful drawing” after seeing the types of images that kept audiences engaged. It may have been from popular prints that *manga* took its structure and inspiration, but it was the *kamishibai* that gave it its aesthetic style.

Kibyoshi

These picture books were originally circulated as quick ways to spread news, but being under the control of artists and citizens, as well as being extremely discreet and portable, as well as cheap to manufacture, they very quickly became gossip pieces. [13] From gossip, they quickly became a tool of social satire, poking fun at everything from the devaluation of silver [13] to having violent

samurai in civil positions [13]. Censors were evaded by coding the parodied problems in the form of riddles or comic-book style adventures, almost like extended political cartoons. [13] We continue to see *kibyoshi* become a fertile medium for humor, as most of the best selling *kibyoshi* continue to offer satire and jokes. Due to the logistical difficulty of producing *kanji* and *hiragana* with mechanical printing presses, the text was often written by hand or engraved directly onto the plate, allowing for artistic use of text that remains a hallmark of *manga* today. [13] In fact, to any Western eye, these books are nearly identical to modern *manga*, sequential, comic-book style stories that have clear narrative action, speech bubbles and simple colors.

Modern Manga

Kibyoshi were the end of a thousand year process that began with the emergence of *yamato-e* hundreds of years earlier, and many argue that *kibyoshi* are what truly sparked the rise of Japanese comic book culture, for a simple reason. In 1868, Japan began to trade with England, a country, which, like Japan, had gone through periods of involvement and isolation, had a very complicated relationship with the continent it was near, and had a political system based on politeness. But one similarity which is very interesting to note was the England had developed a tradition of political cartoons for which she was known the world over, at the exact same time that *kibyoshi* exploded onto the scene in Japan. The two cultures immediately connected, and Japanese and British cartoonists found that their senses of humor meshed perfectly. Within 10 years of Japan's ports opening to the West, the joint Japanese-Western satirical magazine *The Japan Punch* (Figure 17) was already in widespread circulation. With a Western market and Western means of mass production, *manga* took off, enjoying popularity throughout Japan's modernization, becoming an efficient propaganda tool during its militarization, and becoming a cultural juggernaut during the

Japanese cultural booms of the '80s and the New Tens. The *manga* aesthetic has become universally recognized as a symbol of Japan and has spread to other countries as well. Looking at a sample of modern *manga* in Figure 18, we see the culmination of several trends. We see the character detail and simple scenes passed down from *yamato-e*. We see the playfulness and engaging character of the old Heian hand-scrolls. We see the simple aesthetic of *ukiyo-e*, and the character designs of the *kamishibai*. We see hundreds of years of Japanese tradition, designed to make the art form exciting and accessible, and we see it bound and distributed like Tokugawa Japan's *kibyoshi*. *Manga* is a tradition thousands of years in the making, and, given the engaging nature of its stories, will hopefully continue to exist for a very long time. And the humor that's emerged as an essential part of it will certainly continue to exist as well.

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Figure 1: The Xenomorphs from the popular film *Alien* painted in Tang ink-wash style



Figure 2: A later Tosa School recreation of a classic *yamato-e* painting showing a scene from the *Tale of Genji* [17]



Figure 3: Detail from the *Shigisan-Engi*



Figure 4: Details from the *Choujuu-Jinbustu-Giga*



Figure 5: Muromachi *samurai* prepare for battle in this narrative print from the Ashikaga period.



Figure 6: Detail from the *He-Gassen*



Figure 7: Hokusai's self-portrait



Figure 8: *Senju, Muhashi Province*



Figure 9: *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*



Figure 10: *Takiyasha Summons the Skeleton*, an example of horror *ukiyo-e*



Figure 11: A parody of political drama, showing the participants as cats dressed as the characters in *Chiushingura*.



Figure 12: This scene from a serial print collection highlights sequential storytelling and comic book style dialog bubbles.



Figure 13: A typical conservative *shunga* scene

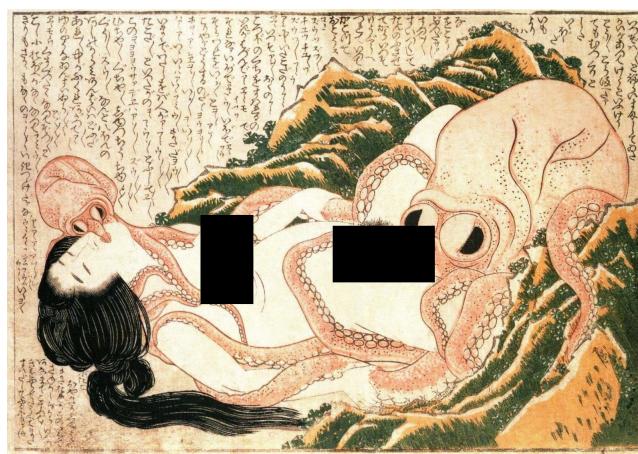


Figure 14: *The Dream of The Fisherman's Wife*



Figure 15: A contemporary *kamishibai* performer in Tokyo

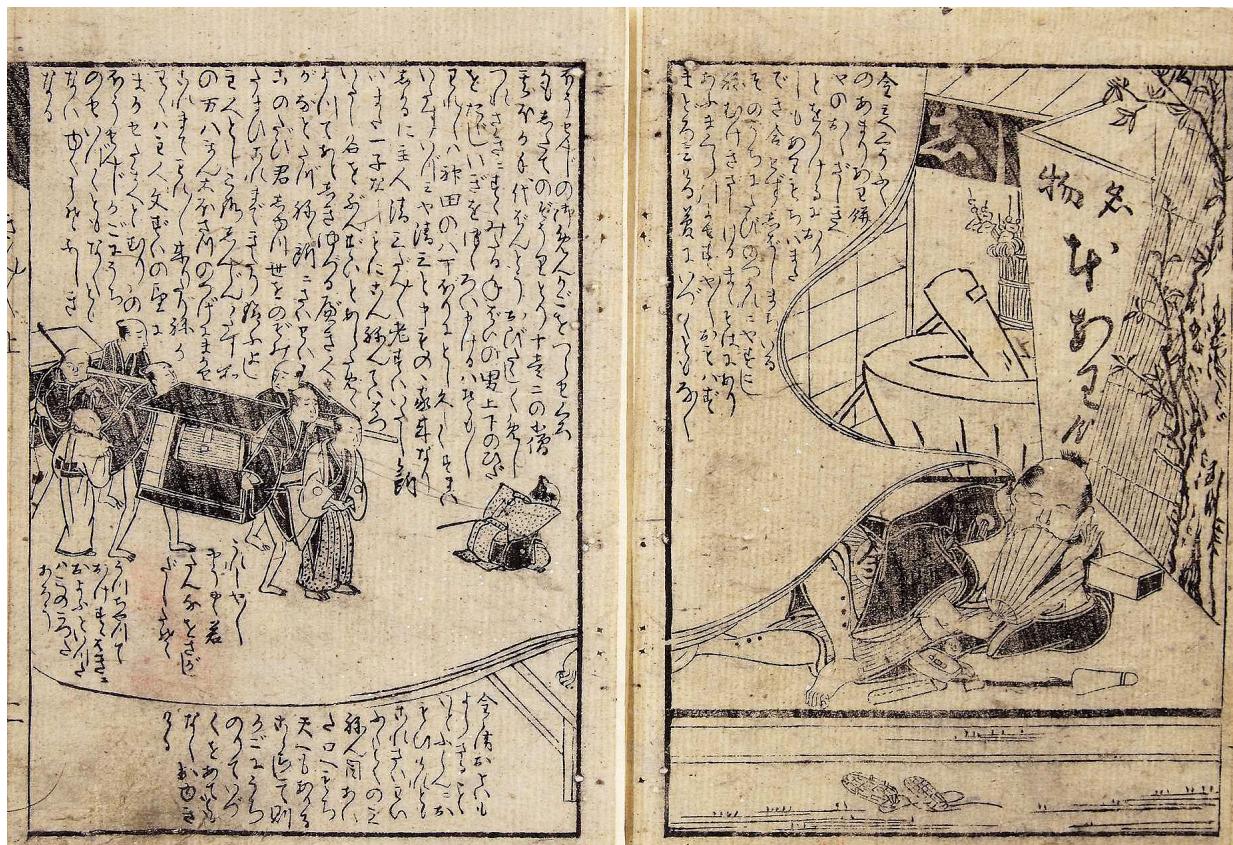


Figure 16: An example of *kibyoshi*

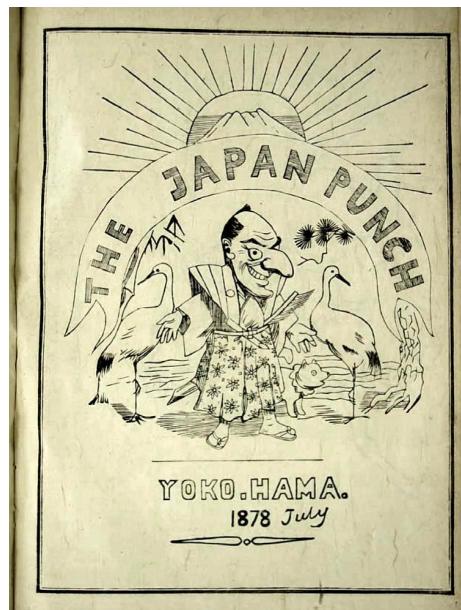


Figure 17: The cover of an issue of *The Japan Punch*



Figure 18: A scene from *Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun*, a popular modern *manga*