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## Commentary

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COMMENTARY

## *The Citi Exhibition Manga* マンガ (British Museum, 2019)

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This article presents a commentary on *The Citi exhibition Manga* (British Museum, 23 May–26 August 2019) from the point of view of a Southeast Asian who is a fan of manga and Japanese culture, but whose family history, like many in the region, was shaped by the outcome of World War 2. By considering the historical context and themes behind some key works, the article concludes that the exhibition succeeded in presenting manga and anime as the intermediary over which common values and sentiments can be shared by all, despite past grievances and political differences.

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**Keywords:** Asia; Exhibitions; Japanese Comics; Museums; World War II

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You make sense of *The Citi exhibition Manga* at the British Museum like you make sense out of a manga: you don't just read. You look at everything and you read between the lines. The white space between the panels and negative space matter just as much as the story. Likewise, to understand the exhibition, you observe what was displayed and what was intentionally left out from the curation.

Organised with The National Art Center, Tokyo and the Organisation for the Promotion of Manga and Anime as part of the Japan-UK Season of Culture 2019–20, with curatorial work supported by the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, *The Citi exhibition Manga* (23 May to 26 August 2019) featured 50 manga artists, 70 titles and 162 works that were divided into six zones. If manga is a narrative “driven by threading a succession of text and images” (Rousmaniere & Matsuba, 2019: 99), so was the curation of the exhibition. Section by section, visitors were taken through a time capsule where they discovered the history of manga, its relation to Japanese kabuki theatre and other visual medium, from the Meiji period to the age of anime.

As a Southeast Asian, my initial reaction to *the Citi exhibition Manga* was: 'Hey, things I read as a kid gets the validation of high culture. How nice.' The second reaction, as an anthropology postgrad, was: 'But why *the British Museum*? Isn't that where you deposit old artefacts and the Empire's loot of expired civilisations?'

I wasn't alone in thinking the British Museum was an odd choice. Artist Nakamura Hikaru said in the comprehensive 351-page guide to the show, *Manga*: "To be honest, it gives me a funny feeling to think that my manga is on display at the British Museum. It may look strange in a museum, as I think of manga as something that you read" (Rousmaniere & Matsuba, 2019: 18).

I asked the curator and also co-editor of the book, Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, about it at an event at Japan House. She was one of the speakers at the *Classical Arts x Digital Technologies* symposium which was held on 29 June 2019. Rousmaniere explained: "The British Museum has been collecting the manga since it was first published, back when the British Library was located at the British Museum" (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The British Museum, via The British Library, has been collecting manga ever since it was first published during the Meiji period. The library, which was based at the museum, was the connection between the museum exhibition and manga. Photo © 2019 Salina Christmas.

So that explains it. The museum, via the British Library, has been collecting manga periodicals ever since *Punch*-style *Nipponchi* was first published in 1874 (Rousmaniere & Matsuba, 2019: 108). And that's even before the first Japanese translation of *Alice In Wonderland* was published in 1899 (Rousmaniere & Matsuba, 2019: 46). Fantasy genre and its consumerist consequence, cosplay, are big amongst *otakus* or devotees of manga and anime. In fact, our journey through the looking glass of *Manga* began with a section on *Alice*, or rather, several manga adaptations of Lewis Carroll's world-famous novel. To the strictly *seinen*, this was *kawaii* (cute) overkill. To the rest of us, this was where the fun began.

## An Interesting Past

To understand up close recent works such as *Golden Kamuy*, *Tokyo Ghoul* and *Yona Of The Dawn*, one needs to step back and view manga's history through a wider angle. There are two key periods to consider:

- The Meiji Restoration of 1868 that led to the modernisation of Japan, industrialism, trade lobbies, editorial imports such as *Punch* and eventually, the birth of manga for mass consumption.
- The defeat of Japan in the Second World War in 1945. From heavy censorship under the Allied Occupation, manga – previously used as a medium of propaganda – embraced consumerism and pop culture for its survival, before returning to the discourse of identity politics in the late 60s.

The first 20 minutes of the exhibition for me was a lovely saunter through memory lane. 'Oh, look at that: *Doraemon*. Didn't we use to collect the stickers at school? *Dragon Ball*. No, I never really dug it. Stuff for boys.' Then I came across Tezuka Osamu's *Astro Boy* (1952–68), otherwise known as *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Atom With Iron Arms*), at Zone 2 of the exhibition. Of course, World War 2 would crop up at some point.

## Humanity under Scrutiny

*Astro Boy* (Figure 2) tells the story of a robot child created by a scientist to replace his son who died in a car accident. The child was later abandoned when it was clear that he could not, in the eyes of his 'father', become fully human. Nonetheless, *Astro Boy* gains his humanity by helping others.



**Figure 2:** Way before replicants questioned humanity in “Blade Runners”, Tezuka Osamu asked some serious questions about war, abandonment and post-trauma heartbreaks through “Astro Boy” (pictured) and “Dororo”. Photo © 2019 Zarina Holmes.

This theme of abandonment and anguish is a common thread that appears again and again in manga – especially in sci-fi and fantasy genres – be it *shoujo* (young girls), *shonen* (young boys) and *seinen* (young men). As a schoolboy, Tezuka witnessed his hometown Osaka destroyed by B-29 bombers. As a young man, he was beaten up

by an American soldier for trying to stop his manga, the merchandise he himself had drawn, from being ripped up (Tanaka, 2010). Barely a year after the Americans ended their occupation, Tezuka published his allegorical sci-fi about the future of humanity, or whatever's left of it (Hornyak, 2007).

Tezuka didn't have to resort to speculative fiction anymore to make his point by 1967. *Dororo* (1967–69) another seminal work, also focuses on the themes of abandonment and sins of the father. This time, however, it's a fiction based on history. In *Dororo*, the baby Hyakkimaru was sacrificed to demons by his own father, a *daimyou* or a lord, in exchange for peace and prosperity for his people. Hyakkimaru grows up blind, deaf, disabled – and angry. As he slays the demons one by one to collect his limbs, internal organs and five senses, Hyakkimaru, like *Astro Boy*, regains his humanity.

*Dororo* isn't displayed in the exhibition, although you can find the *Dororo* mouse mat at the museum's souvenir shop. This is a shame because the updated anime series was released only this year on Amazon Prime. There are many works of Tezuka that are outstanding, but *Astro Boy* and *Dororo* provide a good insight into Tezuka's anti-war stance.

## War: An Unlikely Romance

If *Astro Boy* is a pillar of solemnness amidst all the other light-hearted works at the exhibition, the 12-minute silent film, *Manga: no limits, Studio Ghibli in close-up*, got me feeling conflicted. It was shown in Zone 6, dedicated to anime, the point of which manga finally gets to meet the global audience. This and another silent film featured clips of Studio Ghibli's famous works. Amongst them were *Grave Of The Fireflies* (1988) and *The Wind Rises* (2013).

*Grave Of The Fireflies* is a World War 2 tearjerker about two orphans who become 'victims' of the war. We're not sure of the victim mentality of *Fireflies*, but we all agree it strikes a universal chord with regards to human compassion. In fact, I was first recommended to watch it by a South Korean friend – a fellow anthropologist – who admitted that she found it strange to cry whilst watching it when, really, it was Japan that invaded Korea.



*The Wind Rises* is a historical fiction based on the life of aircraft engineer Jiro Horikoshi, the designer of military aircraft for the Imperial Japanese Navy. When I saw the clip of Mitsubishi military aircraft disappearing into the blue horizon, eventually morphing into white swans, I began to wonder who this exhibition was pandering to. I wasn't offended. I just don't remember World War 2 being depicted as a soft-focus romance at school or at home.

I am a Malaysian of Malay and Chinese descent. My father was born in 1942 in pitch darkness as Japanese bombers flew overhead to bomb Singapore. His brother, a toddler, died of malnutrition. My mother's uncle – barely an adult – was sentenced to death by the Japanese; his little brother was then enrolled into Japanese school to learn the ways of the master. I totally get *Astro Boy*. I get it when Dr Tenma howls over his son's dead body. I get it when Astro Boy's home gets devastated by fire. I get it when Seita loses his sibling to starvation in *Fireflies*. But military aircrafts gliding placidly like some elegant swans over occupied territories? Only in anime, I suppose.

### **Soft Power at Play**

The apex of the exhibition was in Zone 3 and 4, dedicated to sports and music. In action drawing, manga and its offshoot, anime, reign supreme. Here, we got to see the best of strokes, outlines and inking techniques used to depict movements and temporality. Although martial arts were banned in occupied Japan, it didn't stop manga capitalising on Western sports such as boxing and baseball. Post-occupation, Japan still gets to export contact sports such as judo, karate, jujitsu, kendo, aikido and battodo (which I still grapple with).

The football manga, *Captain Tsubasa* (1981–88), was soft power in Arabic, distributed by Japan as it carried out reconstruction projects in Iraq (Rousmaniere & Matsuba, 2019: 158). Inoue Takahiko's *Slam Dunk* (1990–96) was such a visual feast of basketball action. Ishizuka Shin'ichi's *Blue Giant Supreme* (2016-ongoing), about a high school jazz saxophone player, was a study of line weighting: fine lines for the background, heavy lines for the body outline, fewer lines to imply light. Some publishers at MCM Comic Con complained that manga focuses too much on space, strokes, close-ups and tight frames at the expense of a coherent storyline. But what's manga without that intricate devil in the detail?

There was another type of play featured at the exhibition: sexual expression in printed form. Of course, *hentai* (porn) was not featured at the British Museum. Instead, we got to see Tagame Gengoroh's tastefully rendered *Ototo no Otto* (2014–17; **Figure 3**), a story about family relationships around same-sex marriage. From here on, we were shown examples of strokes and shades used to convey emotions via works such as *Saint Young Men* (2006-ongoing; **Figure 6**), *Red Flower* (1993) and *Olympia Kyklos* (2018-ongoing).

All these were hors d'oeuvres that whipped up our appetite for the centrepiece of the exhibition, Kawanabe Kyosai's *Shintomiza Theatre Curtain* (1880; **Figures 4 and 5**). The massive curtain was drawn by the artist within four hours whilst he downed crates of sake. "He might have drawn it in four hours, but he'd been thinking about it for a long time," said Tim Clark, Head of the Japanese section, British Museum, at the Japan House seminar we attended. The Kyosai curtain is an important



**Figure 3:** Tagame Gengoroh, from the series "*Ototo no Otto*" (*My Brother's Husband*), 2014–2017. Manga affords the privacy needed for readers to deliberate on various relationship issues that otherwise cannot be articulated publicly. © Gengoroh Tagame 2014. Photo © 2019 Salina Christmas.





**Figure 4:** Visitors inspecting manga on display. In the background is Kawanabe Kyosai's "Shintomiza Theatre Curtain" (1880), the ultimate point of reference of all the manga renderings on display at the exhibition. Photo © 2019 Salina Christmas.



**Figure 5:** Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889), Shintomi theatre curtain showing kabuki actors as monsters and ghosts 新富座妖怪引幕 河鍋暁斎. Ink and colour on cotton fabric, 1880. © Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, Waseda University. Courtesy of the British Museum's Manga Teachers Image Bank (2019).

artefact. Before the age of cinema, manga's art direction was heavily influenced by kabuki theatre posters and curtains. Later, the visual grammar shifted to perspectives similar to film and photography.

If the British Museum is a repository of loot taken from the expired and the vanquished, then it was quite a feat to have an artefact from a living nation – once



**Figure 6:** Jesus and Buddha seated at a table drawing their own manga. Nothing is impossible in manga. Nakamura Hikaru. 2014. Cover illustration for vol. 10 (May 2014) of collected manga from the series: *Saint Young Men* (*Saint Oniisan*, 聖☆おにいさん) 2014-ongoing. Digital colour print. © Nakamura Hiraku/Kodansha Ltd. British Museum, 2015, 3038.1. Courtesy of the British Museum's Manga Teachers Image Bank (2019).

subdued but never vanquished – exhibited here. The imposing Kyosai curtain is manga's way of telling us: 'You see all this fancy fodder of popular culture like Comic Con and Hyper Japan? They all have their roots in our great, old tradition'. And the British Museum acknowledged this cultural superiority by featuring Asirpa, the Ainu heroine of *Golden Kamuy* (2015-ongoing) as the poster girl for the exhibition. The Ainu people – a much oppressed minority – were finally acknowledged as indigenous under Japanese law in April 2019. *The Citi exhibition Manga* was truly soft power at play.

### **Dreaming of an Asian Century**

The exhibition, sponsored by an American bank, opened not long after the “beautiful harmony” *reiwa* era began on 1 May 2019. Despite yet another trade dispute between Japan and a neighbour in recent weeks (this time South Korea), this new era expresses the hope of a nation, and dare I say, the Asian side of the Pacific (The Nikkei Asian Review, 2015). To put things in perspective, the Sino-Japan war and the whole sorry business of World War 2 are a small blip in comparison with the 10,000 years of the diplomatic relationships in that region.

Japan got to defeat the British Empire in Asia not just by military prowess. It had the support of the European colonies, long fed-up with their imperial masters. Some truly bought into Imperial Japan's mantra, “Asia for Asians”. For this, princes turned against princes, cousins against cousins, across the region. Many, upon discovering that some Asians are more equal than others, felt betrayed. They weren't the only ones. There were unlikely 'victims', too: occupying soldiers, conscripts from Korea, Manchuria, Formosa (now Taiwan) and elsewhere who got lumped in our vast, unforgiving jungles. Like the Scottish Highland regiments who were left behind by the British to meet their maker through war and starvation, they, too, were abandoned. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were greeted not with joy but a fleeting relief that war was finally over.

The only common ground that the victims and perpetrators shared of that history is the perplexity over the senselessness of it all. Because of Japan, we broke free from the West. But our borders were split. We entered five decades of Cold War, communist uprisings, oppressions in Western-backed 'democracies', Year Zero and closed

door policies. The whole mess took seven decades to sort out. “Shikata ga nai.” It can’t be helped, said Emperor Hirohito.

Magically, manga and anime cleverly work as the glue that bonds us. We might not agree on the logic of war, or who the real victims were in World War 2, but when we follow *Dororo* and *Rurouni Kenshin* (1994–99), we wholeheartedly agree with the sentiments of our samurai protagonists: do we really have to build our nation on the flesh of our sons? Why the cruelty? Why is the line between demon and human so thin?

In 1930s, around the Second Sino-Japan War, the most popular theme in manga was samurai stories. Samurai stories are still prominent today, but more of a cautionary tale of what might have become lest we forget the past. “Evil did not manifest itself in specific characters in Tezuka’s stories; rather it emanated from dysfunctions of an oppressive society” (Rousmaniere & Matsuba, 2019: 115). That is pretty much the Buddhist view: there is no bad person, just a bad situation. Of course, you can’t simply follow this assumption without understanding the belief system. Buddhism doesn’t excuse evil. For this, I respect Tezuka for trying to explain the life of Siddharta volume by volume for his manga, *Buddha* (1972–83).

I am in awe of *The Citi exhibition Manga*. I am proud to see Asian culture enjoying this level of prominence at the British Museum. Our histories and cultures have long intertwine, and they weren’t always about empires, political posturing, trade wars and Sun Tzu’s *Art Of War*. There are other commonalities, too: we share a Buddhist heritage. We subscribe to Confucian values that put weight on knowledge seeking, filial piety, peace and harmony. We dream of an Asian Century. But the Asian Century we want is not based on hubris, superiority complex, ignorance and greed. We want one based on enlightenment, compassion and beautiful harmony. But whilst Asia slowly makes its way there, I’ll enjoy the poetic justice and comfort that fictions like *Dororo* and *Rurouni Kenshin* give to me.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### Author Note

I based my commentary on lectures and comic events attended, and manga books and anime films consumed for the past three months. My aim is for an exhibition review that has a longer shelf life for discussions.

For referencing names, I have followed the Japanese naming convention: surname first, given name second. Manga and anime are dated as start year-finish year. The event is referenced in past tense, to take into consideration that the article might be read after the exhibition is over.

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