An Illustrated History: Manga in Postwar Japan

Introduction

Japanese comics, known as manga, have become one of the country’s biggest cultural exports. They exist in every conceivable genre, in art styles that vary from simple line drawings to detailed full-color spreads. Their origins are in thousand-year old scrolls of narrative artwork, which told stories of epic battles, whimsical animals, and scary ghosts. Modern manga developed after World War II, drawing influence from older traditions as well as popular American and European comics. Stories grew in complexity and scope, and their format grew from newspapers to cheap comic books to magazines dedicated only to manga, and then to neat paperback volumes compiled from long-running serialized stories. Despite these changes, the manga of the postwar period provides a cohesive image of a nation reconstructing itself. Analysis shows that developing views of foreigners and women corresponded with a growing interest in the world beyond contemporary Japan. This is communicated not only through art, words, and story, but also through the four distinct Japanese character systems. Looking at the composition and content of a selection of manga from the 1940s through the 1970s paints a picture of postwar Japan’s changing fears and values.

Selected works from the first half of this time frame are Machiko Hasegawa’s *Sazae-san*, a slice-of-life gag manga that started in 1946; Osamu Tezuka’s *Manga Daigaku*, a mix of manga writing tips and original stories from 1950; Tomofumi Terao’s
Aohajo no Himitsu, a children’s story from 1957; and Kaze Kozou, a mythical drama by Mayumi Tensei and Terauchi Tetsuo from 1959. From the latter half, selected works are Shigeru Mizuki’s 1967 Kitaro, about monsters and ghosts; Mitsuteru Yokoyama’s Iga no Kagemaru, a ninja story from 1969; Takao Saito’s Gorugo 13, an action story about a hired assassin from 1969; and Reiji Matsumoto’s Space Pirate Captain Harlock from 1977, a space adventure epic. Manga Daigaku is a Japanese reprint from 1990; and Sazae-san and Kitaro are English translations from 1997 and 2013, respectively. The rest are first edition Japanese publications.

Manga’s Pre-Modern Origins

Japanese narrative artwork began in the distant past, with scrolls illustrated with sequential events involving monks, animals, deities, and nobility. A scroll would be read by unrolling it section by section, leaving only one or two “panels” visible at a time.¹ By the 12th century, these scrolls sometimes featured text inserted next to characters in the middle of the action, a device that would naturally give rise to speech bubbles.² Eventually, artwork developed that could be shared among common people, not only appreciated by the rich. This meant smaller sheets of paper with illustrations reproduced by woodblock, like the famous work of Hokusai (the artist behind ‘The Great Wave’) and his contemporaries.³ This kind of art would come to be called manga, or “whimsical pictures.” So, comic-like art has existed in Japan for centuries, but it took

² Koyama-Richard, One Thousand Years of Manga, 58.
some inspiration for its modern form from American and European comics that because popular in Japan after the country’s isolation was ended in 1853. In fact, many of the early magazines that carried manga were created for Westerners living in Japan, but had readership among the Japanese as well.4

However, while early Western comics were organised as pictures with captions, manga very early on inserted text into the images themselves. The artistic tradition of scrolls was one reason, but the efficiency of printing also played a role.5 In English printing, words are created with a small number of movable type pieces, and pictures were always created with custom engravings. This meant it was easier to keep words and images separate. Asian scripts, however, contain so many characters that movable type is already less efficient. So if an image needed to printed, it would take no more time to engrave the words in it, as well. Art and writing would be combined on the same woodblock. Therefore, the transition to copper plate engraving was a natural one.6 The process of treating copper selectively with acid to create a page-sized stamp was similar to carving the image into wood.

In the 1940s and 50s, it was most common for manga to be printed in newspapers, like Sazae-san. Also popular were “red books,” thin, cheap volumes with colorful covers that were sold primarily to children.7 Aohajo no Himitsu (fig. 1) and Kaze Kozou (fig. 2) are good examples. Some artists who started out in this market rose to fame and went on to write longer manga. Terao, the author of Aohajo, is actually best known for a later art series about Hiroshima, where he was stationed as a soldier during

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4 Schodt, Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics, 42.
the atomic bombing. As readers became more discerning and artists got more skilled, the production value rose, and children stopped being able to afford the stories. This led first to lending manga libraries, and eventually to regular magazines containing a dozen or so stories in one phonebook-sized periodical. The different stories would be repackaged as volumes containing several chapters each, and these would also be sold. This is the format Captain Harlock and Iga no Kagemaru are in.

Printing & Binding

Information about the intended audience of each manga can be gleaned from the size of the volume and the quality of the paper. Sazae-san and Kitaro (fig. 3) are more recent American reprints, and both have the high-quality white paper and brightly decorated covers that are common in American manga releases. The investment of licensing and localizing a manga into English means that volumes must be more expensive, so people who buy them are generally collectors, and want them to be nice. In Japan, on the other hand, manga is not rare at all and therefore much cheaper to make and buy. This is especially evident with Aohajo no Himitsu and Kaze Kozou, as they are thin, made entirely of paper, with inside pages of tan recycled paper and occasionally blurred printing (fig. 4). They are clearly meant to be read and used up, not treasured and preserved. There is color on the cover, but the inside uses the same ink the whole way through.

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Gorugo 13 also has a full-color cover, but is much thicker and bound with glossy paper. The inside paper is crisp and white, and there are a few sections that use orange ink as well as the customary black. It is intended for keeping and reading more than once. The design on the back cover of a skeleton wearing a crown of thorns (fig. 5) is meant to be a reference to the title: Gorugo is how “Golgatha” is pronounced in Japanese. It’s immediately obvious that this manga is intended for mature audiences.

Captain Harlock (fig. 6) is similarly constructed, but the cover illustration is surrounded by the publisher’s border and name. This kind of layout is common in manga, with all series licensed under the one company using the same border around unique artwork. Iga no Kagemaru (fig. 7) is also published by Sunday Comics, and uses the same border. This volume of Harlock was the first one released, compiling chapters of manga that had previously been published in a magazine. Readers likely had some awareness of the series, and their eye might be caught by recognizing the same artwork. It also fits a genre, science fiction, in which the quality of the artwork is essential to communicating the story. These books were made to last, which is one reason why the themes and the characters from them are still remembered today, even in other countries. Harlock has a detailed fan wiki in English, whereas virtually no English information exists about Aohajo.

Words & Art

Japanese is unique among languages in its multi-alphabet writing system. There are four character types used in modern Japanese: kanji, the pictorial characters derived from Chinese; hiragana, the basic characters that correspond to every possible syllable;
katakana, a more angular version of hiragana; and romaji, which are just Latin characters. Hiragana and katakana both arose from the Chinese characters in which Japanese used to be written. Katakana was used by Buddhist monks to mark the pronunciation of the Chinese texts they studied, and hiragana developed from the cursive script used by noblewomen. Hiragana is now used to connect parts of speech and show conjugation of verbs, nouns, and adjectives, which are usually written in kanji (fig. 8). Romaji is really only used for store names (to imply modernity) and official documents. It appears on the covers of Captain Harlock and Iga no Kagemaru, possibly make organization easier in case the stylized kanji titles were hard to read. Katakana, however, has a variety of uses, such as pronunciation guides, sound effects, animal and plant names, and most notably, foreign loan words.

This creates an interesting dynamic in the written language where foreign-origin words are easy to pick out, and the pronunciation of these foreign words is automatically changed to fit the Japanese syllabary. In written media, especially manga, katakana is also used to denote someone foreign or inhuman. Aliens, robots, and non-Japanese people speaking Japanese are sometimes all grouped together by the characters used in their speech bubbles. For example, in Reiji Matsumoto’s Captain Harlock, the alien Miime speaks fluent Japanese but always in katakana (fig. 9). In Aohajo no Himitsu, the Englishman who has been secretly living in Japan for years also speaks perfectly understandable Japanese—but entirely written out in katakana. The effect is that both

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11 Robertson, “He’s More Katakana than Kanji.”
characters seem more rigid and stilted than the characters speaking in the normal combination of kanji and hiragana. It marks them as different, and as unable to blend in with native Japanese speakers. Interestingly, some very early manga was entirely written in katakana, no matter who was talking. This may be because comics were lowbrow literature, as opposed to formal academic writing that used kanji and hiragana, and writers wanted to make this difference clear.

Another form of Japanese writing that shows up particularly often in manga is furigana. Because it does not have any unique characters, it is not considered its own alphabet. These tiny hiragana appear to the side or top of a kanji to give its pronunciation (fig. 10). This is the modern equivalent of monks writing proto-katakana beneath Chinese characters, and in especially old Japanese books, katakana is more often used. Furigana are prevalent in Aohajo no Himitsu and Kaze Kozou, appear somewhat less in Captain Harlock and Iga no Kagemaru, and are rare in Manga Daigaku and Gorugo 13. This is most likely because of the intended audiences of each book. Age is one factor, as children are not expected to know as many kanji as adults, and therefore cannot read text with a large amount of kanji (like a newspaper) without furigana guides to help them. Aohajo is licensed by the “Fourth Grade” division of a larger publishing company, so it has to be easy for children of that age to read.

Harlock and Kagemaru are intended for mature audiences, as is Gorugo 13, which is made patently clear by the nudity on its second page (fig. 11). Manga Daigaku (Cartoon College) is targeted at older audiences not because of theme, but because of the complicated concepts of art, composition, and storytelling it communicates. Osamu

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13 Schodt, Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics, 47, 52.
Tezuka believed that comics could be appreciated by all generations, and often wrote with adults in mind, as opposed to only children. One way he signals this intention is by leaving out the furigana (fig. 8). Tezuka’s playful art style, with it many cute animal characters, is an interesting juxtaposition to the much more realistic art of Kaze Kozou. However, Kaze was clearly designed to be accessible to audiences of all ages because of the furigana. The manga was actually a tie-in to a movie and would have been released at the same time to advertise it, so it needed to be easy enough for anyone to read.

There is a definite evolution in art style from the earlier stories to the later ones, and both are very different from current manga style. Works from the 40s and 50s, such as Sazae-san and Manga Daigaku, look a lot like Western cartoons. Sazae-san’s design, especially in the early years, brings to mind Olive Oyl from Popeye.\(^\text{14}\) They have similarly skinny arms and legs, short dark hair, and simplistic faces (figs. 12a, 12b). Some of the anthropomorphic animal characters in Daigaku (fig. 13) resemble Mickey Mouse and other Disney properties. This makes sense, because although narrative art had existed in Japan for hundred of years, the genre that took shape in the postwar period drew heavily on American and European comics. Japanese comic artists were aware of foreign characters as early as the 1930s, as evidenced by an illustration published by the New Cartoon Faction Group called “A New Year’s Party for the World’s Most Popular Comic Characters.” Mickey Mouse, Felix the Cat, and Popeye are some of the properties pictured.\(^\text{15}\)


\(^{15}\) Schodt, Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics, 46-47.
Manga like *Kaze* are exceptions, because they were trying to realistically portray actors. In the 60s and 70s, manga art started to develop a more distinct style, although the influence of Tezuka lingered on (and is even still felt today). *Daigaku*’s framing device was a manga academy and whether it was intentional or not, it was adopted as a bible by up-and-coming artists.16 *Captain Harlock*, from 1977, clearly displays the stylized hair and detailed eyes that became hallmarks of Japanese manga art, proving that it left its own mark on the industry.

Content & Character

The content of these stories is a window into the Japanese mindset in the postwar era. Some common themes are the portrayal of traditional and current Japan, the interaction of Japan with the larger world, and expectations for women. This is sometimes hidden by gags and storylines revolving around normal daily life. Early strips of Machiko Hasegawa’s *Sazae-san*, which was created in 1945, show the characters divvying up rations, meeting American military officers, and otherwise dealing with the demands of the postwar era in a humorous manner. Hasegawa started writing the comic right after the end of the war, and it draws strongly from the author’s life. But looking back, Sazae-san’s participation in ration distribution (fig. 14) seems less like a joke and more like a grim reminder of a difficult period in history.

*Kitaro*, released 20 years later, represents a Japan haltingly transforming into a modern country. Many images used in *Kitaro* reference older stories of ghosts and

monsters, which were popular in the early days of scroll artwork, but Mizuki set his story in the modern day. The yokai are the defenders of the old ways, as well as the protectors of humans from the malicious ancient forces that seek to harm them. They seem to have accepted that the world is changing, and are doing their best to make the transition a smooth one. Some story lines involve dealing with a spirit about to be displaced by highway construction, renting a supernatural office space, and fighting a battle to protect the people of an island from Western monsters who have come to destroy them (fig. 15). In many stories, the “evil” parts of old Japan are defeated, and the “good” parts like Kitaro and his clan go mostly unnoticed by the average human. Kitaro symbolizes traditional culture guiding the country’s transformation into modernity.

During World War II, most manga was propaganda encouraged by the government. However, pro-Imperial Japan manga abruptly disappeared after the war ended and the American occupation began in 1945. Occupation forces did not allow manga that could sow any dissent among the native people, including manga celebrating Japan’s pre-war history or combative activities. This meant no martial arts and no samurai.

However, after occupation ended in 1952, artists suddenly had much more liberty with their creations, so manga from this time is a closer representation of how people were actually thinking. This reveals certain anxieties that may have been felt about the outside world. The main conflict in Aohajo no Himitsu is that an Englishman is hiding in the mountains near a Japanese village, and has been mistaken for a ogre. The

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17 Koyama–Richard, One Thousand Years of Manga, 52.
19 Koyama–Richard, One Thousand Years of Manga, 133.
towards are ready to attack him, but are stopped by a child who is a fusion of Japan and the West—a Japanese boy raised by the foreigner to speak only English, who becomes a beloved member of a Japanese family. In the end, the Englishman (fig. 16) is aided in his return to Europe, and the boy stays with his adoptive family in Japan. Although the outside world is revealed not to be as dangerous as the townspeople think, they still prefer it back where it belongs, far away from them. This is not a surprising mentality from the 1950s, when the country was still trying to construct a unique modern identity.

By the 60s, manga artists were embracing their artistic freedom even further and writing on a wide variety of subjects. Simple gag comics evolved into complex serialized works, with great detail and craftsmanship becoming more and more common. Topics like samurai nobility came back into vogue, often meant to inspire young boys with their examples of selfless devotion to the good of the whole.\(^{20}\) Mitsuteru Yokoyama’s *Iga no Kagemaru* is set in a fantastical version of old Japan. The settings are realistic, but the characters fight with almost magical ninja powers of duplication, invisibility, and flight (fig. 17).

At the other end of this creative revival arose darker, more dramatic storylines.\(^{21}\) One example is *Gorugo 13*, a manga by Takao Saito that began in 1969 and is still ongoing. Its main character is a ruthless assassin who rarely talks and will kill anyone for the right price. He’s objectively a bad person, but his stoicism is meant to mirror

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bushido code. When he gets a target in his crosshairs, he evokes a samurai archer drawing his bow for the perfect shot (fig. 18).

Even as the past was heavily featured, there was also massive interest in the future. Science fiction gained popularity as a genre. The future, however painfully it arrived, was a tantalizing prospect for a country that nearly starved itself to death supporting a failing war effort. Robots, aliens, and time travelers abounded, most notably in famous works like Osamu Tezuka’s *Astro Boy* and Fujiko F. Fujio’s *Doraemon*. This fascination was also what gave birth to Matsumoto Reiji’s well-known *Captain Harlock*, a tale of a mysterious space pirate captain who fights to protect the world. His competent and reserved figure can also be seen as an homage to samurai values, and has inspired many other noble characters in later works.

A few decades earlier, Machiko Hasegawa was the first woman to become a successful manga artist in the postwar period. She started out as an assistant to a male artist, but was talented—and timely—enough to make it big on her own. *Sazae-san* ran from 1946 to 1974 and portrayed the daily life of a young woman living with her parents, two younger siblings, and eventually, her husband and son. Simple four-panel strips were popular at this time, and often featured families with cute children making the best of hard postwar times. A year after the strip began, the new Japanese constitution was enacted, including article 14. It protected the equality of women and minorities, and prohibited discrimination based on sex.

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Some of Sazae’s challenges, which always lead to a punchline, center around her klutziness and energy (fig. 19) that are not considered appropriate for someone of her gender and role. However, she still tries to be a good homemaker, and it’s clear that she and her mother are relied upon to do so. Her personality is that of the “modern woman,” but her actions and relationship with her family are strictly traditional. Some parallels can be drawn with Blondie, the well-known American strip about a modern woman firmly in charge of her husband and family. Blondie actually ran in Japanese newspapers during the American occupation, but was replaced by Sazae-san only a few days after General MacArthur left Japan. One possible reason is that Sazae-san promoted a more conservative lifestyle, and that Blondie was too consumeristic for Japanese tastes—or at any rate, the tastes of those in power.

In Aohajo no Himitsu, which was published in 1975, the one female character is the daughter of the family who adopts the protagonist. He is a much younger child, but still more powerful than she. They meet when he rescues her from some thugs, and she brings him home and teaches him Japanese (fig. 20). This nurturing role represents the “good wife, wise mother” ideology that was popular in Japan at the time.

In Gorugo 13, more than 10 years later, that aspect of womanhood has disappeared. The nature of the story is not one that allows for nurturing, and women are instead mainly present for the main character to sleep with between scenes of action. An interesting form of equality exists, however, in the fact that both men and women are frequent targets of assassination. After another 10 years, when humanity has taken to the stars in Captain Harlock, women appear in roles comparable to men. The space

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captain Queen Emeraldas is a parallel to Captain Harlock in her strength and stoicism, and her mother features as an all-powerful villain. The fan wiki for the series says that Reiji Matsumoto believes that men must put everything on the line for their dreams, and finds women mysterious. However, it seems like many of his female characters are just as powerful as the men.

Limitations

These observations are limited in their scope and depth. Early examples of manga are rare outside of Japan, and even within the country, early mass-produced volumes don’t have a high chance of surviving intact. I have done my best to locate as much early manga as possible, but it would be useful to have more older material to analyze. However, MSU’s Special Collections does have examples of many famous works, which can be representative of general trends based on their popularity and influence. It may be possible to find more examples of early well-known work in republished or even translated editions, but I was also interested in the characteristics of the original volumes, so I tried to find first-edition Japanese language manga whenever possible. The Special Collections also does not have much in the way of early shojo, or “girl’s manga,” which could provide important evidence of portrayals of women. Shojo is often written by women for women, so it would support an analysis of how women saw themselves during the mid 20th century.

Another limitation is my fluency in Japanese. I could understand a good deal of the text and plot (aided by the illustrations), but it would take much more time for

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someone of my skill level to fully understand any of these stories. For well-known works, I have referenced others’ translations and summaries. I am less confident in my reading of plot and linguistic nuances than in my evaluation of theme and physical characteristics.

Conclusion

There are various trends observable throughout this selection of postwar manga. One is that art becomes more and more complex, from line drawings to elaborate spreads with detailed characters and backgrounds. This is likely due to the reputation manga developed as a legitimate art form and storytelling method, as opposed to just a children’s diversion. A contrast should be made, however, between gag manga like *Sazae-san* and narrative manga that seeks to tell a plot and character-driven story. The fact that a *Sazae-san* anime show still runs in Japan today tells us that simple art is not obsolete. However, as printing methods advanced and artists gained both confidence and freedom, more elaborate art and stories naturally surfaced. The mature themes and images of violence, murder, and sex that can be seen in later works, especially *Gorugo 13*, point to a medium that evolved enough in the eyes of readers to be accepted as a vehicle for serious topics. Indeed, manga is not a genre, it is a medium through which stories as diverse as those in novels or films can be told.

The setting of these manga broadens from current-day Japan in *Sazae-san* to reminiscences of bygone eras in *Aohajo no Himitsu* and *Iga no Kagemaru*, to the international intrigue of *Gorugo 13* to the galaxy-spanning adventures of *Captain Harlock*. Once postwar censorship was relaxed, the scope of artists—and the interest of
their audience—grew. In the 1940s, Japan was still traumatized by the difficult war, the painful loss, and the controlling American occupation. Perhaps topics close to home were all they had the energy to enjoy. The image of Sazae-san’s happy family embracing the changing world and still retaining traditional values must have comforting and inspirational. As time went on and the nation recovered, it became easier to look outwards and forwards into the excitement the rest of the world and the future had to offer. Works created during this time have made manga into the international sensation it is today, and artists like Osamu Tezuka and Reiji Matsumoto are still famous for their contributions. As the medium continues to evolve, young writers are still referencing the art and themes of postwar manga.
Figures

Fig. 1: Cover of Aohajo no Himitsu
Fig. 2: Cover of Kaze Kozou

Fig. 3: Kitaro cover
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Fig. 19: Sazae is over-energetic

Fig. 20: Teaching Japanese. Note the katakana in the boy’s first responses—in English
Bibliography


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