

# Shojo Manga: Girl Power!

Japanese pop culture comes to  
CSU, Chico by Masami Toku



Japanese manga (comics) are no longer just a phenomenon of visual pop culture in Japan. At the beginning of the 21st century, the popularity of Japanese manga has spread all over the world through comic books, animation, and merchandise.

But not many people really understand how and why Japanese manga have become so popular in the world and why children are so attracted to Japanese visual popular products. For this reason, I undertook a project that would bring together artists, scholars, teachers, and fans of shojo manga (girls' comics) to explore this phenomenon. The project was funded by the Japan Foundation; the College of Humanities and Fine Arts; the School of Graduate, International, and Sponsored Programs; and the Department of Art and Art History at California State University, Chico.

There are two purposes of the visual pop culture project Shojo Manga: Girl Power! One is to examine the worldwide phenomenon of Japanese comics (manga) not only in Japan but also in other countries, including the United States. The second purpose is to help audiences—especially teachers, students, and community—develop their media and visual literacy.

These purposes will be accomplished through a touring exhibition, which debuted on the Chico campus in fall 2005. The exhibition examines the cultural and historical backgrounds of this Japanese visual popular culture that exerts such an influence on U.S. society. It examines the treatment of gender roles in shojo manga and how shojo

mangaka (girls' manga artists) have been contributing to the development of a unique style of visual expression in their narratives, a contribution that has seldom been discussed in the world of Japanese comics.

There have been many worldwide manga exhibitions, yet, until now, there has been no exhibition focusing on girls' manga. Japanese girls' comics are unique in the world of comics. Their influence pervades Japanese mass media, including TV animation and toy products. This will be the first significant touring exhibition of girls' manga and discussion of the gender issue in manga as a world visual popular culture. The exhibition will travel to the following sites in the United States and Asia: University of New Mexico; Columbia College Chicago; Teachers College, Columbia University; Moore College of Art and Design; and in China, Taiwan, and Japan.

## What is shojo manga?

Historically, many great comics have existed in cultures all over the world. It may be, however, that in Japan the popularity of manga and its impact on visual popular culture and society are more significant than in any other culture. In contrast to the United States, where comic books are only for children or collectors, in Japan manga have a popular status that influences the entire Japanese society. Manga readers cover a wide range of demographics and ages, from preschoolers to adults. The influence of manga appears in visual culture throughout Japan in commercials on TV,

advertisements, billboards, and even school textbooks. One indication of the popularity of manga is that it comprises nearly 40 percent of all publications in Japan.

In responding to the diverse demands and expectations of manga readers, the contents of manga have developed from simple to more complex stories in diverse subjects, both fiction and nonfiction. Blockbuster anime (animated films) and video games are frequently created based on manga, and it is well known that anime have spread worldwide, as have Japanese video games.

Japanese popular culture first became a phenomenon in Asian countries in the 1980s through pirated versions of manga. Even in the United States, Japanese animation like *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atom*) has been popular as children's entertainment since the 1970s; however, few knew that they were made in Japan or that they were based on manga. This is changing, with a Pokemon center across the street from Rockefeller Center in Manhattan, and *TV Guide* announcing in 2002 that the most popular cartoon among 9- to 14-year-old boys was *Yu-Gi-Oh*, which was created based on the manga. Japanese animated series and their connected merchandising is a powerful influence in the world of U.S. children at the beginning of the 21st century. In the United States, about \$300 million worth of Pokemon-related products were sold in 1998, while about \$500 million worth of Yu-Gi-Oh merchandise was sold in 2002 (*TV Guide*, Feb. 1–7, 2003).

## The world of boys' and girls' manga

There is still controversy over the origin of Japanese manga. The general belief is that manga began with "Choyu-giga" (literally, "humorous pictures of birds and animals") depicted by the monk Kakuyu (1053–1140), also called Toba-sojo. Aristocratic society was ironically depicted in contrast to the commoner's world using anthropomorphic animal caricatures in four traditional scrolls. The term "manga" was originally used in the printed illustration books of *Hokusai Manga* depicted by Hokusai Katsushika (Ukiyoe-shi, 1760–1849) at the beginning of the 19th century. This *Hokusai Manga* (literally, "Hokusai's humorous pictures of everyday life") comprised 15 chapters, and was published serially from 1814 to 1878 (even after his death, due to its popularity). *Hokusai Manga* served as an illustrated textbook of everyday life. Thus, the contemporary meaning of the word "manga," which is now used in Japan to describe graphic novels, is different from Hokusai's manga, which were simple caricatures.

Contemporary Japanese manga developed with the strong influence of American pop culture, including comics and Disney animation, after World War II. In those days, manga was only inexpensive entertainment for children, dreams that made it easier to live in the devastated postwar society in Japan. Thus, manga started as healthy entertainment, a way for children to buoy up their dreams. It gradually developed from simple caricatures to complicated stories in response to readers' expectations.

The first boys' weekly magazine, *Shonen Magazine*, was published in 1959, and the first girls' weekly magazine, *Shojo Friend*, was published in 1963. The children who supported the manga market were born between 1947 and 1950. When the first weekly magazine was published, these children were reaching the end of elementary school. Before this period, children had stopped reading manga after elementary school. However, this generation of children did not stop even after high school, finding manga more attractive than other media, such as TV and movies.

The number of magazines published grew in response to readers' diverse expectations, so that the age of manga readers spread from children to adults during the 1960s. As a result, after the 1960s, diverse manga were developed for different ages and genders, and addressed favorite themes and subjects. One example is the development of "gekiga" ("visual novels"), more serious and realistic story manga with diverse fiction and nonfiction themes, mainly in adolescent male manga magazines. Subjects like sex and violence were no longer taboo in manga from that point.

In the mid-1970s, "ladies' comics" were published in response to female readers' demands that manga reflect their growth

from girls to women. These manga depicted the realities and obstacles of life after marriage, unlike shojo manga, which concentrated on the process of finding true love. The themes in manga reflect changes in Japanese social and cultural conditions. This dialogue between manga and society is now more apparent than in the phenomenon of the amateur comic market, a type of market created in 1975 as a communicative forum for hundreds of thousands of artists and fans to exchange ideas and distribute their manga.

Thus, manga grew from a subculture to become a part of popular culture for the entirety of Japanese society, a part of popular culture that thrived with the development of the economy. Manga continues to have an impact on Japanese society, and this phenomenon has spread from Japan to the rest of the world at the beginning of the 21st century.

## Characteristics of manga

What are the characteristics of Japanese manga that are different from those of, for example, American comics? One of the main differences is that manga are depicted mostly in black and white (except for the cover page), unlike American comics with mostly full-color pages. Ironically, due to the limitations of black and white, the use of the basic elements of manga—and comics in general—has developed in Japan with rich semiotic (philosophical theory of signs and symbols) and semantic connotations. Manga are filled with semiotic signs that readers understand, an imagery shared among the mangaka and readers. At first, manga were a simple combination of picture, word, and frame that told a simple story. However, with readers' growing expectations, the story of manga has developed into graphic novels that express human drama rather than caricatures or simple comic strips. As a result, the use of composition is original in manga.

*Picture:* The picture is the content of manga's expression and basically consists of lines, similar to American comics. However, mangaka have created semiotic graphics to indicate particular meanings and signs with limited color use. For example, black hair indicates Japanese people, and white hair outlined by black lines indicates foreigners, especially Westerners. Also, the aesthetic value of "cuteness" (big eyes and tiny noses in girls' manga and spiky hair in boys' manga) has possibly replaced the imported Western aesthetic values of "beauty" and "realism" for young people not only in Japan, but also in other cultures.

*Words with and without balloons (including onomatopoeia):* Words appear in the picture and also independently outside of the frame, either inside balloons or free floating. Words function as a paste that connects frames in the story. Words also support expression at the meta-level, meaning they can reveal the inner thoughts as well as the voice of the subject/object. The



different shapes of balloons have functions that also indicate the speaker's emotion.

*Frame ("koma"):* It has a role as a container that includes the picture (as the content) and the word (namely "format"). It also has a function to integrate time and place. Frames of different shapes, sizes, and directions are used, especially in girls' manga, to depict the psychology of a character in the favorite theme of the conflict of love. This girls' manga characteristic has been a great influence on boys' manga.

Understanding the phenomenon of manga in Japan leads not only to an understanding of contemporary society in Japan, but also leads to an understanding of the relationship between visual pop culture and children's artistic and cognitive development. I strongly believe that U.S. audiences will be enlightened as to the role and diversity of visual pop culture through this touring cross-cultural research exhibition.

For more information about the exhibition, go to [www.csuchico.edu/~mtoku/vc/Exhibitions/girlsmangaka/girlsmangaka\\_index.html](http://www.csuchico.edu/~mtoku/vc/Exhibitions/girlsmangaka/girlsmangaka_index.html). To order the *Shojo Manga: Girl Power!* catalogue, go to [www.csuchico.edu/~mtoku/vc/OrderPage1.htm](http://www.csuchico.edu/~mtoku/vc/OrderPage1.htm). ☺

## About the author

Masami Toku is an associate professor of art education at CSU, Chico, and the general director of the project *Power of Girls' Comics*. Her research interests include the cross-cultural study of children's artistic and aesthetic developments in their pictorial world and how visual popular culture influences children's visual literacy.