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Book Review

Andrea Horbinski: Manga's First Century: How Creators and Fans Made Japanese Comics, 1905–1989

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Andrea Horbinski: Manga's First Century: How Creators and Fans Made Japanese Comics, 1905–1989

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Manga's First Century is based on Andrea Horbinski's 2017 dissertation [Manga's Global Century](#), completed at the University of California, Berkeley. The book, Horbinski explains at the start, "began in the spring of 2011 as a twinkle in my advisor Andrew Barshay's eye." Barshay remarked, "We still don't have a good history of manga [...] You would be good at that," and, "after about five seconds' thought, I decided that Barshay was right" (xi). In October 2025, the final version of this project was published by the University of California Press: it is 418 pages long, includes 20 greyscale illustrations and eleven color plates, and has one of the most appealing front and back cover designs I have ever seen in an academic monograph.

The book divides the history of manga into five parts: "Origins, 1905–1928," "Manga during Wartime, 1928–1945," "Manga in the Postwar Era, 1945–1963," "TV Manga and the Age of Revolution, 1963–1975," and "Manga Turns Postmodern, 1975–1989." Horbinski explains the overall timeframe, 1905–1989, with the founding of *Tokyo Puck*, "the first manga magazine" (14), in 1905 and the deaths of Japanese Emperor Hirohito and comics creators Tezuka Osamu and Tagawa Suihō in 1989 ("and more" [5], such as the fall of the Berlin Wall).

Horbinski's concept of manga is expansive. Manga is defined early on as "Japanese comics" (13), but 'comics' is left undefined. The book says about illustrated stories called manga manbun, one of the forms covered as manga, that it "fails every kind of manga litmus test other than 'Is it called manga?'" (33), implying that the main criterion is semantic (though Horbinski excludes the Hokusai manga). The rejection of an explicit delineation of what is and isn't manga allows *Manga's First Century* to cover works ranging from political single-panel cartoons to "interstitial manga" (magazine illustrations), "proletarian manga" (socialist art), the book volumes sold globally as manga today, and fan-created works sold at conventions. As the book's story progresses through time, some forms drop out of it, such as political cartoons, which are no longer mentioned after 1945, creating a history of manga as a flexible entity changing over time rather than as a specific form. The story Horbinski presents is an entertaining read. Her writing style is forceful and playful and successfully prevents the book from ever becoming overly dry, sweeping the reader along on a whirlwind journey.

The book's overarching argument roughly goes like this: manga started, a good decade before 1905, as a hybrid form of modern political cartoons in opposition to *ponchi-e*, an earlier, less modern hybrid form of cartooning. It then expanded to encompass a large variety of comics, including elite manga, nonsense manga, children's manga, and proletarian manga. During the 1930s, children's manga, most notably Tagawa Suihō's *Norakuro* (a serialized comic about an anthropomorphic dog soldier), became the most popular of these forms. In the postwar period, children's manga were further popularized by the works

of Tezuka Osamu, whose android *Astro Boy* also became the first TV manga (*anime*). Around 1960, a crop of young comics creators wanting to make more mature comics became known as the *gekiga* (dramatic pictures) movement and expanded manga's audience. In the 1970s, a new generation of women making manga revolutionized comics for girls, and fan-created *dōjinshi* (zines), sold at conventions, took off, with *dōjinshi* eventually dwarfing the professional manga industry in terms of output, a sign of manga's postmodern turn.

The cornerstones of this narrative belong to a familiar path, presented in similar ways in earlier texts, such as *Manga: A Critical Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022) by CJ Suzuki and Ron Stewart. Horbinski's most notable divergences from established manga historiography are her focus on "nonsense manga" (mentioned 63 times) in the 1920s and 1930s, and *dōjinshi* (mentioned 145 times, with *dōjin* mentioned another 86) in the 1970s and 1980s. The book justifies the centrality of "nonsense manga" by stating that many "American newspaper comics were published in Japan as nonsense manga" (54) and that "these foreign comics were universally known as 'nonsense manga' in Japan" (307). Given the originality of these claims and scant known evidence for them in primary and secondary sources, it is surprising that *Manga's First Century* does not justify them.

The implied reason for the book's focus on *dōjinshi* (amateur publications) in the section on the years 1975 to 1989 over star creators from that period, such as Toriyama Akira and Ōtomo Katsuhiro, is that *dōjinshi* "operate on a scale that dwarfs the official publishing industry" (310) and that "the *dōjin* sphere is now both upstream and downstream of the professional manga industry, whose output it dwarfs" (315). Horbinski's argument that *dōjinshi* have become a new core of manga production, "dwarfing" the professional industry, would have major implications for how we understand manga and its history. *Manga's First Century* does not specify the standard on which this claim is based, such as overall revenue, total pages printed, number of readers, or diversity of titles, nor does the book cite data to support it. Horbinski offers three sources in footnotes linked to the claim; when I checked the cited sources, one mentioned the growth of *dōjinshi* in general, but none made or supported a comparative claim vis-à-vis the professional industry. *Manga's First Century's* most original and potentially impactful claims are thus left unsupported.

This is true for some of the book's other claims as well. About manga's origins, Horbinski repeatedly emphasizes that early manga were exclusively political. According to *Manga's First Century*, cartoonist Imaizumi Ippyō in the late 19th century adopted the term manga "to differentiate his 'high-class' political cartoons from the more lowbrow *ponchi-e* in other newspapers" (3), making manga "an upstart art form that consisted exclusively of 'high-collar' political satire" (15). In Horbinski's words, it was only with Okamoto Ippei's *manga manbun*, after Imaizumi's death, that manga was expanded "beyond the strict definition of 'political cartoons'" (4). But several texts listed in *Manga's First Century's* bibliography reproduce or discuss cartoons published by Imaizumi that are based on jokes that have no evident political component. At least two manga published by Imaizumi use the internationally popular late-nineteenth-century 'hosed gardener' gag, in which a prankster blocks a water hose, only for the gardener to check it and the water to be released into the gardener's face—not exactly high-class political satire.

About contemporary manga, on the other hand, Horbinski asserts that "[manga] magazines do not even have tables of contents, the better to force readers to flip through them" (313). Most magazines do have tables of contents, however, except that they are usually located in the back. About *shōjo manga* (girls' comics) between 1963 and 1975, *Manga's First Century* claims that they were "still locked in the



older one-shot story paradigm” (217), but this, too, is not accurate; serialized comics with continuing stories developing over multiple episodes had become a standard feature of girls’ magazines after the success of Tezuka Osamu’s *Princess Knight*, serialized from 1953 to 1956, already. This is even mentioned later in the same chapter, creating a contradiction within the text. That passage mentioning *Princess Knight* introduces a different error, however, claiming that “girls’ magazines in the 1950s began publishing serialized manga for the first time” (225), when Japanese girls’ magazines had already been publishing serialized comics since the 1920s (with episodes being largely self-contained). *Manga’s First Century* itself elsewhere mentions a manga serialized in a girls’ magazine in the early 1940s (cf. 139). These internal inconsistencies appear to stem from the synthesis of conflicting claims found in different secondary sources.

Some Japanese-language sources are misinterpreted. Horbinski mentions “an April 1955 article in the evening *Asahi Shinbun*, which condemned a book of pornography, *Issei teire*” (175), for example, but the cited article, rather than condemning a book by that title, is reporting on a simultaneous (*issei*) police raid (*teire*) on rental bookstores carrying erotic books. Elsewhere, *Manga’s First Century* speaks of *shōjo manga* artist Hagio Moto’s “signature innovation of diagonal lines” and “style of diagonal lines” (242), citing Hagio’s colleague Takemiya Keiko, but what Takemiya is talking about in the cited passage is not a general use or style of diagonal lines but specifically Hagio’s depiction of foliage through tone and shading (by drawing diagonal hatch lines) rather than through outlines of individual leaves.

Many Japanese terms and names are misspelled or misread (often consistently), such as Asō Yutaka as “Asō Yukata” (41; 396; 408), *masukomi* as “masukomii” (214; 215; 397; 407), Nakajima Kikuo as “Nakajima Sakuo” (80; 118; 402; 408), *mangakai* as “mangakkai” (36ff.; 27 instances), and Togetsu Shobō as “Ugatsu Shobō” (168). *Manga’s First Century* even mixes up Kōdansha’s *Weekly Shōnen Magazine* and Kōbunsha’s monthly magazine *Shōnen*. Tezuka’s *Astro Boy* was serialized in the latter, but *Manga’s First Century* ascribes it to the former (cf. 227), which had not yet been founded when *Astro Boy* was created. While discussing girls’ comics, the book also claims about Kōdansha that in contrast to rival publisher Shōgakukan, Kōdansha “had been slow to adopt the new weekly paradigm” (239), even though Kōdansha had been the first major publisher to issue a weekly girls’ magazine, several years before Shōgakukan.

The above are only a few examples of the factual errors in the book, and their frequency and severity prevent the book from serving as a reliable reference. The book’s entertaining style and visual appeal are sure to make it popular with a broad audience—it has already been nominated for a Will Eisner Comics Industry Award for Best Academic/Scholarly Work—but specialists in the field will view *Manga’s First Century* differently than readers who are less familiar with the historiography of manga. For a drier but more reliable survey of manga history that employs a similar historical framework while covering more ground, readers may want to opt for Suzuki and Stewart’s *Manga: A Critical Guide* instead. Notwithstanding the problems identified above, *Manga’s First Century*’s extensive bibliography will constitute a useful resource for scholars interested in manga history and may justify the book’s acquisition.