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Charles Shiro Inouye

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REVIEW & COMMENTARY

Two Phases of Japanese Illustrated Fiction

CHARLES SHIRO INOUYE

Adam Kern. *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the Kibyoshi of Edo Japan*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006. ISBN 978-0674022669.

Manga from the Floating World is a welcome addition to scholarship in English on the literary culture of Japan's Edo period (1600–1868). Painted in the broadest strokes, this era is marked by three peaks of notable artistic activity: the ebullient Genroku period (1688–1704) of Ihara Saikaku, Matsuo Basho, and Chikamatsu Monzaemon; the sophisticated An'ei-Tenmei period (1772–89) of Santo Kyoden, Hiraga Gennai, and Ueda Akinari; and the decadent Bunka-Bunsei (Kasei) period (1804–29) of Jippensha Ikku, Tsuruya Nanboku, and Takizawa Bakin. Of these three, the second has been the least studied. Consequently, Adam Kern's thorough consideration of the illustrated texts that were the dominant genre of popular literature (*gesaku*) at the time is an important contribution. In addition to a solid introduction to the genre and to its era, Kern also provides translations of three of Santo Kyoden's *kibyoshi*, giving us both academic and artistic exposure to the "visual-verbal" imagination that made these works possible.

The term "visual-verbal" is Kern's. It applies to the illustration-text combination that characterizes the *kibyoshi* page. Its hyphenated inclusiveness raises a number of enduring epistemological questions that those who study visual culture must consider. Is the thought process one of seeing images? And how is a verbally produced mental image different from one

produced by pictures, figures, and other material objects? *Manga of the Floating World* chooses not to engage these questions directly. But it does deal with a third evaluative issue that follows from these fundamental considerations, namely whether or not illustrated literature is adolescent or childish. Kern convincingly shows us that a genre like *kibyoshi* is both sophisticated in its methods of expression and mature in its interests. The ostensible bias against the broader category of *kusazoshi* (illustrated writings) to which *kibyoshi* belong, often labeled even by their creators to be "for women and children," is yet another element of a growing phonocentrism that by the An'ei-Tenmei period had gathered considerable strength.

Kibyoshi are the manga and the comic books referred to in the book's title. Presented with this nomenclature, we might expect the author to portray *kibyoshi* as a progenitor of the manga with which we are familiar today. This, I believe, is a natural expectation. Yet Kern actually argues against any easy linkage between contemporary manga and this older, floating-world type. For one thing, as a genre, *kibyoshi* rose up and died away during the last two decades of the eighteenth and the first decade of the nineteenth centuries. *Kibyoshi* belong specifically to the world of Edo letters. Consequently, any reader who does not understand the specific thrust of the "floating world" descriptor runs the risk of misunderstanding this book.

Kern's argument against continuity from old to contemporary follows from his interest in honoring the actual specifics of the *kibyoshi* experience. The details that Kern provides tell us that *kibyoshi* died away and were succeeded by the more lengthy *gokan*, which lasted into the Meiji period but did not have a direct impact on early manga artists such as Kawanabe

Kyosai and Kobayashi Kiyochika. Kern's genealogy indicates that what we know as contemporary manga can be traced back to the caricatures of Charles Wirgman and *Japan Punch*, not to the work of Santo Kyoden, Torai Sanna, and others. Many others have noted that it was Hokusai who popularized the word "manga." But, according to Kern, that was a different kind of manga. Confronted with these careful distinctions, we have to wonder why Kern risked using the term "manga" in his title at all. Why argue for the nonrelationship between *kibyoshi* and manga, while calling them both manga? Perhaps the intent was to encourage comparisons.

In fact, Kern recognizes the general relatedness of illustrated texts of various kinds. He notes the linkages to anime, on the one hand, and to Muromachi- and early Edo-period illustrated texts, the so-called Nara *ehon*, on the other. Yet it is still true that this study is decidedly less interested in showing the theoretical commonality of these various illustrated forms than in the scholarly accuracy that necessarily makes these two phases of Japanese illustrated fiction look less and less alike.

Manga from the Floating World is a thorough book. We learn about the authors, illustrators, and titles. We are given plot summaries and copious annotations to help us appreciate the cultural specifics of the works being considered. Of course, Kern provides some useful interpretation of these details as well. We are presented with summaries of Japanese scholarship on the development and demise of the genre, for instance. We are also given an exciting look at the rich cultural context of the An'ei-Tenmei period, along with a thoughtful analysis of the very tricky "visual-verbal" imagination, as grounded in actual examples.

In sum, Kern's treatment of the "visual-verbal" provides us with a chunky soup rather than with a theoretical purée. After all, both the genre and the Japanese intelligence that created these illustrated texts were playful and not always stringently totalizing forces. This is

a world of mixing (*naimaze*) and tossing things together (*fukiyose*). *Gesaku* writers employed various takes (*shuko*) on established chunks of formal reality (*sekai*). Their almost manic use of in-group allusion renders deep thoughts into parodic embellishments and impressive visual performances.

Meeting the humor of *kibyoshi* with humor of his own, Kern moves us toward a conclusion about why this sometimes stunning display of literary talent died away. "The genre inevitably fizzled out . . . not because of the Kansei Reforms, but because the commercial pressure of reaching a larger, more common audience meant that writers eventually had to dispose of the very sort of in-group jokes and specialized puzzles that had characterized *kibyoshi* to begin with" (245). As I have argued elsewhere, this commercialism also has as much to do with the larger issues of semiotic development that engulfed the particulars of personalities and politics. For instance, the death of *kibyoshi* might be understood in the context of the remarkable influence that the Chinese colloquial novel *The Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan*) had on Japanese letters generally and on the market for reading specifically. What this very long and very colorful Chinese novel taught Japan's *gesakusha* can be summed up in a word: length. This, too, is a matter of "commercial pressure." If a narrative could be extended, à la *Shuihuzhuan*, then an established readership could be kept. It is no accident, therefore, that the birth of *yomihon* (reading books) and the transition from *kibyoshi* to *gokan*, a more extended and plot-oriented form of illustrated literature, occurred at roughly the same time.

In other words, the lengthiness of Bakin's less-illustrated "reading books" (or *yomihon*), such as *Eight Dogs* (*Hakkenden*), and an equally lengthy work such as Mantei Oga's *Eight Aspects of the Buddha: A Japanese Library* (*Shaka hasso Yamato bunko*), are a consequence of the same forces that made the *kibyoshi* unsustainable. Similarly corrosive to Tokugawa Japan's "visual-

verbal” imagination was the seriousness of the Meiji-period novel (kindai *shosetsu*), which became an almost entirely a words-only endeavor. Perhaps only now, with the success of *Akira* and *Sailor Moon*, are we ready to understand the picture-phobic nature of the modern Japanese novel for what it was: a modern suppression of the grapheme in order to support a wide-ranging conceptualization of mass society that was better accomplished without too many pictures. Only now that we have recovered the sophistication of pictured reality are we ready to give the brilliance of *kibyoshi*, this early flowering of “manga,” its just due.

Whether a direct progenitor to contemporary manga or not, *kibyoshi* are good to know. To recognize the extraordinary burst of creativity that brought the genre to fruition is to gain an important perspective on the creative precedents for Japan’s manga and anime artists today. The lacuna between these two phases is a crucial piece of Japanese cultural history that needs to be addressed. Thanks to *Manga from the Floating World*, we can now better understand this puzzling break and the highly illustrated work that lies on both sides of it. Appreciating both old and new manga (choosing to stay with Kern’s terms), we can grasp the power of the phonocentrism that aided the development of modern consciousness and made the belittling of illustrated texts necessary.

One thing is clear from reading Kern’s painstakingly researched book. Modern consciousness did not welcome the graphemic richness of manga, whether indicated by the transition to *gokan* in the eighteenth century or the transition from *gokan* to the *shosetsu* in the nineteenth. With the return of manga and the flourishing of other forms of visual media during the twentieth century, modern consciousness finally came unglued. As told by Adam Kern, the life and death of *kibyoshi* is an important chapter of the modern story. Knowing the Edo past helps us appreciate the visual splendor of contemporary Japanese culture as a come-from-behind sort of victory. In

the ongoing battle between image and text that W. T. J. Mitchell calls culture, the score in recent innings is Image 7 and Word 6. For the foreseeable future (until the electricity goes off), I would bet on the team with the most pictures.

Review Editors’ Note

More information about *kibyoshi*, plus detailed summaries and illustrations, are available in the symposium edited by Adam Kern, “*Kibyoshi: The World’s First Comicbook?*” *International Journal of Comic Art* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 1–486.

Paradise Lost . . . and Found?

PAUL JACKSON

Ergo Proxy. 2006. Murase Shūkō (Director). Geneon Entertainment USA. Long Beach, Calif. 6 volumes. ASIN B000I2JSVM, B000KB48MA, B000MKXEM4, B000NVIGK2, B000N2HD5U, B000P296B2.

Much has been made of *Ergo Proxy*’s superficial similarities to *Ghost in the Shell*. In truth, these amount to little more than reflections of a shared genre lineage, which, although significant, belies *Ergo Proxy*’s true scope and ambition. Here, cyberpunk themes and imagery, still very much present and intact, are used only as a point of departure. From there, *Ergo Proxy* uses intertextuality and recurring motifs of awakening and death to explore very different facets of the human experience. This essay will specifically explore how the series incorporates biblical allusions in its construction of character and meaning.

The story opens in the domed city of Romdo, on the surface a gleaming utopia of individual and collective prosperity, a shining bastion of civilization amid a world of frozen oceans and barren continents. In an anonymous lab, however, a humanoid monster (or Proxy) writhes on an examination table. As onlooking AutoReivs (subservient robots) and scientists try to sedate it, the creature pulsates violently, eventually