

# READING JAPAN COOL

Patterns of Manga Literacy and Discourse



JOHN E. INGULSRUD  
and KATE ALLEN

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## Preface

*Reading Japan Cool: Patterns of Manga Literacy* is a culmination of a project that has taken nearly eleven years to complete. It began in response to the findings from a survey to our college students on their reading habits and their reading histories. Manga was repeatedly raised as something they were currently reading and had read since childhood. As teachers of reading and writing, we posed the following question: How does our students' manga literacy relate to other literacies? We also asked: What kind of skills do they possess that we are ignoring? Would a better understanding of these skills help students transfer this knowledge to other areas? Prompted by these questions, we began our project.

As we explain in chapter 1, we only became manga readers ourselves in response to our students' reading patterns. In the course of the project, we have become more knowledgeable and conversant on various manga works, but the world of manga is vast and we are continually amazed at the range of material that is being created and the enormous body of works from past years. We have attempted to link our findings from surveys and interviews with actual manga readers to similar kinds of findings in literacy studies around the world, admittedly in mostly English-speaking countries. We tried to avoid casting manga literacy as particularistic, meaningful only in the context of Japan. We suggest that the manga literacy practices and reading strategies resonate with those in other contexts, and that they inform us on how we understand literacy and media use in general.

In addition, we have provided a description of the study of manga. This was uncharted territory. To date we are not aware of a similar kind of review of the literature. We are well aware that there may be important gaps. Still, we hope the review can serve as a basis for subsequent students to provide more comprehensive descriptions. We have also described manga literacy in terms of the historical development of literacy in Japan. In so doing, we provide an account of the kind of literacy skills taught in school to contrast with manga literacy.

Because our research was conducted in Japan with Japanese-language readers of manga, we use the Japanese titles of the manga works we mention. Consequently, we have paid less attention to the English translations of the works. Where we can, we provide the English translation of the title. However, the medium keeps evolving with new titles translated and new editions with different English titles published. In spite of our efforts, they may not be satisfactory for many English-language manga readers.

When we introduce a Japanese word for the first time, we provide the word in Japanese scripts. The modified Hepburn system has been used for the romanized representation of Japanese. The system involves a macron over the long vowels. For Japanese names, we put the surname first, with the given name following. Exceptions for these conventions are made for names of authors of English-language works, names of companies and brands, and romanized titles of manga, often with the expressed wishes of creators and publishers.

Transcripts from interviews are interspersed throughout the book. If the transcript is in brackets, this indicates that it has been translated from Japanese. If it is simply in quotation marks, then the interview was conducted in English. For these transcripts, we have not “corrected” the English. There are two reasons for this. The first one is a socio-linguistic position regarding world Englishes. Native-speaker norms do not have to apply ubiquitously. The other reason is that these transcripts are actually more expressive and to the point than the translated ones.

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JAPAN HAS OFTEN BEEN DESCRIBED AS a highly literate nation, boasting literacy rates of nearly 100 percent. While it may be difficult to substantiate such high rates in literacy skills, the perception exists, both in Japan and abroad, that Japanese people are highly literate. In recent years, however, newspaper articles have regularly drawn attention to the decline of literacy skills in Japan. Headlines such as these describe a literacy crisis: “Book-Reading Rate on Decline, Survey Says,”<sup>1</sup> “Diet Group Wants Japan to Get Back to the Books,”<sup>2</sup> and “Ministry Acknowledges Falling School Performance.”<sup>3</sup> A drop in rank from eighth to fourteenth position in the 2005 Program for International Student Assessment, followed by a further decline in the 2006 survey by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, acutely intensified this sense of crisis, putting Japan in the company of Britain and the United States, both of whom complain of declining literacy skills.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from a decline in academic skills, the lack of interest in reading among school children is seen to have multiple effects. One concern is that young people have poor language skills, such as difficulty using *kanji* 漢字 (Chinese characters) and properly using honorifics when speaking to elders or people of higher status.<sup>5</sup> The decline in literacy skills is linked to worries about economic success and the preservation of cultural values, as emphasized by this lawmaker’s comments: “Widespread concern over the nation’s future and a sense of crisis regarding print culture—they’re like the two sides of the coin.”<sup>6</sup>

In spite of these concerns, the official response by the government to the perceived literacy crisis has been inconsistent. In 2001, the Japanese government passed a bill to increase spending on books for school libraries and to encourage schools to allocate more time for reading.<sup>7</sup> In 2005, another law was passed intended to promote literacy skills. Among the various proposals in the 2005 bill was that the government would encourage the development of school and community libraries. Furthermore, in order to foster public awareness of the importance of reading, a Print Culture Day was to be declared.<sup>8</sup> However, building more libraries, training more teacher-librarians, and



having more reading time in school provide only part of the solution. Despite the previous 2001 law promoting reading, few local governments acted. Instead, money allocated for reading promotion was used for purposes other than purchasing books.<sup>9</sup> Even when funds were directed specifically for this purpose, little guidance was given in regard to buying books that were of interest to children. One school principal received the focus of the media because he was seen to have successfully promoted reading in his middle school. As part of his strategy, this businessman-turned-principal stated that “[t]he library has dared to abandon many books unpopular with students.”<sup>10</sup> Despite efforts to encourage reading in school, there is limited attention paid to what children read out of school. This divide between literacy practices in school and literacy practices elsewhere has also been identified by literacy studies in Australia, Britain, and the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Japanese media describe young people as *katsujibanare sedai* 活字離れ世代 (the generation withdrawing from print), there is a current upsurge in writing novels to be read on mobile phones.<sup>12</sup> Prize-winning cyber-author Towasan explains that she set the installments of her serialized novel on her website, and she completed her novel based on the response and suggestions from readers.<sup>13</sup> In a television interview, Towasan explained that she had never read novels. Instead, she read lots of manga.<sup>14</sup> What is it about her manga literacy that relates to her ability to write mobile-phone cyber novels?

## Becoming Manga-Literate

Our interest in reading manga comes not from being avid readers of manga or even comics. We studied early literacy in China<sup>15</sup> and continued studying the same topic even after we relocated to Japan. However, after surveying our college-age students about their reading habits, we discovered that reading manga not only played a large role in their current literacy practices but that manga existed throughout their development of literacy skills.

Our initial survey on reading practices was administered in 1997. We then developed a survey that specifically focused on the reading of manga and later administered it to junior high school students in 2002, followed by senior high school students in 2005 (see chapter 4). At the same time, our project to study manga literacy compelled us to be manga readers ourselves. John Ingulsrud, although bilingual in Japanese and English, never learned to read manga regularly, in spite of having grown up in Japan. Kate Allen only began to learn Japanese when she came to Japan in 1995. Therefore the two of us, in middle age, embarked on learning to read a new medium. It was not easy; the panels came at us with a cacophony of symbols and images, and the main problems of comprehension were not linguistic ones. We did not get a teacher nor go to classes. Like many of our respondents, we read the manga again and again, concentrating first on works that were easy to understand. Through this experience, we are convinced that manga literacy does not just happen and that reading manga is far from a mindless activity. In 2000, we

began reading the weekly *Morning*, published by the large publishing company Kodansha. This is an “adult” manga magazine containing titles of human interest and social critique. Since then, we have purchased, read, and stored each copy. Although it has taken time to become fluent readers, we now enjoy reading *Morning* and look forward to the serialized installments of many of its titles.

By being manga readers, we participate in the manga economy. Manga publishing in Japan is a US\$4.5 billion market and accounts for nearly a fourth of the total publishing market.<sup>16</sup> These publications range from manga for children to manga for adults and cover every conceivable topic from sports, romance, drama, science fiction, adventure, and mystery to niche interests such as business enterprises, gambling, fishing, cooking, and childrearing. Japanese manga are classified into a number of categories roughly corresponding to different age and gender groups: *kodomo* 子ども (children); *shōnen* 少年 (boys); *shōjo* 少女 (girls); *seinen* 青年 and *yangu* ヤング (young adult men); *redizu* レディース and *fujin* 婦人 (women); and *seijin* 成人 and *shakaijin* 社会人 (adult men and, increasingly, women) manga. The market is evenly balanced between manga geared toward children and those targeting adults. In addition, there is a growing market for self-published *dōjinshi* 同人誌, manga “fanzines,” parodies, and original works with large *Comiket* (comic market) conventions. Successful manga generate spin-offs such as toys, costumes, and other media products like animation series, light novels, television dramatizations, movies, and video games.

Most manga titles appear first in periodicals published in weekly, biweekly, or monthly intervals. They are readily available in bookshops, convenience stores, and station kiosks, but are generally not available by subscription.<sup>17</sup> *Shōnen* manga, for instance, come in volumes of over four hundred pages published on a weekly basis. These manga volumes may contain up to twenty serialized stories. The stories are printed on recycled newsprint, and except for the cover and a few pages of advertisements, they are set in black and printed on white or light-colored paper. Often groups of stories are printed in different colored text, giving a rainbow effect to thick volumes. These periodicals are inexpensive and read quickly.

Unlike our own manga literacy practice, manga magazines are not intended to be kept and are usually thrown away soon after reading. However, individual titles that are considered successful are later republished as paperback books (*tankōbon* 単行本) called *komikku* コミック (bound comics) or *komikkusu* コミックス, depending on whether it is singular or plural. It is unnecessary to mark the plural for Japanese nouns, but some writers are careful to do so for many English loan words. Once a title has assumed some staying power, it can be published as a *bunkobon* 文庫本. This is still a paperback, but possesses the same paper and binding quality of “proper” novels. These paperbacks are more expensive to buy than manga magazines. After reading the titles in manga magazines, many people collect the bound versions of their favorite series. In our survey of high school students, nearly 75 percent reported that they collected manga *komikkusu*. Some of the well-known titles are available in public libraries, but from our own investigation of local Tokyo

public libraries, the selection is limited. There is greater selection at manga Internet cafes where manga *komikkusu* line the walls, and customers can freely choose their favorite titles. In addition, there is a growing business in buying and selling used *komikkusu*. For example, at the used-book chain *Book Off*, manga volumes occupy over half of the shelf space.

Despite the popularity of manga, sales of new manga, both in magazine and *komikku* form, have declined steadily in the past ten years by as much as 20 percent. Sales of books and magazines have also declined. In fact, income from publishing *komikkusu* in 2005 has surpassed that of manga magazines for the first time.<sup>18</sup> Economic commentators suggest that the growth of manga Internet cafes and used bookstores has been the biggest reason for the decline in manga magazine sales.<sup>19</sup> Other reasons include the proliferation of the Internet, particularly the mobile-phone format, and the access to manga stories through these media, together with the continued popularity of manga stories in anime form or as television dramatizations. Nonetheless, it is misleading to judge readership or literacy solely in terms of consumer patterns.

As we describe in chapter 4, the world of the manga reader is complex. Based on our surveys administered to junior high school, senior high school, and college-age students, nearly all of our respondents are readers of manga or have been at various times in their lives. Their reading of manga is inextricably linked with other kinds of reading material, such as magazines and books. Manga reading is also connected with the use of different media like anime and television, as well as video games and the Internet. These forms of literacy can be combined with play, mediated by toys, costumes, and plastic models. These media have inspired new directions in product and industrial design.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it is difficult, perhaps inappropriate, to consider each kind of literacy practice, media accessing, or entertainment consumption in isolation. Together they form a body of cultural products, practices, and sensibilities that is increasingly called “Japanese cool,” “cool Japan,” or “Japan cool.” In our study of manga literacy, we document the connections to other media where possible, but the reason we focus on manga is that the manga characters, the stories, and indeed the literacy skills serve as a basis for these various media. The poster for the 2007 annual Manga Festival in Akihabara carried the following caption: Japanese Cool の原点 “Manga”! (Manga, the origin of Japanese Cool).<sup>21</sup>

Reading manga, according to our respondents and interviewees, can be both a communal practice and an individual one. Very few respondents have been taught how to read manga. Instead, they have been introduced or persuaded by friends, family members, television commercials, or simply picked up the manga that were lying around. Once the individual starts reading a manga, comprehending it involves skills at several levels. Manga are written in the comic format, combining the media of graphics and print. In the terminology of systemic-functional linguistics, these media are called modes. Thus the combination of graphics and print results in texts described as multimodal. For Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, meaning is conveyed at different levels, such as the layout of the pages, illustrations, words, and scripts.<sup>22</sup> A reader must process and interpret the meanings of these layers in order

to build an understanding of the text. In addition, the reader acquires expectations of how the manga narrative will be organized. Furthermore, the reader learns to recognize the intertextuality of past narratives and other voices.

Van Leeuwen specifically described how readers comprehend multimodal texts in stages, beginning with the graphics, then the large captions, and on down to the lexico-grammar, the words and sentences.<sup>23</sup> This observation is reminiscent of patterns of text comprehension, such as top-down/bottom-up or macro-/micro-structure that are well established in cognitive linguistics.<sup>24</sup> Although these studies describe the complexity of the reading process, there is no indication how many times a reader is supposed to read a text before comprehending it. We suspect the assumption is only once because the term “comprehension” is most usually associated with testing, and on tests there is only a single encounter. Furthermore, reading comprehension is also associated with speed. Quickly comprehending a text is valued more highly than comprehending at a slow pace.

In the case of manga, we are dealing with a kind of text in which the literacy skills of comprehension are not tested. For our respondents, they learn to read and read by their own volition.<sup>25</sup> Yet one surprising finding is that readers read the same manga over and over again. It is well known that young children repeatedly watch the same video, read the same picture book, and get pleasure out of having the same book read to them. However, our results show that the number of repeat readings does not decrease with age. Readers report that they notice different things each time they read. This discovery of new perspectives, they say, is one way that enhances the pleasure of reading manga.

### **Structural Features of Manga**

Before we describe in detail the nature of manga, it may be useful for those who are not familiar with them to present some of the structural features of manga. To begin with, a manga page, as with any page from a comic, is presented in configurations of panels set in frames. This distinguishes manga from other media. Within the medium, there are different structural genres: the single panel cartoon, the four- to eight-panel gag manga or comic strip, and the story manga or graphic novel. The locus of the information is in the graphics, speech balloons, and occasional commentary, as well as the arrangement of panels itself. Yet not every scene is depicted. The creator has selected scenes to illustrate; therefore, the so-called gutter or border between the panels contains information that requires the reader to infer. At the same time, you cannot read a manga or comic aloud to anyone unless they are reading along with you. The lines in the speech balloons alone are insufficient to understand the text. On the other hand, the graphics alone are insufficient to understand the text. Senko Maynard, for example, included an excerpted text from the manga *Crayon Shin-chan* in the appendix of her book, *Principles of Japanese Discourse*. There are no graphics. The lines of the speech balloons are simply rendered as prose, and as such, they are incomprehensible.<sup>26</sup>

Then how do we process manga? At the simplest level, there are four rectangular panels to a page, and they are read from right to left, top to bottom. The less important information is at the top of the page, while the more important details are in the lower part.<sup>27</sup> However, there is considerable variation in the size, shape, and number of panels to a page employed for pragmatic and literary effect. These techniques affect the comprehension or level of appreciation of the reader. In addition to the panels and graphics, there are symbols to indicate movement, sound volume, tactile qualities, and emotional states. The graphics are usually accompanied by linguistic text in speech balloons. The auditory and tactile information expressed linguistically in onomatopoeia (*onyu* 音喩) and qualities of texture (*gitaigo* 擬態語), as well as the non-linguistic graphic symbols (*keiyu* 形喩) representing movement and intensity, are merged in with the illustrations.<sup>28</sup> Yet manga readers have the additional task of knowing the four kinds of scripts that are employed in manga. These are *kanji*, the two syllabaries of *hiragana* ひらがな and *katakana* カタカナ, and finally *rōmaji* ローマ字 (roman letters). The scripts can vary in how they are presented—that is, horizontally (right to left, left to right) or vertically (top to bottom). Furthermore, the reading of the scripts may be facilitated or hindered by the kinds of fonts used, as well as by the font size. These features provide creators with the resources to make lively and distinctive dialogue for their characters.

Although many manga contain explanatory information to help the reader comprehend the story, the bulk of the linguistic information is dialogic, placed in the speech and thought balloons. The shapes of the balloons also provide pragmatic information, indicating the nature and intensity of the message. Thus even before actually reading the content of the balloons, readers can acquire a sense of what the speaker intends by the way the speech balloons are represented. For instance, balloons with sharp jagged edges may suggest shock or surprise. The size and font of the lettering in relation to the balloon can also indicate the volume of speech or intensity of thought. Curved or jagged lines and the number of lines all depict movement and psychological states.

These techniques to enhance the speech balloons relate to motion lines and other graphic symbols. The symbols and techniques are called “emenata” by many comics creators.<sup>29</sup> To illustrate how a specific kind of emenata can provide a plethora of polysemy, we borrow the example of drops of liquid provided by Takekuma Kentarō, as shown in table 1.1.<sup>30</sup> These drops can represent water, sweat, tears, saliva, and nasal discharge. Drops referring to water, most often, simply denote the physical state of water and being wet. Water drops can indicate the emptiness of a vessel. Drops representing sweat denote feeling hot, but can also represent anxiety, stress, or surprise. Sweat can also mean irritation

**Table 1.1: Denotation and Connotation for “Drops of Liquid”**

Type of “drops”	Denotation	Connotation
Water	Rain and “wetness”	Emptiness (of a bottle)
Sweat	Feeling hot	Anxiety, stress, or surprise; irritation or anger
Tears	Weeping	Irritation or anger
Saliva	Appetite for food	Consumer or sexual appetite
Nasal discharge	Nasal discharge	Fatigue, sickness, drunkenness, or sexual arousal

**Table 1.2: Binary Feature Analysis of Connotations for “Drops of Liquid”**

	<i>Water</i>	<i>Sweat</i>	<i>Tears</i>	<i>Saliva</i>	<i>Nasal discharge</i>
Emptiness	+	-	-	-	-
Anxiety	-	+	-	-	-
Stress	-	+	-	-	-
Surprise	-	+	-	-	-
Irritation	-	+	+	-	-
Anger	-	+	+	-	-
Sadness	-	-	+	-	-
Hunger	-	-	-	+	-
Consumer appetite	-	-	-	+	-
Sexual appetite or arousal	-	-	-	+	+
Fatigue	-	-	-	-	+
Sickness	-	-	-	-	+
Drunkenness	-	-	-	-	+

or anger. Drops representing tears denote crying and connote a heightened emotional state, suggesting anger and irritation. Here the subtleties of meaning overlap with sweat. This overlap raises questions regarding the representation of gender. Drops representing saliva denote an appetite for food, but connote many kinds of appetites, including sexual and consumer appetites. Drops representing nasal discharge, in contrast to the others, hardly ever denote nasal discharge itself—unless the character’s cold is part of the story. Takekuma describes nasal discharge as representing a character’s loss of self-control. This could mean a state of fatigue, sickness, drunkenness, or sexual arousal.

We have just analyzed the semantics of drops of liquid in terms of denotation and connotation. This kind of binary conceptualization comes out of structural linguistics. Pierre Masson, for instance, has extensively applied structural analysis to comics.<sup>31</sup> No doubt more effort at applying structural categories may produce some results in understanding manga, but few symbols and categories can be organized as neatly as the analysis of drops of liquid. Table 1.2 illustrates this kind of analysis.

Recently, a great deal of information is offered to English language readers through magazines on manga and its kindred media, such as anime, light novels, computer and video games. There is also information in commentaries that accompany translations of manga and on Internet sites. For many years, Frederik Schodt’s works, *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* and *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*, have served to introduce manga to the English-speaking world and to describe comic-manga connections. More recently, Paul Gravett’s *Manga: 60 Years of Japanese Comics* provides a colorful and readable introduction to manga, with informative descriptions of the various genres. We provide a summary of manga genres here because readers interested in manga literacy may not be familiar with the range of material.

### **Basic Categories of Manga—Age and Gender**

Although manga are written for specific age groups and gender, these categories have become increasingly blurred. For instance, aspects that typify *shōjo* manga for girls, such as big eyes and free-form panel arrangements, are found now in *shōnen* manga, which

are typically targeted at the male adolescent market. Manga readers have reported (see chapter 6) that girls read both *shōjo* and *shōnen* manga. In spite of these defined markets, manga written for people of differing age groups are sold in the same bookshops, and the traditional classifications are still employed in their placement on the shelves. In presenting these categories, there is a danger of assuming that each one is comparable in readership, numbers of titles, and range of topics. The *shōnen* and the “adult” versions of *shōnen* manga (i.e., *yanpu* and *seijin* manga) comprise the largest category and thus are seen as the typical category (unmarked category) of manga, while the other categories are seen as special (marked categories) in contrast to them. Yet at the same time, developments coming out of *shōjo* manga are considered to be more innovative.

In the following sections, we briefly describe the basic age and gender-related categories of manga. The description here begins with manga targeted at young children, then the ones for adolescent boys and girls, followed by those for young adults, and, finally, the wide range of manga available for adult readers. These basic categories of age and gender remain stable, in spite of the continual fluctuations in stylistic representation.

### *Children’s Manga*

Manga for children (*kodomo* manga) can be described as entry-level *shōnen* and *shōjo* manga.<sup>32</sup> Two examples of children’s manga magazines are *COROCORO* and *Ciao*.



Figure 1.1. *COROCORO* and *Ciao* (Covers from *COROCORO* and *Ciao*. © 2007 by Shogakukan. Reprinted with permission of Shogakukan.)

for boys and *Ciao* for girls, both published by Shogakukan. Figure 1.1 presents the covers of the popular manga magazines. Many of the titles that originated in these magazines have been produced as anime, thereby increasing their distribution to a global audience. Indeed, it is these titles that would be most familiar to a non-Japanese reading audience. A number of the popular titles include *Doraemon*, *Asarichan*, *Chibi Marukochan*, and *Pocket Monsters*, a title developed out of a popular video game.<sup>33</sup>

Some commentators claim that there are too few children's manga published and the range of titles available is too limited.<sup>34</sup> For a sales-sensitive industry, the consumer, that is, the young child, is dependent on parental purchasing patterns. When children begin to receive allowances, they are free to purchase manga themselves. Our surveys revealed that while a number of interviewees described beginning with children's manga, far more respondents reported that they began with *shōnen* and *shōjo* manga designed for an older readership. Some publishers, like Shueisha and Kodansha, begin their lines with *shōnen* manga magazines, but also include titles for younger readers, like *DRAGON BALL*.

### *Shōnen Manga*

*Shōnen* manga, although targeted at adolescent boys, is read by the greatest number of readers and possesses the largest number of titles. Most of the popular periodicals are published weekly and sold in large volumes containing over four hundred pages. These are printed on rough newsprint and cost less than two dollars. Boys, girls, young men, and adult men tend to read *shōnen* manga.

Frederik Schodt has described *shōnen* manga stories as possessing three main features—friendship, perseverance, and winning. These features make for upbeat



Figure 1.2. *Ashita no Joe* and *THE PRINCE OF TENNIS* (Cover from *Ashita no Joe 12* by Takamori Asao and Chiba Tetsuya. © 1993 by Kodansha Comics. Reprinted with permission of Kodansha. Cover from *THE PRINCE OF TENNIS* © 1999 by Takeshi Konomi/SHUEISHA Inc.)



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