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Strangers in a Strange Land:
Foreign-born *Mangaka* and the Future of the 'Japanese' Comic Industry

A Thesis Presented

by

MICHELE FUJII

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2018

Japanese
East Asian Languages and Cultures

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND:
FOREIGN-BORN *MANGAKA* AND THE FUTURE OF THE
'JAPANESE' COMIC INDUSTRY

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All translations from Japanese to English are my own unless otherwise indicated. For Japanese individuals, the family name precedes the given name with few exceptions.

ABSTRACT

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND: FOREIGN-BORN MANGAKA AND THE FUTURE OF THE 'JAPANESE' COMIC INDUSTRY

MAY 2018

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This thesis addresses the phenomenon of the recent success of foreign-born *mangaka* in the Japanese comic industry. One in a long line of foreigners who have written about Japan, Swedish *mangaka* Åsa Ekström is a representative example whose success has been facilitated by a set of circumstances brought on by the influence of the international manga market, socio-economic policies stemming from the unique challenges presented by Japan's declining birthrate and rapidly aging population, and changes in the landscape of the Japanese publishing industry. Drawing upon themes and excerpts from Ekström's popular comic essay series, *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan* (*Hokuō joshi Ōsa ga mitsuketa Nihon no fushigi* 北欧女子オーサが見つけた日本の不思議), this thesis explores those facets of her skilled background in conjunction with the aforementioned circumstances that have contributed to her success, including the influence of internationalization, effects of an increasingly digitized publishing industry, and proliferation of vocational manga schools encouraging overseas student enrollment. By doing so, this thesis attempts to answer the question of whether foreign participation in what has been traditionally considered a closed market is reflective of a globalizing Japan, and determine the future of the market for comic essays by foreign-born *mangaka*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Foreign-born Authors of Japanese Language Works	1
1.2 An Introduction to Comic Essays	5
1.2.1 Platform and Appeal: The Role of Comedy in Comic Essays	5
1.2.2 The History of Comic Essays	7
1.2.3 Recent Trend: Transnational/Transcultural Themes	8
1.3 What This Thesis Intends to Examine	11
2. ÅSA EKSTRÖM: A CASE STUDY	14
2.1 Åsa Ekström, <i>Mangaka</i>	15
2.1.1 The Visual Language of ‘Manga’	15
2.1.2 Åsa-Nikki (オーサ日記) : The Role of ‘Self’ in Autobiography	23
2.1.3 Multiculturalism in Manga: ‘The Japan the Japanese Don’t Know’	30
2.2 Critical Reception	33
2.3 One Hit Wonders?: The Future for Foreign-born <i>Mangaka</i>	43
2.4 Conclusion	48
3. DIGITAL MEDIA TRENDS & THE STATE OF THE JAPANESE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY	50
3.1 The Decline of Print-based Media	50
3.2 Manga Meeting the Challenges of a Digital Market	53
3.3 Opening the Manga Market Through Web-based Distribution	55
3.4 Conclusion	58

4.	‘DRAWING’ FOREIGN STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS IN THE FUTURE OF THE MANGA INDUSTRY	60
	4.1 The Emergence of Vocational Manga Studies Programs	61
	4.2 Encouraging International Student Enrollment	63
	4.3 Comic Markets	65
	3.4 Conclusion	67
5.	A GLOBALIZING JAPAN	68
	5.1 The ‘Foreign’ Element	69
	5.2 Representative Foreign Practitioners of Traditional Japanese Performing Arts	72
	5.2.1 Silvain Guignard	72
	5.2.2 Maud Archambault	75
	5.2.3 Katsura Sunshine	76
	5.3 Conclusion	77
6.	CONCLUSION	79
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	82

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Illustrates a variety of programs based on region, course offerings and their foundation years, as well as a breakdown of student enrollment	62

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. The cover of “Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan.”	16
2. A side-by-side comparison of the front covers of “Maros Resa” (LEFT) drawn in a “manga-influenced style”, and “Sayonara September Vol.2” (RIGHT).	19
3. Ekström rationalizes Japanese ‘hug culture.’	25
4. Ekström compares Japanese and Swedish public transportation.	26
5. Ekström’s traumatic washlet experience.	27
6. Ekström’s linguistic faux pas.	29
7. This graph highlights the quantity and quality of each author/ <i>mangaka</i> ’s comic essay reviews from amazon.co.jp (data obtained January 9, 2018)	34
8. Haefelin’s disappointing group date.	36
9. (LEFT) Ekström’s cover design for the light novel, “French girl Madalena’s downtown mysterious story”. (RIGHT) Poster for the Chiba city stamp rally featuring Ekström’s illustrated Hokuō joshi self.	45
10. <i>Yonkoma</i> episode from Åsa Ekström’s <i>Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan 2</i>	54

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Foreign-born Authors of Japanese Language Works

Outsiders have been providing a unique view of Japan for over 1,000 years. The first written records of Japanese civilization appear in the Chinese Dynastic Histories of the third century, in which their dietary, religious, and marital customs are depicted as a curiosity.¹ In the centuries following, explorer Marco Polo laid out his own account of the strange inhabitants of the “fabled land of Zipangu [Japan],” sparking interest in the archipelago throughout Europe.² However, it was not until the sixteenth century with the arrival of the Dutch and Portuguese that first-hand accounts of foreigners’ experiences in Japan were put to paper. In subsequent centuries, many notable Japanologists, such as Lafcadio Hearn, Ivan Morris, and Donald Keene to name a few, have added their names to the list of authors who have written about this country with its culture so seemingly alien to the western world. For various reasons these accounts have been written in the native languages of their authors and were generally intended for a foreign audience.³ However, in recent years, foreign-born authors such as novelist, literary critic, and *Man’yōshū* scholar Hideo Levy, have begun to garner attention for their Japanese language works, pointing to a trend not only toward the visible recognition of works written by non-native

¹ William Theodore DeBary, Yoshiko Kurata Dykstra, William M. Bodiford, J. S. A. Elisonas, and Philip B. Yampolsky, *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

² Michael Cooper, preface to *They Came to Japan: An Anthology of European Reports on Japan, 1543-1640* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

³ Exceptions include but may not be limited to those long-time expat residents of Japan who wrote in English to enhance the language education of their native Japanese students, such as John Haylock and Peter Milward, as well as a number of Taiwanese and Koreans from the occupation period (including Lu Xun), and several diplomats and/or their spouses who have published poetry in Japanese (such as Frances Hawks Cameron Burnett).

language speakers, but also a burgeoning interest in the “outsider’s perspective”. This phenomenon, is not limited to purely literary works, and can be clearly seen in Japanese readers’ positive reception of comic essays (*komikku essei* コミックエッセイ) written by foreign-born *mangaka* (comic artists) that have become popular in recent years.

Åsa Ekström (Sweden), Benjamin Boas (USA), Foo Swee Chin (Singapore), and Sandra Haefelin (Germany/Japan) have all successfully published comic essays ruminating on their experiences as foreigners in Japan. It is what these author-artists have in common that sets them apart from others who have tried and failed to enter what has been traditionally considered a “closed” market—facility in the Japanese language, the aesthetic appeal of their “Japanese” artwork, genre, and timing, which will be discussed in depth in subsequent chapters. Among them, however, Ekström is most noteworthy for her unprecedented success as a foreign-born *mangaka*. After graduating from a comic arts school in Sweden and working as a freelance illustrator, Ekström moved to Tokyo and enrolled in a graphic design program to pursue her dream of publishing manga in Japan. During that time she began publishing online the autobiographical *yonkoma* manga (four-panel strip comic) that would become *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan* (*Hokuō joshi Ōsa ga mitsuketa Nihon no fushigi* 北欧女子オーサが見つけた日本の不思議). Her comics gained the attention of Japanese publishing company Media Factory,⁴ and were compiled into *tankōbon*,⁵ selling over 190,000 copies within the first two years of publication.⁶ The first volume, published in March of 2015, was quickly followed by a second in September of the same year, and the widespread popularity of Ekström’s comic essays soon became evident in her numerous T.V. appearances, interviews, and book-signing

⁴ The division of Kadokawa responsible for publishing comic essays.

⁵ Printed books of comics previously serialized in a manga magazine, or in this case, online.

⁶ This sales figure refers to both print and digital copies of her first three volumes.

events around Japan. Although the hurdles to becoming a *mangaka* are seemingly insurmountable for foreign-born author-artists looking to break into the industry, let alone become successful, due to many factors such as the cultural and linguistic barrier, demanding lifestyle, oversaturation of the native market, and the persisting stigmas against foreign-born *mangaka* in regard to the authenticity of their work,⁷ Ekström has clearly broken the mold. In this thesis I will examine the underlying reasons for her success by exploring recent publishing trends as they relate to Ekström and other successful foreign-born *managka*, and the changing perceptions of and support for aspiring foreign-born *mangaka* in Japan. I look at factors including the influence of internationalization, effects of an increasingly digitized publishing industry, and the proliferation of vocational manga schools encouraging overseas student enrollment.

The acceptance of foreign-born authors' works as Japanese literature can in part be credited to internationalization, according to Nagoya University professor of Languages and Cultures and researcher Wakui Takahashi, in article written as an extension of his 2005 speech, *Investigating the Image of Japan: Japan from the Inside / Outside*.⁸ This can be seen in the increasing success of foreign authors of the comic essay genre and the spread of Japanese literature in translation worldwide. Wakui suggests that in comparison to the past, the cultural border between Japan and the rest of the world has been significantly weakened as a result of the internationalization phenomenon, both on the foreign and domestic scenes, and with it the

⁷ Casey Brienza, "'Manga is Not Pizza': The Performance of Ethno-racial Authenticity and the Politics of American Anime and Manga Fandom in Svetlana Chmakova's *Dramacon*," in *Global Manga: "Japanese" Comics without Japan?*, ed. Casey Brienza (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 67-113.

⁸ Wakui Takashi 涌井隆, "Kokusaika jidai no Nihongo sakkatachi" 国際化時代の日本語作家たち [Japanese Language Authors in the Era of Internationalization], *Nagoya Daigakuin Kokusai Gengo Bunka Kenkyūsōsho* 名古屋大学大学院国際言語文化研究叢書 5 (2006): 115-125.

Japanese concept of inside/outside (*uchi/soto* 内・外).⁹ He finds this to be especially true in the case of several Korean-born authors whose works are much more widely read now than in the past, owing to the fact that those authors were able to successfully deliver their messages to Japanese people about the cultural and political issues surrounding Korean persons residing in Japan (*zainichi chōsenjin* 在日朝鮮人). These works, Wakui states, were previously unknown and unimaginable to the general population.¹⁰ However, what is most interesting about his analysis is the reception of such works by the Japanese reader:

When intellectual authors critically compare Japan to the West, they are in turn opposed by other intellectual authors' nationalistic views. On the other hand, when considering foreign writers who write about Japan, while there are some who praise elements of Japan that are not found in their own culture, there are also those long-time residents who write critically about inconvenient elements of Japan that they have encountered. Japanese people who read those types of foreign authors are making a choice to adopt or reject them for their own purposes.¹¹

Wakui suggests that it is not so much the novel 'foreignness' of these works as the palatability and delivery of the message from a non-native perspective (which would otherwise tend to incite a patriotic, defensive reaction) which sparks the reader's interest. If his theory is to be believed, then it can be no wonder that recent trends in the sales of these comic essays written by foreign-born *mangaka* in Japanese are on the rise, especially those written by Ekström, whose ability to appeal to a Japanese audience with the upbeat and non-overly critical tone of her comic essays sets her apart from the competition. Furthermore, it is the humorous nature of the comic essay genre that facilitates the smooth and non-combative nature of what could be considered sensitive or taboo content.

In this thesis I will show how the delivery of the message from a non-native perspective

⁹ Wakui, 125.

¹⁰ Ibid., 122.

¹¹ Ibid., 115-116.

is of consequence to Japanese readers, and in turn is attributable to the success of the aforementioned foreign-born *mangaka*. Primary focus will remain on Ekström, and a comparative case study of her works will form the basis of this thesis. Although other foreign-born *mangaka including* Boas, Haefelin, and Foo have also successfully published their works in Japan, for reasons that will be explained in depth in the following chapters, Ekström is a prime example of the influence of what this thesis defines as “tamed globalization”: dealing with the foreign in a domesticated way.¹² Her success can also be attributed to a combination of her education, support system, and timing with respect to the proliferation of the international manga market as well as changes in the landscape of the Japanese publishing industry.

To frame my argument that foreign participation in what has been traditionally considered a closed manga market is contingent on a form of “tamed globalization”, the primary themes I discuss are cultural assimilation, the importance of the visual language of “Japanese” manga, and the essential element of humor. In order to make sense of Ekström’s use of “tamed globalization” it is first necessary to understand the platform for her success, comic essays, and how the characteristics of the genre are conducive not only to the palatable delivery of the material by a foreign-born *mangaka*, but are able to spark genuine interest on the part of the readers. This is reflected not only in the content, but format of the comic essay as well.

1.2 An Introduction to Comic Essays

1.2.1 Platform and Appeal : The Role of Comedy in Comic Essays

Characterized by a style unbound by the appearance of traditional story manga, comic essays, also known as essay manga (*essei manga* エッセイマンガ), are a form of

¹² This term coined by Dr. Amanda C. Seaman.

autobiographical manga written from a comical perspective.¹³ The artwork is more informal, with less detailed backgrounds and more simplistically-drawn characters in three (*santōshin* 三頭身) or four-head proportion style (*yontōshin* 四頭身); the characters' overly-large heads and disproportionately short torso and legs lending to the comical nature of the subject matter. The important role that comedy plays in comic essays cannot be overstated. "Manga and humor have a very long history in Japan," dating back to the caricatures drawn on the ceiling of Horyuji Temple, "...the oldest wooden structure in Japan... These caricatures are among the oldest surviving Japanese comic art."¹⁴ In the modern era, "Humorous manga ranges from one-frame and four-frame gag manga to short episodes and ongoing story-based manga magazine serialization and as *tankōbon* volumes (Japanese comic books that comprise a collection of manga episodes that have previously appeared in magazines)."¹⁵

The content of comic essays is markedly light fare, often focusing on everyday life and rarely addressing serious social issues. However, their humorous backdrop makes them a medium of expression uniquely suited to the communication of potentially controversial material. Comedy is both an essential mechanism in driving the plot (or punchline), and an integral device in the dissemination of what might otherwise be considered unsuitable or difficult to broach subject matter. Thus, comic essays provide a platform for the dissemination of information by shedding the spotlight on important issues with the ultimate goal of initiating a discourse.

¹³ Mio Bryce and Jason Davis, "An Overview of Manga Genres," in *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Toni Johnson-Woods (New York: Continuum, 2010), 41.

¹⁴ Kinko Ito, "A History of *Manga* in the Context of Japanese Culture and Society," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 3 (2005): 458.

¹⁵ Bryce and Davis, 41.

1.2.2 The History of Comic Essays

University of Nebraska-Lincoln associate professor of Japanese and comparative literature researcher Ikuho Amano observes that, “Since the 1960s, Japanese artists have utilized manga as an effective platform for life writing.”¹⁶ However, it wasn’t until the early 1990s that comic essays first garnered attention with the publication of several *tankōbon* on the topic of childbirth and childrearing such as Tajima Miruku’s *I’m an Angel You’re a Devil* (*Atashi tenshi anata akuma* あたし天使あなた悪魔, Fujinseikatsusha Publishing Company *Fujin seikatsu sha* 婦人生活社, 1992), Takahashi Yoko’s *Akiko Mama’s Child Rearing Hasty Diary* (*Akiko mama no ko sodate atafuta nikki* 陽子ママの子育てアタフタ日記, same publisher, 1993), and Ishizaka Kei’s *Baby Came* (*Akachan ga kita* 赤ちゃんが来た, Asahi Shimbun, 1993).¹⁷ In subsequent years, comic essays on this theme have continued to constitute a large percentage of the overall market, which is perhaps unsurprisingly reflected in both the author and readership demographics—the vast majority being women.¹⁸ However, changes in the digital publishing landscape combined with the increase in the number of amateur artists gaining popularity for their comics published on social networking sites (SNS) in recent years has helped increase the visibility of comic essays as a genre and resulted in an expansion of thematic content.¹⁹ According to the breakdown given by Kadokawa publishing company’s comic-essay.com, they can generally be divided into the following categories: beauty/diet (美容・ダイエット), work

¹⁶ Amano, 239.

¹⁷ All Japan Magazine and Book Publisher's and Editor's Association 公益社団法人全国出版協会, “コミックエッセイの刊行続々と” [Comic essays published one after another], March 02, 2009, <http://www.ajpea.or.jp/column/data/20090302.html>. (accessed January 4, 2018)

¹⁸ NOTE: This data is not based on officially recorded figures. Yamasaki, interview.

¹⁹ Ibid.

(お仕事), domestic (暮らし), childbirth/ child rearing (出産・子育て), lifestyle (生き方), practical (お役立ち), hobby (趣味), travel (旅行), special (スペシャル), and up-and-coming [lit. challenge design] (チャレンジ企画).²⁰ These categories are in keeping with the trend in reader preference for nonfiction, which has persisted since the postwar period.²¹ In the semi-annual reports published by the Japan Book Publishers Association (JBPA) over the last several years, nonfiction titles continue to dominate the top-ten bestseller lists in all genres, some even translated titles from overseas.²² Many of the foreign works which have enjoyed increasing popularity in recent years are in fact of the nonfiction variety: books on business, self-help and enlightenment, and even humanity.

1.2.3 Recent Trend: Transnational/Transcultural Themes

Amano observes that “In the twenty-first century, the genre [of comic essays] has visibly evolved around the theme of the transnational/cultural experience of each author, developing a significant size of readership and cultural market in Japan...focus[ing] on their personal history and cultural experience to appeal to the contemporary readership.”²³ This can be most clearly seen in the popularity of such series as Oguri Saori’s *My Darling is a Foreigner* (*Dārin wa gaikokujin* ダーリンは外国人). Oguri was already an established *mangaka* working on a serial publication in a comic magazine when she was approached by Media Factory editor Matsuda

²⁰ These are my own English translations of the categories. Komikku essei gekijō コミックエッセイ劇場. Kadokawa Corporation. 2015. <http://www.comic-essay.com/>.

²¹ Laura Miller, “There’s More Than Manga: Popular Nonfiction Books and Magazines,” in *A Companion to the anthropology of Japan*, ed. Jennifer Robertson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 316.

²² Japan Book Publishers Association, *An Introduction to Publishing in Japan 2014 - 2015* (Tokyo: Japan Book Publishers Association, 2014), 38-39.

²³ Amano, 239.

Noriko,²⁴ and asked to compile an autobiographical manga centered around her marriage to American husband Tony Laszlo. The result was a series of vignettes of their daily life together navigating the inevitable quandaries of their transcultural relationship: cultural and linguistic differences and misunderstandings, the pressure of first introductions to each other's families, and negotiating the practicalities of married life. Originally marketed toward transnational/cultural couples, the series gained an unexpected level of popularity with a much wider readership, due not necessarily to its theme of international marriage, but rather the universal relatability of the struggles and pitfalls of romantic relationships.²⁵

Although not technically the first its kind,²⁶ it cannot be denied that since the first *Darling* book's publication in 2002 several key factors have paved the way for similar publications and have fostered, if not ensured, their success to a certain extent; i.e. the rising number of international marriages in Japan,²⁷ the increase in the number of Japanese living and traveling abroad,²⁸ and foreign visitors, students, and permanent residents in Japan.²⁹

²⁴ Matsuda has since become the editor-in-chief of Media Factory's comic essay division, overseeing the publication of *Nihonjin no shiranai Nihongo*, as well as foreign-born *mangaka* Åsa Ekström's, Foo Swee Chin's, and one of Sandra Haefelin's comic essays in recent years.

²⁵ Tomoko Otake, "Drawing on Love; The "Da-rin" books detailing a couple's quirky ways are a publishing marriage made in heaven," *Japan Times*, October 17, 2004, accessed July 22, 2017, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2004/10/17/to-be-sorted/drawing-on-love/#.WYO3sRPYvBJ/>.

²⁶ Kiyama Yoshitaka (Henry) wrote one of the earliest examples of *yonkoma* autobiographical manga, detailing his and several other Japanese students' experiences abroad in San Francisco in the 1931 *The Four Immigrants Manga*. *Encyclopedia.com*, "Kiyama, Henry Yoshitaka 1885-1951," accessed January 8, 2018, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/kiyama-henry-yoshitaka-1885-1951>.

²⁷ An increase of 8,999 marriages between 1985 and 2016. Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 厚生労働省, "Jinkōdō taichōsa 人口動態調査" [Demographic survey], <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/81-1.html>. (accessed November 21, 2017)

²⁸ An increase of 12,168,054 individuals between 1985 and 2016. Ministry of Justice 法務省. "Shutsunyū kokukanri tōkei tōkeihyō: Shutsunyū (ki)kokusha sū 出入国管理統計統計表: 出入(帰)国者数" [Immigration control statistics statistical charts: number of departures and arrivals/returnees]. http://www.moj.go.jp/housei/toukei/toukei_ichiran_nyukan.html. (accessed November 21, 2017)

Additionally, the *Darling* series proved to be a catalyst for the popularization of comic essays on “transcultural themes” in the twenty-first century, which Amano notes have since rapidly increased.³⁰ Initially followed by Yamazaki Mari’s *Ferocious! The Italian Family* (*Mōretsu! Itaria kazoku* モーレツ!イタリア家族) in 2006, and Umino Nagiko’s *The Japanese the Japanese Don’t Know* (*Nihonjin no shiranai Nihongo* 日本人の知らない日本語) in 2009, *Darling* is now one of more than 50 titles in the genre that have been published over the past fifteen years. Oguri has experienced notable success since the publication of her first volume: a movie adaptation, the subsequent publication of 11 more titles in her *Darling* series, and several spin-off titles featuring her husband as the protagonist. *The Japanese the Japanese Don’t Know* was also quite successful, having been adapted into a televised series by the same title in 2010, and followed by four additional volumes.³¹

The transnational/transcultural genre has continued to expand, and within the last five years branched out to include comic essays which parallel the experience from the opposite perspective. Foreign-born *mangaka* Ekström, Boas, Chin, and Haefelin explore the themes of transcultural relationships and encounters with the ‘foreign’ through travel and in the workplace in Japan in their comic essays. This genre is no better exemplified than by Ekström’s popular series of comic essays which document her daily life as a foreigner and aspiring *mangaka* in Japan, and have propelled her to fame in the last three years.

²⁹ An increase of 20,959,018 individuals between 1985 and 2016. Ibid.

³⁰ Amano, 240-241.

³¹ 日本人の知らない日本語 2 (Media Factory, 2010), 日本人の知らない日本語 3 (Media Factory, 2012), 日本人の知らない日本語ドリル [*The Japanese the Japanese Don’t Know Drills*] (Media Factory, 2012), 日本人の知らない日本語 4 (Media Factory, 2013)

1.3 What This Thesis Intends to Examine

Manga has become a global ‘soft’ powerhouse. What was once considered a subculture phenomenon has gained significant traction in the academic world over the past thirty years. The field of research on the subject is continually expanding, with researchers, academics, independent scholars, and professionals colloquially dubbed “manga scholars.”³² While the pool of research that exists is arguably comprehensive in terms of the history and publication process of manga and its varying genres, more recent studies have tended to turn toward the effects of Japan’s soft power player on the global comic market and its overseas domestication, most notably in the U.S., France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, where readership has been fast-expanding since the 1980s. This is especially true in the case of the relatively “new” genre of comic essays, a genre so highly reflective of the trends in modern Japanese reading habits. Scholar Ikuho Amano’s study of well-known Japanese *mangaka* Yamazaki Mari, which suggests that much of her success is owed to her autobiographical comic essays, appears to be one of the only studies that deals with the topic in English. As Amano suggests, Yamazaki’s comic essays “[reflect] the diversity of transnational/cultural realities that Japan faces today.”³³

Japan’s recent hot-button issues of its declining birth rate and rapidly aging population, the pressure to relax immigration standards and address the global influx of refugees, as well as shore up relations with its Asian neighbors and allies, have taken center stage in an exhaustive debate over its ability and willingness to internationalize. As such, its seemingly insignificant grassroots efforts to address them are sure to fall to the wayside, creating a need to fill the research gap. Taking that into consideration, the growing popularity of comic essays written by

³² A large body of manga scholarship is of course available in Japanese; of note are several scholars who have made significant contributions to the discourse in the English-speaking world, including Frederik Schodt, Sharon Kinsella, Susan Napier, Thomas Lamarre, Jennifer Prough, Neil Cohn, and Ito Kinko.

³³ Amano, 239.

foreign-born *mangaka* in particular is deserving of scholarly attention. However, the field has not yet gained much academic attention. As such, the literature specifically pertaining to the field is sparse. Although the phenomenon is yet a small part of a niche market, the intended product of this thesis will be a comprehensive study of the comic essays representative of the foreign-born *mangaka* genre which should serve to provide a basis for further discourse on the studies of this burgeoning market indicative of an increasingly globalized Japan.

Chapter two illustrates the relative success of these foreign-born *mangaka* and the reception of their works by a Japanese audience. The comic essays of Swedish *mangaka* Åsa Ekström in particular forms the basis of this case study, which consists of a close reading of contents of Ekström's body of work and an examination of those aspects that have contributed to her success in Japan. It will delve into those aspects of her background and content of her comic essays which have contributed to her success. This case study provides a critical review of the reception of Ekström's works in comparison to Boas, Chin, and Haefelin, as Ekström can be considered the most representative of the model of success in her genre. Although the existing publications by foreign-born *mangaka* are by no means extensive, there are many in existence that will not be discussed for various reasons: their classification as story manga as opposed to comic essays, nature of their content (namely conventional genres already widely available in Japan that are non-representative of the foreign perspective), and the relative invisibility of their authors in comparison to those represented in this study.

Chapter three addresses the future of the Japanese publishing industry in an age when digital media is in many ways outperforming traditional print media, and the resultant effects on the manga market. It frames the necessary particulars of the Japanese publishing industry in respect to the state of print versus digital sales and the viability of the market as well as recent

trends in reader preferences. This chapter argues that a digital format allows alternative voices to join the conversation, opening up what has traditionally been a closed market. Chapter four continues to evaluate the wide-reaching influence of the challenges facing the Japanese publishing industry in respect to the evolving support systems for the training and education of aspiring *mangaka*. In particular, the emergence of universities and innovative vocational programs in tandem with government initiatives to encourage and increase the admission of international students, and the integral role of comic markets. The amalgamation of these factors should serve as evidence to the increasing opportunities now being made available to foreign-born *mangaka*, whose ability to successfully enter into the manga market was previously unimaginable to many. Chapter five will look at Japan's move toward the acceptance of foreign participants in the arts and entertainment sectors and contextualize the success of several key individuals who embody Ekström's brand of "tamed globalization" in order to become similarly successful in their fields, which have also been traditionally closed to foreign participation. The final chapter will summarize the analyses of the previous five chapters and offer avenues for further research opportunities.

CHAPTER 2

ÅSA EKSTRÖM: A CASE STUDY

One in a long line of foreign-born authors who have written about Japan, Swedish *mangaka* Åsa Ekström's pop-culture take on the genre exploded onto the publishing scene in 2015 with the release of her autobiographical manga, *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan* (*Hokuō joshi Ōsa ga mitsuketa Nihon no fushigi* 北欧女子オーサが見つけた日本の不思議). One of few foreigners to have successfully broken into the industry which was previously thought to be closed to foreign participation, with the publication of her fifth comic essay in the short span of three years and over 200,000 copies of her previous volumes sold in Japan, Ekström is truly the model of success for aspiring foreign-born *mangaka*. But what is it about Ekström and her manga that has attracted the attention of the media and so many Japanese readers? Furthermore, how has she retained her popularity and what is the outlook for the continuation of her success and others hoping to follow suit? These questions will be addressed in this chapter with a discussion of Ekström's educational background, the essential aesthetic and content-oriented aspects of her manga that appeal to a Japanese readership, and the support system that has facilitated her success in Japan.

The bulk of this chapter is based on a close reading and comparative analysis of Ekström's comic essays, both to her previous work as well as other comic essays by foreign-born *mangaka*. The works that will be analyzed are Ekström's story manga *Sayonara September* (Kartago, 2009-2013), comic essays *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan* Vols. 1-4, (Media Factory, 2015-2018), *Nordic Girl Åsa's countryside Japan adventure* (Media Factory, 2016), Sandra Haefelin's *My 100 Seriously Funny Problems as a 'Half Japanese' Living in Japan* (Media Factory, 2013), *Even a "Half Japanese" Raised in Germany Knows This!*

Japanese People, Here's What is Fantastic, and Here's What is a Little Strange (Daiwa Shuppan, 2014), *Hilarious! Cool Japan: Huh? Is that What Foreigners Think of Japan...!?* (Ascom, 2016), Benjamin Boas's *Everything I Learned About Japan, I Learned from Manga and Videogames*. (Shogakukan, 2015), and Foo Swee Chin's *Nerdy Manga Artist from Singapore Takes Aim at Japan* (Media Factory, 2016).

2.1 Åsa Ekström, *Mangaka*

2.1.1 The Visual Language of 'Manga'

Not only does Ekström possess the necessary artistic ability in addition to command of the visual language of Japanese manga, but her unique perspective is also to thank for drawing in her Japanese readers. Ekström's *Hokuō joshi* series editor Yamasaki Shun credits the series' success to her ability to appeal to a Japanese audience on both these levels.³⁴ From a young age, Ekström was strongly influenced by Takeuchi Naoko's *Sailor Moon*, drawn to its strong female protagonists. At a time when manga had just begun to gain popularity in Sweden, Ekström taught herself to draw manga by copying full pages from the original manga. She now attributes part of her growth as a *mangaka* to this exercise; forcing herself to practice drawing the "difficult things" such as feet and backgrounds, which are often drawn by an assistant rather than the main *mangaka* him or herself, and learning not only about style, but the flow of comic panels as well.³⁵ It is this early exposure to manga to which *Hokuō joshi* series editor Yamasaki Shun attributes Ekström's ability to "absorb typical Japanese expressions naturally,"³⁶ and reproduce

³⁴ Shun Yamasaki, interview by Michele Fujii, e-mail correspondence, August 18, 2017.

³⁵ Åsa Ekström, interview by CHAPPE TV, *YouTube*, September 3, 2015, accessed April 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72zuFpWiIM>.

³⁶ Yumi Kanemaki, "Swedish woman's manga look at life," *Yomidasu Rekishikan Yomiuri Shimbun*, April 18, 2015, accessed February 10, 2017, <https://database-yomiuri-co-jp.silk.library.umass.edu/rekishikan/>.

them in her comics. This sentiment is echoed in the reviews of her books by Japanese readers who were surprised to discover that not only did Ekström author the comic essays, she also drew them in what they remarked on as a very “Japanese” style. Although the typical style of a comic essay tends to be more simplistic than traditional story manga, a certain level of ability is required in order to produce them. Thus, while it may simply be a case of lacking artistic ability that spurred Benjamin Boas and Sandra Haefelin to seek Japanese artists to provide the illustrations for their comic essays, the fact that Japanese and not foreign artists were hired for the publication of their comic essays in Japan is quite telling. While it is not necessarily requisite for a *mangaka* to both write the narrative and draw the comic panels, the importance of the art style cannot be overstated.



Figure 1: The cover of “Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan”. ©Åsa Ekström/Kadokawa, 2015.

The case has been made by such scholars of manga as Frederik Schodt, that comics are a form of visual language, and like language are culturally unique. Neil Cohn, who has written one of the only articles discussing the visual language of manga, further submits that,

Culturally, this visual language combines with written language in comics, manga, *bande dessinée*, and the like, uniting their readers and authors in a common (visual) linguistic community. Following this, unique cultural styles of drawing simply become different visual language, the same way that verbal (and signed) languages differ throughout the world.³⁷

Thus, it would logically follow that the visual language expressed in manga created by native Japanese *mangaka* would be preferable to that of non-natives who are not as intimately familiar with the subtleties and intricacies of the Japanese culture. Cohn goes on to say that unlike western comics with their wide variety of drawing styles reflective of artists' individuality, Japanese *mangaka* create within the confines of a particular set of techniques and features, a theory akin to the use of Tokyo dialect as a standard representation of the Japanese language. That is not to say that Japanese *mangaka* do not inject individuality into their medium of expression, but rather that there is a certain codified set of characteristics more universally applied to the drawing of Japanese manga as opposed to comics in the West. It is this set of characteristics, emulated by Japanese children, that Cohn, citing research in imitative drawing, suggests is to be attributed to their high level of creativity, ability to maintain their drawing skills past puberty (which he also notes is a trait unique to Japan), and it "...establishes a community of 'visual speakers' using a common visual vocabulary...through exposure, imitation and practice."³⁸ Ekström's facility in this visual language can be attributed at least in part to her having followed this imitative pattern. In a review of her *Hokuō joshi* series in the *Yomiuri*

³⁷ Neil Cohn, "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga," in *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Toni Johnson-Woods (New York: Continuum, 2010), 187.

³⁸ Cohn, 190-101.

Shimbun, it was noted that “...the type of humor and punchlines of her four-panel manga faithfully adhere to Japanese manga style.”³⁹ Taking these factors into consideration, it is therefore unsurprising that she has experienced her current level of success in comparison to other foreign-born *mangaka*.

However, Ekström’s artistic style has not always been classifiable as “authentic” manga. Prior to settling in Tokyo in 2011, Ekström studied for three years at The Comic Art School in Malmö, Sweden and worked for seven years as a freelance *mangaka* and illustrator for children’s publishing house Bonnier Carlsen.⁴⁰ She contributed to the manga-style series for young readers (ages 6-12) *Maros Resa*, a “...so-called Swedish manga series using Japanese narrative techniques and aesthetics but signed by Swedes for a Swedish / Western audience.”⁴¹ During that time she also received a scholarship to practice as an assistant in a Japanese multi-talent studio⁴² and published a three-volume story manga series titled *Sayonara September*. The series is centered around a female protagonist who wants to become a *mangaka* and begins studying at a comic arts school, which in part draws on Ekström’s own life experiences. Coincidentally, it did not garner much attention either in Sweden or Japan until her *Hokuō joshi* series took off. It has since been translated into Japanese and English in addition to the original Swedish.

When I debuted in Sweden... I was twenty, and I was not very good, but I had really great timing in Sweden that it was at that point where manga became really popular and there was really no one else doing it... [*Sayonara September*], as well as a lot of other manga that has been drawn outside of Japan by foreigners is made with real love for

³⁹ Kanemaki, “Swedish woman’s manga look at life.”

⁴⁰ Åsa Ekström, interview by Sharla in Japan, *YouTube*, September 21, 2015, accessed January 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1TmEEMfKuQ>.

⁴¹ Bonnier Carlsen, “Åsa Ekström,” accessed March 3, 2018, <http://www.bonniercarlsen.se/illustratorer/e/a-sa-ekstrom/>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Japanese manga, and I think and I hope that that shines through the work even though the level is maybe not... [on par with a Japanese *mangaka*'s].⁴³



Figure 2: A side-by-side comparison of the front covers of *Maros Resa* (LEFT) drawn in a “manga-influenced style”, and *Sayonara September Vol.2* (RIGHT). Ekström’s style has since evolved, as can be seen when comparing these covers to the artwork in her Hokuō joshi series (see Fig.1). ©Åsa Ekström/Jo Salmson/Bonnier Carlsen, 2017; ©Åsa Ekström/Creek & River Co., Ltd, 2015.

In 2015, the same year Ekström’s first comic essay was published with Kadokawa⁴⁴, *Sayonara September* won first place in the 2015 Gaiman⁴⁵ Award competition and was featured in a special exhibition at the Kitakyushu Manga Museum’s International Manga Competition just one

⁴³ Ekström, CHAPPE TV interview.

⁴⁴ Kadokawa is one of the top publishing companies in Japan, alongside Bungeishunjū, Kodansha, Shogakukan, and Shūeisha. Its subsidiary, Media Factory, is responsible for publishing a substantial portion of comic essays currently on the market in Japan.

⁴⁵ A modern catch-all term, shortened from 外国の漫画 *gaikoku no manga* [lit. comics from overseas], used to describe manga created overseas and translated into Japanese.

year later. It is likely the case that *Sayonara September* would not have been as well publicized had Ekström not already established a name for herself in Japan.

The Gaiman Award, established in 2012 and sponsored by the Kyoto International Manga Museum, Kitakyushu Manga Museum, and Meiji University's Yonezawa Memorial Library of Manga and Subculture,⁴⁶ "...is devoted to 'gaiman' comics created overseas to offer visitors a chance to appreciate world views and drawings outside of a Japanese context."⁴⁷ While the competition is steadily gaining popularity, its entry pool having tripled between 2012 and 2016,⁴⁸ and despite the increase in the number of comics translated into Japanese from overseas in recent years, comics with an overtly westernized style traditionally have not been successful in the Japanese market. Therefore it cannot be surprising that foreign-born *mangaka* who have not adhered to the Japanese style generally have not been successful in publishing their works nor garnering noteworthy attention in the Japanese market regardless of their artistic ability.

Since the publication of *Sayonara September*, Ekström has not only grown as an artist, but she has also adapted the content of her *yonkoma* manga to suit her Japanese audience. A common observation by Japanese readers who reviewed Ekström's comic essays was that they did not seem as if written by a foreigner, either in terms of the quality of her artwork or the subject matter. That is not necessarily to say that the implication is that a foreigner is not capable of creating the type of manga on par with a Japanese *mangaka* (although this issue is a hot topic among critics and die-hard manga fans who believe a comic cannot truly be deemed manga unless it is written and drawn by a native Japanese *mangaka*, leading to their designation as

⁴⁶ "GAIMAN AWARD gaiman shōtte nani!? GAIMAN AWARD ガイマン賞ってなに!?" [What is the GAIMAN AWARD!?!], <http://www.gaiman.jp/about/index.html>. (accessed January 15, 2018)

⁴⁷ Satoshi Okumura, "Cool 'gaiman' foreign comics offer different view of manga," *Asahi Shimbun*, October 16, 2016, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201610160014.html>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

‘manga-style’ or ‘manga-influenced’ comics),⁴⁹ but rather that Ekström’s comic essays embody the characteristics of a manga written by a native Japanese *mangaka*.

The issues that plagued *Sayonara September* have no place in Ekström’s *Hokuō joshi* series. “The main characters in ‘Sayonara September’ are teen girls drawn in the familiar style of Japanese manga. There, the similarity ends. It features urban landscapes in Sweden, where the story is set, and the characters speak in a straightforward manner—for example, by flatly disagreeing with the opinions of others.”⁵⁰ This approach is uncharacteristic to the Japanese, and understandably may not resonate with a Japanese audience, especially without the need for a level of localization that would possibly destroy the integrity of the characters’ development or storyline all together or cause an incomprehensible disconnect between the artwork and the dialogue if translated into Japanese. *Hokuō joshi* on the other hand, was originally written in Japanese with that target audience in mind.

Although cultural comparison is a common theme that has been successfully explored by foreign writers for centuries, *Sayonara September* is not of the true ‘cultural comparison’ variety. It is a story manga written by a Swedish national, in the Swedish language, for a Swedish audience; the cultural disparities that exist in the characters behaviors would be practically unintelligible to the average Swedish reader who would not likely be looking for them. However, from a Japanese standpoint, this manga by a foreign-born *mangaka* may be expected to enlighten readers on Swedish culture. Instead, due to the plethora of unexplained cultural differences it may simply seem too unfamiliar to be enjoyable; the target audience must be taken into account.

⁴⁹ Martin Webb, “Manga by Any Other Name Is... Do Japan’s World-Conquering Cartoons Have to Be Created by Japanese to Be the Real Deal?” *Japan Times*, May 28, 2006, accessed August 17, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2006/05/28/to-be-sorted/manga-by-any-other-name-is/#.WZW3EBPyvBI>.

⁵⁰ Okumura, “Cool ‘gaiman’ foreign comics offer different view of manga.”

Other successful foreign-born *mangaka* have dealt with the cultural differences in the production and reception of manga as well. In an interview with CHAPPE TV, German *mangaka* Carolin Eckhardt, whose two-volume story manga *Okusama GutenTag!* (奥さまグーテンターク！) was published by Shueisha in 2013, emphasized the importance of keeping the target audience in mind when creating her characters.⁵¹

The protagonist is Japanese but his wife Julia is German. I have to make sure not to portray Julia too Japanese. Sometimes I accidentally draw her doing Japanese gestures, but at the same time, the readers are mostly Japanese, so even if I portray a realistic German the readers might not understand certain punchlines due to the different gestures and expressions. There are times when the actual plot is based on the differences, but the overall way that the character talks, I portray her as a German but at the same time make it so that Japanese readers can relate to the character, so maybe Julia has a bit of Japanese in her as well. I always keep reminding myself that she's German. I try to reflect on the German part of me. It's difficult at times, but I feel the little bit of Japanese in her is necessary.⁵²

Eckhardt shrewdly observes here the importance of forming a connection with her audience, a trait she shares with Ekström.

The style of Ekström's manga has come a long way since *Maros Resa* and *Sayonara September*. Although *Sayonara September* was not the hit in Japan that her *Hokuō joshi* series proved to be, Ekström's copying the drawing styles and techniques of authentic Japanese story manga in her formative years as an artist inadvertently prepared her to connect with a Japanese audience. The growth she has achieved, however, cannot be solely attributed to her self-study, graduation from a Swedish comic arts school, nor her freelance work prior to publishing her comic essay series in Japan. The next section will discuss the further development of the artistic

⁵¹ *Okusama GutenTag!* (Hello, My Wife!) was originally published on *Tonari no Young Jump*'s website prior to its publication in *tankōbon* format. Eckhardt also included many facts, articles and her favorite German recipes to the manga, adding to the immersive cultural experience and providing readers with an educational experience akin to a comic essay in addition to the story.

⁵² Carolin Eckhardt, interview by CHAPPE TV, *YouTube*, November 30, 2013, accessed August 1, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_zcPUNvMFo&t=82s.

skills and cultural (mis)understanding that enabled Ekström to introduce her comics to the Japanese market.

2.1.2 Åsa-Nikki (オーサ日記) : The Role of ‘Self’ in Autobiography

Upon her arrival in Japan in 2011, Ekström enrolled in a vocational program at Tokyo Designer Gakuin with the original intention of continuing her education in manga studies.⁵³ Ultimately, intimidated by the level of commitment required of the typical *mangaka* lifestyle, she changed tracks and earned a certificate in graphic design instead. In true autobiographical form, she began uploading the *yonkoma* manga that would become *Hokuō joshi Ōsa ga mitsuketa Nihon no fushigi* 北欧女子オーサが見つけた日本の不思議 [Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan] to her personal blog as a means to document her life in Japan.⁵⁴ Each volume in Ekström’s series is comprised of four or five chapters containing an average of 27 episodes revolving around a particular theme: everyday life in Japan, Japanese language and customs, Swedish culture, and life as a *mangaka* in Japan. Although the ‘stranger in a strange land’ genre seems to be on the decline (but may not yet be entirely played out), with the fierce competition within the Japanese manga community Ekström says she was advised to take advantage of this perspective.

[A]s a foreigner, that’s your weapon. That’s the thing you can do that Japanese people can’t do and the thing that I’ve been told constantly from my teachers and from my publishers and everyone, that you should use your foreign perspective when you write stories. It’s a bit limiting because you basically just draw manga about being a foreigner in Japan, or about your own country, or about international marriage... but it’s so true.⁵⁵

⁵³ Adachi Education Group, “Tokyo Designer Gakuin College,” last modified 2018, accessed January 22, 2018, <http://www.adachi-gakuen.jp/en/tdg/>.

⁵⁴ Ekström, interview by Sharla in Japan.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

By nature of her being foreign, many episodes inevitably hinge upon a cultural comparison between Japan and Ekström's native Sweden. Japanese audiences have long been captivated by the foreign perspective, but when considering her work for publication with Kadokawa, Yamasaki notes looking for more than a mere meditation on culture gaps.⁵⁶ Of utmost importance was that each episode be presented in a unique and interesting way, i.e., demonstrating a genuine curiosity for Japan and combining a sense of humor with knowledge, rather than mere praise or criticism of Japan.⁵⁷ In the afterword of her first volume Ekström relays her struggle to maintain the balance; "With this type of theme, there is the fear that it will be seen as 'all Japanese people are like this, but that is not really the case. This manga is drawn entirely from my own personal point of view and impressions.'"⁵⁸

The episode "Hug Culture" (*Hagu no bunka* ハグの文化) presents the reader with a tutorial-like way to approach foreigners from "hugging" and "handshake cultures" while its subsequent episode, "How the Japanese Feel [about them]" (*Nihonjin no kimochi* 日本人の気持ち) presents the "Japanese" perspective through Ekström's point of view, which demonstrates her newfound cultural sensitivity. Ekström explains that it is not that the Japanese don't like to hug, but rather that the unknown motivations behind culturally unexpected physical interactions can be shocking and a bit unsettling for those who are not used to interacting with foreigners. She also offers up her own experience from the "other side" after being given a traditional

⁵⁶ Yamasaki also worked as an editor for Sandra Haefelin's *Nippon zaijū hāfu na watashi no setsujitsu de waraeru hyaku no mondai* ニッポン在住ハーフな私の切実で笑える 100 のモンダイ [My 100 Seriously Funny Problems as a 'Half Japanese' Living in Japan] (2013) as well as Foo Swee Chin's *Shingapōru no otaku mangaka, Nihon wo mezasu* シンガポールのオタク漫画家、日本をめざす [Nerdy Manga Artist from Singapore Takes Aim at Japan] (2016).

⁵⁷ Yamasaki, interview.

⁵⁸ Åsa Ekström オーサ・イエークストロム, *Hokuō joshi Ōsa ga mitsuketa Nihon no fushigi* 北欧女子オーサが見つけた日本の不思議 [Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan] (Tokyo: Kadokawa / Media Factory, 2015), 138.

parting kiss on the cheek by an Italian friend. She notes that while she now understands and respects the Japanese disinclination toward hugging, she is always happy when the Japanese initiate them, no matter if they are not quite so “tight” as the Swedish hugs she is used to.⁵⁹ This cultural compromise and gentle explanation of the traditions and mindsets of both cultures is delivered not only in a tactful way, but also demonstrates her unique perspective within the Japanese social context rather than a sheer unpalatable criticism of the Japanese projected by the “bitter *gaijin* (foreigner).”



Figure 3: Ekström rationalizes Japanese ‘hug culture.’ © Åsa Ekström/Kadokawa, 2015.

However, true to Yamasaki’s evaluation, Ekström strikes a careful balance between criticism and praise, her observations never overly-critical. On the rare occasion Ekström comments on a facet of Japanese culture that does not appeal to her she often balances out her criticism with a non-competitive comparison to Sweden. She is able to admit what she sees as flaws within her own

⁵⁹ Ibid., 92-93.

country as well, and presents her observations merely as her own personal experience. For example, in the episode “But the Last Train...” (*Shikashi shūden wa...* しかし終電は・・・), she laments the lack of trains that run at night in Japan, complaining to a friend that she wishes there were at least a bus available to take after the last train has stopped running. Although Ekström states plainly that she “hates” the last train system in Japan (followed immediately by a humbly apologetic “*mōshiwakegozaimasen*” 申し訳ございません), she admits that taking the bus in Sweden in the middle of the night she often falls asleep and misses her stop, landing her in the middle of nowhere in the freezing cold with hours to wait in the dark alone for the next bus.⁶⁰

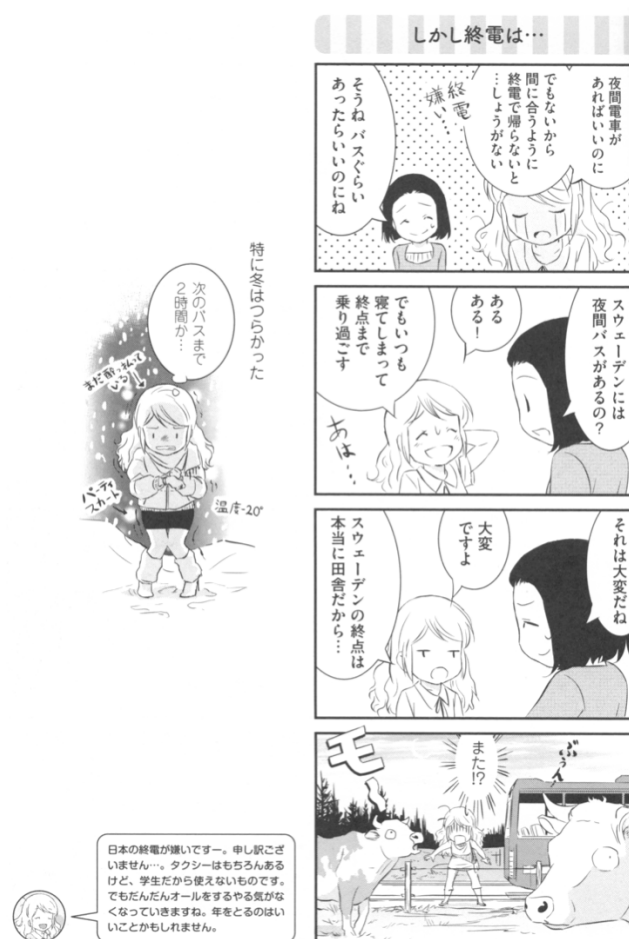


Figure 4: Ekström compares Japanese and Swedish public transportation. © Åsa Ekström/Kadokawa, 2015.

⁶⁰ Ekström, *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan*, 111.

Ekström's ability to pick up on the interesting aspects of the mediocrity of everyday life that will make for interesting episodes is uncanny, according to Yamasaki.⁶¹ In "Western-style Toilet Trauma" (*Wafū toire no torauma* 和風トイレのトラウマ p.30) Ekström recalls her first experience with a Japanese washlet, something that any foreigner who has visited Japan may pick up on as interesting and unique to modern Japanese culture. However, instead of simply pointing out that fact, Ekström goes a step further, pulling the punchline of her gag from a traumatizing personal experience. Unable to decipher the many buttons on a washlet in her friend's home, the bidet overflows onto the floor. When her friend comes to check on her, to Ekström's horror there is a suspicious puddle of water that she must now explain.⁶²



Figure 5: Ekström's traumatic washlet experience. © Åsa Ekström/Kadokawa, 2015.

⁶¹ Yamasaki, interview.

⁶² Ekström, *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan*, 30.

Ekström goes on to say of her series that,

More than anything, I feel that it has become a story of my own daily mistakes. The mistakes of a foreigner living in Japan perhaps cannot be avoided. In regard to those mistakes, I am grateful to those Japanese people who always kindly and gently explained things to me with patience. Moreover, it is thanks to using those mistakes as an impetus to have conversations about things such as cultural differences that I have come to understand Japan on a deeper level.⁶³

This theme is even more apparent in her second volume, which she points out as being even more focused on herself than her view of Japan.⁶⁴ Ekström's portrayal of her manga self is honest, perhaps even to a fault. Uncharacteristic of her stereotypical foreign visage with her model-like proportions, blonde hair, and blue-eyes, she is clumsy and imperfect, traits her readers consider to be both endearing and refreshing. She does not attempt to disguise or distract from the less glamorous aspects of her life abroad in a foreign country. Unlike Amano's suggested typical characterization of the autobiographical manga protagonist, often portrayed as "...simple and rather naive... suppressing his or her cultural perceptiveness and intricate experiences in reality,"⁶⁵ Ekström's cultural faux pas are genuine and uncontrived for the sake of her manga, made out of an earnest attempt at navigating the often unexpected complexities of her daily life in Japan as a foreigner, student, and professional *mangaka*. Endearingly blundering, often ignorant of Japanese customs, manners, and linguistic nuance, and completely inept or comically unskilled in the use of the language, Ekström is often the object of comic relief, corrected by or endearingly patronized by the Japanese characters around her or even other more 'experienced' foreign characters. The ironic presentation of such situations as comical rather

⁶³ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁴ "Compared to volume 1, I think that there are more episodes about myself than the mysteries of Japan." Åsa Ekström, オーサ・イエークストロム, *Hokuō joshi Ōsa ga mitsuketa Nihon no fushigi 2* 北欧女子オーサが見つけた日本の不思議 2 [Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan 2] (Tokyo: Kadokawa / Media Factory, 2015), 156.

⁶⁵ Amano, 241.

than bitterly embarrassing (though embarrassing they may be) portray Ekström as being in on, rather than the brunt of, the joke, dictating to the reader quite skillfully what is to be funny.

In the episodes “Polite Level” (*Teinei reberu* 丁寧レベル) and “Politeness Warning” (*Teineisa chūi* 丁寧さ注意), Ekström deals with the difficult linguistic nuances of the Japanese *keigo* (honorifics) system. She first explains that after graduating from the basic short sentences of a beginner, she too-quickly moved on to inappropriate too-casual speech when speaking to her teacher. Thinking she had stumbled upon the secret to *keigo*, she began using polite language even with her friends who were senior in age only to come to the realization that in so doing she was giving off rather passive-aggressive vibes. “I was probably so rude!” (*chō shitsurei kamo!*) she laments, agonizing over making a mistake for another four pages.⁶⁶



Figure 6: Ekström's linguistic faux pas. © Åsa Ekström/Kadokawa, 2015.

⁶⁶ Ekström, *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan* 2, 30-31.

A combination of artistic ability, unique perspective, and balanced humorous content undoubtedly played a large role in Ekström's debut as well as her continued success. After two smash-hit volumes, another important factor in the continued viability of her series came in the form of a marketing opportunity resulting in a third, separate but related volume. The contents of *Nordic Girl Åsa's countryside Japan adventure (Hokuō joshi Ōsa no Nippon saihakken rōkaru tabi* 北欧女子オーサのニッポン再発見ローカル旅) align with the long history of autobiography, memoir, essays, and travel writing amongst the expat community in Japan, which includes Nicolas Bouvier's *The Japanese Chronicles*⁶⁷ and Alan Booth's *The Roads to Sata*.⁶⁸ Of the many accounts that Westerners have written about Japan using Japanese techniques, Ekström's third comic essay perhaps most evocative of Cathy Davidson's *36 Views of Mount Fuji* (2006). Davidson's 1993 witty and humorous account of her four trips to Japan describes her experiences working and traveling across different parts of the country against the backdrop of Katsushika Hokusai's series of woodblock carvings of the same name. However, where Davidson includes many poignant and emotional reflections, Ekström's comic essay is lighthearted and jovial. Where others have presented Japan to their readers as a homogenous country in terms of both its people and culture, Ekström presents the many different facets of what she describes as a "multicultural Japan" from her "fresh" foreigner's perspective.

2.1.3 Multiculturalism in Manga: 'The Japan the Japanese Don't Know'

Ekström branched out after her first two volumes to write *Nordic Girl Åsa's countryside*

⁶⁷ Swiss image merchant and photographer Bouvier published this travelogue-cum-history of Japan in 1975. It also details his experiences traveling through Japan accompanied by his own photographs.

⁶⁸ Booth's novel is a witty account of his 2,000 mile trek on foot from Hokkaidō (northern Japan) to Sata (southern Japan) in 1977.

Japan adventure (Hokuō joshi Ōsa no Nippon saihakken rōkaru tabi 北欧女子オーサのニッポン再発見ローカル旅), taking advantage of the publicity her comics gained by being featured on Asahi Digital to break from the interpersonal perspective of her first two volumes. With the support of her editor and in an effort to learn more about the various regions of Japan outside Tokyo at the behest of her readers' suggestions, for six months Ekström traveled around Southern Tohoku, Fukuoka, Okinawa, Hiroshima, and Kyoto. Interestingly, many of the “cultural comparisons” in this volume are more so between Tokyo and the rest of Japan than Sweden. The volume is packed with photographs, travel tips and practical information on the places she visited and different events she attended on her trip, to make it even more appealing, resulting in a volume that would be just as at home in travel agency as it would a bookstore. Not only did the trip provide her with an excess of inspirational material,⁶⁹ it resulted in her most critically acclaimed volume to date.⁷⁰

By providing her Japanese readers with a fresh perspective on a Japan to which they may not necessarily have given much thought previously, Ekström appears to have been successful in carrying out the hopes of her editor, Yamasaki, who expressed this sentiment in an interview; “I wanted Japanese readers to read it because by seeing Japan through Asa’s point of view, they can discover a Japan that even we Japanese do not know very well.”⁷¹ Ekström did exactly this, writing about Japan from what she describes as a “multicultural” perspective—one that perhaps the Japanese themselves, nor much of the rest of the world, considers when first calling the

⁶⁹ “Through my travels, I was able to experience a tremendous amount of inspiration like never before, and about three times as many ideas as I have ever gathered in a book,” Åsa Ekström オーサ・イエークストロム, *Hokuō joshi Ōsa no Nippon saihakken rōkaru tabi* 北欧女子オーサのニッポン再発見ローカル旅 [Nordic Girl Åsa’s countryside Japan adventure] (Tokyo: Kadokawa / Media Factory, 2016), 154.

⁷⁰ *Nordic Girl Åsa’s countryside Japan adventure* received a 4.7/5 star rating on amazon.co.jp.

⁷¹ Yamasaki, interview.

country often described as ‘homogeneous’ to mind.

Through visiting various places and discovering more about the mysterious side of Japan, I have come to understand Japan more deeply. In contrast to the multicultural societies of the adjoining European countries, Japan is an island country, but it has many different regional cultures and customs, and even though foreigners may be scarce, the truth is that I feel it is a multicultural society.⁷²

Her analysis rang true with readers who shared Yamasaki’s sentiment; in part being able to experience Japan through her unique perspective and coming to see it for its regional differences, which they enjoyed.

It may seem somewhat unorthodox to take a six-month trip around the country for the purposes of gaining inspiration for the creation of a comic essay, but according to manga scholar Sharon Kinsella in her book *Adult manga : culture and power in contemporary Japanese society*, such “research field-trips” are not at all unusual.⁷³ Par for the course in a typical manga editor-artist relationship, as chief editor on Ekström’s projects Yamasaki had a hand in facilitating the trip. As part of what Kinsella describes as the process of “*create and keep*,” it is the role of the editor to encourage *mangaka* in the creation of “suitable subjects and stories” as well as ensure their continued success by “maintaining a story of months or years after it had been launched, by feeding it with interesting new directions.”⁷⁴ In taking her readers’ feedback to heart, both Yamasaki and Ekström were able not only to provide a fresh new perspective (*create*), but also boost ratings as well as sales. In the months after its release, all three of Ekström’s volumes saw a jump on popular comic essay ranking lists. Doubtless this renewed interest in her entire series played a role in enabling her to release her fourth volume later that same year (*keep*). In taking

⁷² Ekström, *Nordic Girl Åsa’s countryside Japan adventure*, 154-155.

⁷³ Sharon Kinsella, *Adult manga: culture and power in contemporary Japanese society* (Honolulu : University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), 176.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

the readers' feedback into account, Ekström was able to put new spin on an already-established theme, moving away from the broader and more typical view of Japanese culture and portraying the "stranger in a strange land" in a more multicultural dimension.

2.2 Critical Reception

Several other foreign-born "*mangaka*" made their debut around the same time Ekström's first volume of *Hokuo joshi* was published.⁷⁵ Sandra Haefelin, a self-proclaimed '*hāfu*' born and raised in Germany to a Japanese mother and German father, released her first comic essay, *My 100 Seriously Funny Problems as a 'Half Japanese' Living in Japan*, with Media Factory in 2013. The following year she published a second volume with Daiwa Shuppan, and yet a third with Ascom in 2016. Foo also published her first comic essay, *Nerdy Manga Artist from Singapore Takes Aim at Japan*, with Media Factory in 2016. American Benjamin Boas, a freelance writer and translator and Cool Japan ambassador released his comic essay, *Everything I Learned About Japan, I Learned from Manga and Videogames*, with Shogakukan in 2015.⁷⁶ Although these back-to-back releases may not necessarily constitute a boom in the market as the number of *mangaka* adds up to a whopping total of four, nevertheless it can be considered the baseline for future expansion of the genre.

⁷⁵ I refer to the collective group as "*mangaka*" because although they authored the content of their comic essays, Sandra Haefelin and Benjamin Boas's comic essays were illustrated by native Japanese artists. Haefelin works as a writer and has a large repertoire of books in addition to her comic essays, many on the topic of being *hāfu* in Japan. Furthermore, as a translator and ambassador for the nationally-sponsored Cool Japan program, Boas's comic essay could be considered more a venture in advertising than a step toward pursuing a career as a *mangaka*.

⁷⁶ Where three of the four got their start with Media Factory it is reasonable to assume that more than other publishing companies, Kadokawa may cater to the multicultural genre, as the pioneer *My Darling is a Foreigner* was commissioned by Kadokawa editor Matsuda Noriko. Boas's being published with Shogakukan may have more to do with his pre-established ties to the company (he has worked as a "bilingual editor" with Shogakukan since 2010) more than the content of his essay. Should he not have been successful publishing with Shogakukan his comic essay may very well have had a place among the other three authors' at Kadokawa.

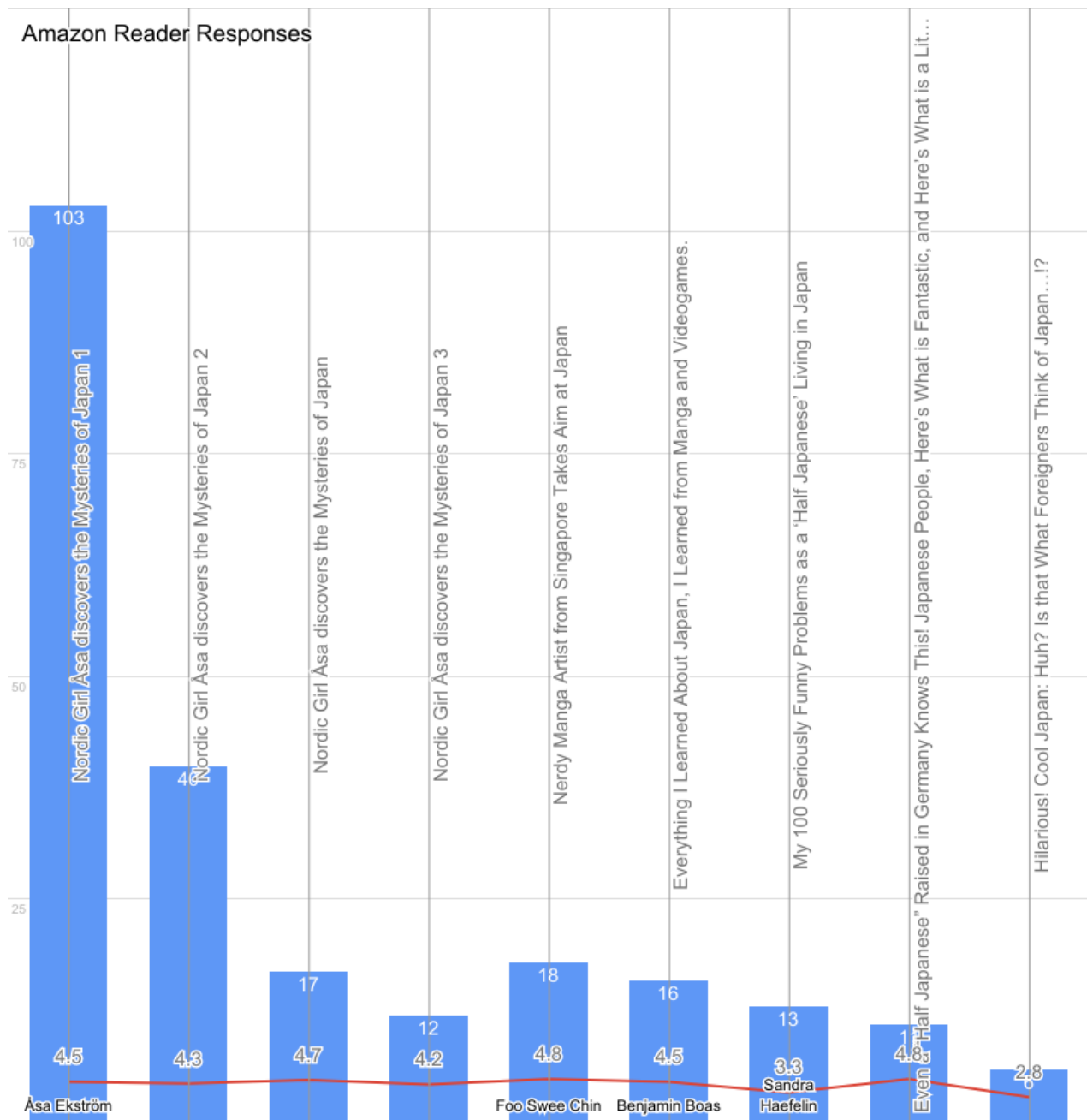


Figure 7: This graph highlights the quantity and quality of each author/*mangaka*'s comic essay reviews from amazon.co.jp (data obtained January 9, 2018).

Ekström is unquestionably the representative model of success for a foreign-born *mangaka* in the comic essay genre, based not solely on the number of volumes she has published (Haefelin has a similarly impressive repertoire), but in terms of how her series has been received.

At least one of her books has appeared on honto.jp monthly top 100 comic essay ranking lists (print and/or digital) over the past year.⁷⁷ Neither Boas, Chin, nor Haefelin's comic essays made these ranking lists during that time period.⁷⁸ The number of customer reviews she has received on amazon.co.jp also dwarfs those of Boas, Chin, and Haefelin (see Graph 1 on the previous page). Customer ratings on amazon.co.jp for all four *mangaka* are predominantly positive. The majority of Ekström, Boas, and Foo's comic essays received near 5/5 star ratings.⁷⁹ Ratings of Haefelin's essays, on the other hand, are a fairly even split between positive and negative reviews, which may be a reflection of the critical content of her comics.

Although the surface elements of these comic essays are similar, the underlying sentiments are vastly different. Where Ekström unconsciously navigates her content with an upbeat attitude, Haefelin does so in a self-deprecating and critical manner. True to its title, in *My 100 Seriously Funny Problems as a 'Half Japanese' Living in Japan* Haefelin deals with issues she experienced, both in Germany where she grew up and Japan where she currently works and resides.⁸⁰ For example, in an episode titled "The Pressure to be 'Beautiful'" (*Bijin ga kuru' puresshā* 「美人が来る」プレッシャー), Haefelin is invited on a group date and the boys are told ahead of time that a half-Japanese girl will be joining. At first they are all excitement in anticipation of what must be a beautiful girl coming along, since as we all know, *hāfu* are sure to be attractive. Knowing this, Haefelin explains that this is the reason she becomes overly nervous to attend group dates. Sure enough, when she arrives, shock and disappointment at her looks

⁷⁷ The months surrounding the release of a new volume in Ekström's series inevitably led to a jump up to the top 50 or higher for one or all her other volumes.

⁷⁸ Data was obtained from honto.jp over a period of one year; May 2017 to April 2018.

⁷⁹ Data obtained from www.amazon.co.jp on 01/09/2018.

⁸⁰ It is not solely autobiographical, as it also includes several episodes of the struggles of other half Japanese living in Japan.

registers quite clearly on their faces.⁸¹ The episode ends there, without Haefelin giving her final assessment of the turn of events, perhaps aptly so, as to have the final word may be pushing beyond the fragile boundaries of a comic essay.



Figure 8: Haefelin's disappointing group date. © Sandra Haefelin/Media Factory, 2013.

However, she continues to further her agenda in the final column of her third volume, *The Sad Truth... The "Chin Chan Chon" Problem* (*kanashii shinjitsu "chin chan chon" mondai* 悲しい真実・・・「チンチャンチョン」問題). Haefelin begins with a disclaimer, saying she knows it will ruin the light-hearted comical nature of the book but she strongly feels the need to express

⁸¹ Sandra Haefelin サンドラ・ヘフェリン, *Nippon zaijū hāfu na watashi no setsujitsu de waraeru hyaku no mondai* ニッポン在住ハーフな私の切実で笑える 100 のモンダイ [My 100 Seriously Funny Problems as a 'Half Japanese' Living in Japan] (Tokyo: Media Factory, 2013), 138-139.

her feelings about being bullied for her ethnicity growing up in Germany.⁸² She presents the issue from the perspective of an Asian being bullied by Caucasians, stipulating that her reason for doing so is to “prepare” would-be tourists in Europe for the possibility of discrimination, but it is not difficult to pick up on the underlying subtext as her audience is Japanese. Although this volume did not receive the lowest rating of the three, at 3.3 neither was it a close second to the 4.8 stars she earned with her third volume.

In both her second and third volumes, Haefelin is careful to present those issues that are most potentially controversial from the point of view of other foreign characters rather her own, perhaps with the knowledge that any criticism leveled at the Japanese may be more permissible when presented through the point of view of the bumbling foreigner more wholly ignorant of Japanese culture than she. In *Even a “Half Japanese” Raised in Germany Knows This! Japanese People, Here’s What is Fantastic, and Here’s What is a Little Strange*, which received the lowest rating of all three volumes at 2.8 stars, Haefelin offers up a myriad of cultural comparisons, navigating the misconceptions held both by foreigners and the Japanese with the “expert knowledge” granted to her through one or the other sides of her cultural heritage. In her interactions with foreigners she is the authority on Japan, and to the Japanese, she is the authority on the West. Similarly, in her first volume Haefelin admits that her personality tends to change depending on whether she is called by her German (Sandra) or Japanese name (Junko), ultimately feeling more reserved as a “Japanese.”⁸³ However, in the rare episode that she presents her observations about Japan from her own perspective, she tends to make overly-generalized observations of the sort Ekström is so careful to point out that she wished to avoid

⁸² Sandra Haefelin サンドラ・ヘフェリン, *Bakushō! kūru Japan : e? gaikokujin wa Nihon o sō omotte ita no...!?*. 爆笑!クールジャパン: えっ外国人は日本をそう思っていたの...!? [Hilarious! Cool Japan: Huh? Is that What Foreigners Think of Japan...!?] (Tokyo: Ascom, 2016), 163-165.

⁸³ Haefelin, *My 100 Seriously Funny Problems as a ‘Half Japanese’ Living in Japan*, 87-88.

when writing about cultural comparisons.⁸⁴ Haefelin makes no such claim, simply presenting each scenario as “Japan is like this,” “in Europe it’s that,” “Germans do this.” Although there is nothing particularly overly-critical about the content of this book (save maybe a few extreme examples: the hypothetical episodes about a Japanese office worker waiting for permission from the head office before evacuating an exploding building, and asking for paid vacation), this is a common complaint in reader reviews:

“Even if you evaluate the world based only on your own origins and narrow observations, it isn’t helpful. I stopped reading halfway through.”⁸⁵

“The author was in Germany until she was 22 years old. And then Japan. However, what the author wrote has no basis in evidence. Do you know about the whole of Europe at the age of 22? First of all, it is not clear what kind of literature you read and what effect it had. Germany alone is not Europe. Also, even coming to Japan, it hasn’t been long, and it’s doubtful you know about Japanese society. She’s writing about harmless and inoffensive things, but they seem quite far from fact. I don’t really want to read this author’s books...”⁸⁶

As observed by one reviewer, Haefelin also seems to take on one or the other of her *hāfu* identities when it suits her:

“In regard to Japanese people, she takes on the pretense of being ‘European (German)’ and states her theories with, ‘In Europe ~’. On the other hand, in regard to Europeans she takes on the pretense of being ‘Japanese.’ The author seems to be doing business by skillfully using the social status of ‘half-Caucasian’ and ‘half-Asian,’ but honestly I cannot help but have doubts about this kind of behavior.”⁸⁷

In her third volume, *Hilarious! Cool Japan: Huh? Is that What Foreigners Think of Japan...!?*, Haefelin herself seems to take issue with blanket statements and assumptions about foreign cultures, and yet by the same token, in the second volume she perpetuated this notion from the

⁸⁴ The reader will remember the sentiment expressed in the afterword of her first volume: ““With this type of theme, there is the fear that it will be seen as ‘all Japanese people are like this, but that is not really the case,’” Ekström, *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan*, 138.

⁸⁵ amazon.co.jp user: Gabriel, 09/13/2015

⁸⁶ amazon.co.jp user: Masuda Makoto 増田真実, 05/12/2016

⁸⁷ amazon.co.jp user: Helsinki28, 01/27/2015

parallel perspective, introducing facets of “European” culture to the Japanese when she was born and raised in Germany, applying blanket cultural markers to an entire collection of countries when her assertions may well only apply to Germany or her own hometown. Ekström, by comparison, expresses her hope that her manga will be useful to people who are interested in learning about other countries and goes on to say that the best way to do that is to meet and interact with people from those countries in the afterword of *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan 4*.⁸⁸

Haefelin’s third volume is a compilation of episodes revolving around several characters of differing nationality. Haefelin plays the role of the *tsukkomi*, or straight man, in these episodes, providing explanations of how things ‘really are’ in contrast to each foreign character’s misconceptions of Japanese culture. In this way she becomes merely a comic bystander, narrating their faux pas and cultural misconceptions. It is unclear whether these characters are modeled after Haefelin’s friends or acquaintances, an amalgamation of several people morphed into a single character stereotypically representative of their home country, or entirely fictionalized. This act of distancing herself from any criticism leveled at the Japanese may be a contributing factor to the marked difference in reader responses. This does not mean, however, that *Hilarious! Cool Japan* didn’t receive its fair share of criticism. Readers commented on the stereotypical and stale nature of the types of cultural comparisons it presents; “Although one can enjoy reading it quickly, there are many topics I had heard about somewhere before, and I after reading it I felt a little unsatisfied.”⁸⁹ In recent years, popular television programs such as “Why Did You Come to Japan?” (*You wa nani shi ni Nippon e* YOUは何しに日本へ?), “Nepu and

⁸⁸ Åsa Ekström オーサ・イエークストロム, *Hokuō joshi Ōsa ga mitsuketa Nihon no fushigi 4* 北欧女子オーサが見つけた日本の不思議4 [Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan 4] (Tokyo: Kadokawa / Media Factory, 2018), 169.

⁸⁹ amazon.co.jp user: *murasaki* 紫, 12/05/2016

Imoto's World Ranking" (*Nepu & imoto no sekai banzuke* ネプ&イモトの世界番付), and "Who Wants to Come to Japan" (*Sekai! Nippon ikitai hito ōendan* 世界！ニッポン行きたい人応援団)—not to mention NHK special programming as well as the news—have been showcasing various aspects of "Cool Japan," correcting foreigners' faux pas and misconceptions about Japan.

Since the 1980s, Japan has been making inroads to extend the reach not only of its economic exports, but its cultural exports as well. Most commonly known to the international community among these may be manga and anime, video games, fashion, music, and other pop culture phenomenon. The last fifteen years, however, have marked a gradual shift toward the increased popularization of some of Japan's more traditional cultural products, chief among them the performing arts. This spread of Japanese culture across the globe has resulted the interest of foreign participation in these areas, and will be examined in Chapter 5. More recently, "Cool Japan," a soft power strategy established by Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) in 2010, has aimed to expand Japan's cultural influence on an international scale by promoting its "creativity-based industries both at home and overseas."⁹⁰ Despite the widespread criticism the program has received both within Japan and abroad for the mishandling and misrepresentation of the country's image, the Japanese government has continued to support its efforts leading up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Cool Japan ambassador Benjamin Boas in

⁹⁰ Kazuaki Nagata, "As manga goes digital via smartphone apps, do paper comics still have a place?" *Japan Times*, August 2, 2017, accessed August 12, 2017, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/08/02/business/manga-goes-digital-via-smartphone-apps-paper-comics-still-place/#.WY8ycxPyvBI/>.

particular has been vocal on this point, lamenting the lack of “true foreign perspective” on those aspects of Japanese culture which non-natives find to be the most fascinating.⁹¹

However, Boas is not exempt from a similar evaluation. At a book signing Q&A event at the popular Japanese chain bookstore Kinokuniya, Boas said that he wrote his comic essay as a “thank you” to the manga and video games which allowed him the ability to experience living and working in Japan, and out of the desire to tell other people about *his* “Cool Japan.”⁹² While the criticism he levels at the Japanese is less focused on inherent social issues, and more an unnecessary (possibly even unwelcome) recommendation of his own personal opinions. The cultural comparisons to be expected of a comic essay in this genre are scarce,⁹³ and the reflective essays (many of which read like an advice column) that section off each chapter are largely concerned with his personal theories on effective communication from a philosophically Western standpoint of “open and honest communication.”

More importantly in Boas’s case, as a somewhat random collection of his memories connected to Japanese manga or video games, his comic essay is almost too autobiographical in nature to be entertaining for the average reader. Whereas Ekström’s comic essays have the potential to appeal to a wide variety of readers—much in the same way as Oguri’s—Boas’s comic essay limits itself to an even further subcategory of interest, namely readers who have a

⁹¹ Benjamin Boas, “‘Cool Japan’ needs to listen to its target market,” *Japan Times*, April 24, 2016, accessed December 01, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/04/24/general/cool-japan-needs-listen-target-market/#.WjVW51Q-fBI>.

⁹² Benjamin Boas, “Kinokuniya Presentation” (video of bookstore Q&A signing event, Books Kinokuniya Shinjuku, March 1, 2015), accessed January 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Dtmb5NqknU&feature=youtu.be>.

⁹³ “Cultural comparisons” are limited to the taboo of having children out of wedlock in Japan, onomatopoeia unique to Japanese manga, the prevalence of revenge stories in Japanese manga versus what Boas believes to be a non-existent theme in American comics, the differences between character design in American comics and Japanese manga, and the perception of manga and anime as being for children in the West.

true affinity for manga, anime, and/or video games and who are also interested in hearing about a foreigner's perspective on them.

Similarly to Ekström, reviewers praised Foo's artistic abilities as well stated their pleasant surprise upon reading it that it wasn't "just another story about seeing Japan from a foreigner's perspective." As with the other comic essays in the genre, it presents several episodes based on cultural comparisons (New Year's in Tokyo is a much quieter affair than in Singapore, to-go-bags in Singapore are simple plastic bags, Singapore also has a culture of giving *otoshidama*, etc.), but is largely autobiographical; the majority is dedicated to describing the story of her life up culminating in the publication of the comic essay itself. It details the ups and downs of her introverted childhood, the difficulties of living with her parents as an adult, and personal struggle in coming to Japan to undergo the grueling process of *mochikomi* to publish her manga—themes that all have the potential to resonate with a wide audience, especially aspiring Japanese *mangaka*, thus broadening the appeal of her comic essay. Where there are many comic essays that deal with similar themes, *Singapore Otaku* reflects Foo's struggles in not quite such a negative light. Although the overall tone is not as upbeat as Ekström's, reviewers commended Foo's acceptance of her weaknesses and desire to overcome them.

While Ekström's success cannot be attributed to any single factor, it is clear based on the reception of her comic essays in comparison to Haefelin, Boas, and Foo that a combination of her upbeat tone, gentle, self-deprecating humor, balanced critical content, and safe multiculturalism played an important role. Equally important to the creativity and presentation of her content is the guiding hand of her editor and extent of her marketing tactics which does not appear to have been the case for the others.

2.3 One Hit Wonders? : The Future For Foreign-Born *Mangaka*

As of August 2017, total paper and digital sales of Ekström's comic essays (exclusive of her fourth volume) had already exceeded 190,000 copies.⁹⁴ Even these early figures, however, may not be entirely representative of the true extent of their popularity. Kinsella points out that "The actual readership of manga magazines however is approximately three times as high as their circulation figures. Each magazine sold is read by an average of three people... Reading books and magazines on the hoof in book shops and convenience stores (*tachiyomi*) is a common pastime activity."⁹⁵ With the popularity of used book retailers such as BookOff (notorious for its tolerance of *tachiyomi*), manga cafés, and rental manga available at chain bookstores such as Tsutaya, it can reasonably be assumed that comic essay *tankōbon* may follow a similar pattern, making Ekström's readership base all the more substantial than what is reflected in sales figures alone. With the increased marketability of her comic essays over the past year thanks to efforts by her editor on Ekström's behalf, it is possible that figures will continue to increase.

Each volume of Ekström's *Hokuō joshi* series is around 150 pages with one episode per page. Similarly to traditional story manga, the majority of the episodes are in black and white with the exception of the introductory pages which are in full color. However, the exceptions to these rules are *Nordic Girl Åsa's countryside Japan adventure* with two episodes per page, and the third volume of the series, which was published in full color in its entirety. The increasing amount of work and effort that has gone into these subsequent volumes and the relatively short time frame in which they have been published is testament not only to Ekström's increasing

⁹⁴ Paper sales made up the majority of these figures at 165,000, whereas digital sales had already reached 25,000. Official figures for the digital sales of Ekström's 3rd volume had not yet been collected at the time of the interview, but paper sales had already reached 22,000 less than five months after the volume's initial release. Yamasaki, interview.

⁹⁵ Kinsella, 43.

popularity and reader demand, but an expert marketing schema. Ekström's works are prominently marketed on Kadokawa's comic-essay.com, Kadokawa Media Factory editor-in-chief Matsuda Noriko's Twitter page, as well as Ekström's own Twitter and official *Hokuō joshi* blog.⁹⁶ Select episodes from her comic essays translated into English and Chinese are also available to read for free online at NTT Docomo's multilingual tourist information website WOW! JAPAN.⁹⁷ They have also been featured on the Asahi Digital (朝日新聞 DIGITAL)⁹⁸ as well as The Volvo Life Journal⁹⁹ websites in the original Japanese. More recently, Ekström has also branched out into collaborative projects. She contributed an original cover design and artwork to the light novel *French girl Madalena's downtown mysterious story* (*Furenchi joshi Madorēna-san no shitamachi fushigi monogatari* フレンチ女子マドレーヌさんの下町ふしぎ物語), published by Kadokawa on September 23, 2017,¹⁰⁰ and even more recently (December 1, 2017 until June 30, 2018), was asked to collaborate with the Chiba City Tourism Office by contributing new *yonkoma* manga to an eleven page full-color guidebook for a stamp rally¹⁰¹ campaign to promote tourist spots along their new monorail line. The prizes for completing the

⁹⁶ “Hokuō joshi ga mitsuketa nihon no fushigi Åsa Ekström ofisharu burogu 北欧女子が見つけた日本の不思議オーサ・イエークストロムオフィシャルブログ” [Nordic Girl discovers the Mysteries of Japan Åsa Ekström official blog], last modified April 4, 2017, <http://ameblo.jp/hokuoujoshi/>. (accessed April 7, 2017)

⁹⁷ WOW! JAPAN, “Hokuou Joshi: A Swedish Girl's Life in Japan: Self Introduction,” accessed February 18, 2018, https://wow-j.com/en/Allguides/other/tips_manners/ae000_en/.

⁹⁸ Asahi Digital 朝日新聞 DIGITAL. “Hokuō joshi Asa no nihon tanken” 北欧女子オーサの日本探検 [Nordic Girl Asa's Japanese Adventures]. *Asahi Digital* 朝日新聞 DIGITAL, July 8, 2017. http://www.asahi.com/be/nihontanken/?iref=com_taglist/. (accessed August 11, 2017)

⁹⁹ The Volvo Life Journal, last modified January 4, 2018, accessed January 4, 2018, <http://v-for-life.jp/>.

¹⁰⁰ Yuni Mon 由似文 (author) Ekström, Åsa オーサ・イエークストロム (illustrator), *Furenchi joshi Madorēna-san no shitamachi fushigi monogatari* フレンチ女子マドレーヌさんの下町ふしぎ物語 [French girl Madalena's downtown mysterious story] (Tokyo: Kadokawa, 2017).

¹⁰¹ A promotional event, usually to boost tourism, in which participants visit designated locations to collect stamps in a booklet in return for a special completion prize.

rally include a clear file and notebook with Ekström's *Hokuō joshi* artwork.¹⁰² Ekström has also made numerous YouTube and television appearances as a guest, interviewee, and program host, including but not limited to Asahi Digital, NHK, and the GaiMan Show! (ガイマン SHOW!).



Figure 9: (LEFT) Ekström's cover design for the light novel, *French girl Madalena's downtown mysterious story*. The artistic style of Ekström's *Hokuō joshi* series is clearly reflected in the illustrations. © Yuni Mon/Åsa Ekström/Kadokawa, 2017. (RIGHT) Poster for the Chiba city stamp rally featuring Ekström's illustrated *Hokuō joshi* self. © Chiba City, Åsa Ekström, 2017.

In February of 2018, Ekström released the latest volume in her *Hokuō joshi* series in rare full-color as a 'thank you' to her readers for exceeding 200,000 copies of her previous volumes sold; *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan 4* (*Hokuō joshi Ōsa ga mitsuketa Nihon no fushigi 4* 北欧女子オーサが見つけた日本の不思議4) is a compilation of 80 new episodes of her life in Japan and trip to visit her home country of Sweden, in addition to those that were

¹⁰² Retasukurabu nyūsu レタスクラブニュース, "Sutanpu secchi basho スタンプ設置場所" [Stamp rally location] <https://www.lettuceclub.net/special/tf/chibashi/20171201/>. (accessed February 15, 2018)

serialized on Asahi Digital, The Volvo Life Journal, Chiba City stamp rally, and her *Hokuō joshi* blog.¹⁰³ At this continued rate of production it is reasonable to question the continued viability of the series and whether Ekström as already achieved everything possible for a comic essayist in her genre. Congruent to several reader reviews, it seems that there is only so much more she can write on the topic of experiencing Japan from a foreigner's perspective. However, others disagree, lauding Ekström's continued ability to provide a fresh and engaging perspective. Ekström herself expresses in the afterword of this volume her love for Japan and its many "mysteries", about which she feels she could write forever. She goes on to say that she could not understand why her readers would want to read a comic about her tiny European country, but when asked, they expressed an interest to know not only about Sweden, but about the way people in other countries think.

Several possibilities then exist for Ekström to continue to further her career as a *mangaka*, after now having established herself as a household name with a formidable number of publications under her belt. It may be the opportune time for Ekström to expand the scope of her work to traditional story manga, as she mentioned she hoped to do in an interview for CHAPPE TV. Ekström expressed her interest in drawing an "epic fantasy manga" inspired by Swedish folklore, taking advantage of what she sees as her unique advantage as a foreigner in the Japanese manga industry, the ability to "draw something that only you can draw as a foreigner."¹⁰⁴ Although initially put off by the strict publishing pace and demanding lifestyle of a serial *mangaka*, with her current understanding of the Japanese publishing industry it would not be such a stretch in comparison to her days as an unknown artist. Should this indeed be the case, Ekström's unique situation would prove to be the mirror opposite of the typical pattern of

¹⁰³ Ekström, *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan* 4, 170.

¹⁰⁴ Ekström, CHAPPE TV interview.

mangaka first making a name in traditional manga before moving on to autobiographical works. However, it would follow this pattern precisely in that she first needed to make a name for herself before attempting what has traditionally been the most difficult aspect of the business.

Perhaps more likely, however, is the possibility for the expansion of her current readership based on a stroke of good luck in the timing of her continued release of the *Hokuō joshi* series. In much in the same way Oguri's *Darling* series, although initially geared toward transnational/cultural couples but surprisingly drew in a much wider readership base, Ekström's comic essays, although marketed toward Japanese readers interested in how their country is viewed from the perspective of a foreigner.¹⁰⁵ Contrary to the typical majority female readership of comic essays, Ekström has already attracted a near 50/50 male/female readership.¹⁰⁶ She also has the potential to draw in the Japanese-literate expat community; the contents of her comics being relatable to the typical 'foreign experience,' yet refreshing enough in the personal touch she lends each episode of her experiences to remain appealing. Along similar lines, with her works being officially translated into Chinese and English (with Swedish almost sure to follow), there is every possibility that the impending 2020 Tokyo Olympics will provide an opportunity to renew global interest in Japan, and that other foreigners would like to read these types of comics as well. In that sense, language is the only barrier (and one easily solved by the 'problem' of translation) to her reaching this audience, despite the 'visual language' and intended readership being 'Japanese.' There has been a boom in the consumption of Japanese culture over the past few decades, especially in terms of manga and anime. Since its introduction to the U.S., manga has grown from an *otaku* subculture obsession to a legitimized genre with its own dedicated shelf space in Barnes and Noble booksellers, where it competes head-to-head with

¹⁰⁵ Yamasaki, interview.

¹⁰⁶ This data is not based on officially recorded figures. Ibid.

graphic novel sales.¹⁰⁷ Europe also has been highly influenced by manga, with many aspiring *mangaka* (from France, Italy, Germany, and Sweden in particular) hoping to break into the Japanese industry. ‘Manga-style’ comics such as *Avatar: the Last Airbender* have also done quite well within the United States, and a number of how-to instructional guides on the basics of drawing manga have been published in English, all leading to the inevitability of foreign-born artists pursuing their dreams of becoming *mangaka*. It is a dream shared by Ekström herself;

Not only myself, but there are many other foreigners active in Japan and their own countries who love Japanese manga and under that influence want to become *mangaka*. I think it would be a wonderful thing if after this everyone in Japan could read even more Japanese-style manga drawn by foreigners. It should be because those works have been drawn with a strong love of Japanese manga.¹⁰⁸

This dream is becoming increasingly more attainable with the rise in popularity of digital media, which has created a gateway for aspiring artists, as well as the establishment of vocational programs for the education of *mangaka* and animation artists in Japan within the past twenty years to be discussed in subsequent chapters.

2.4 Conclusion

As evidenced by the sales figures and overwhelmingly positive readers’ reviews of her comic essays (especially in comparison to other foreign-born author-artists in the genre), Ekström is clearly the representative model of success for a foreign-born *mangaka*. A number of critical variables have contributed to the prolific and enduring popularity of her work over the past few years. Among these are the unique combination of her educational background (both in Sweden and Japan), years of experience perfecting her artistic style—which has importantly

¹⁰⁷ Casey Brienza, *Manga in America : Transnational Book Publishing and the Domestication of Japanese Comics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 58.

¹⁰⁸ Ekström, *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan 2*, 156-157.

been lauded by reviewers as being very ‘Japanese’, the upbeat tone of her comic content, and the support of her *Hokuō joshi* series editor. Although these factors have undoubtedly set her ahead of the curve, several ‘universal’ keys to success appear to be applicable not only in Ekström’s case, but other aspiring foreign-born *mangaka* as well. These variables are the ability to assimilate both on a cultural and linguistic level, facility in the visual language of ‘Japanese’ manga, the overall tone and delivery of potentially critical content, a support system, and timing. These last two factors will be discussed in the following chapters as they pertain to the increasingly digitized landscape of the publishing, international manga competitions, and the proliferation of vocational manga schools which cater to foreign student enrollment.

CHAPTER 3

DIGITAL MEDIA TRENDS & THE STATE OF THE JAPANESE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

In this chapter I will assess Japanese publishing companies' recent efforts to meet the challenges of a decline in the consumption of print-based media precipitated by an increasingly digitized market, which has been the subject of speculation in the field manga research for over twenty years. In particular it will explore those elements of manga (more specifically *yonkoma*) uniquely suited to adapt and grow in an increasingly digitized market—its digestibility and the growing access of publishers to promising new talent by means of web-based distribution. In order to make sense of the data compiled from annual publishers' reports, I will begin with an overview of the current state of the market, discuss the ways in which publishers are responding to recent trends in reader preferences in the context of digital publications, and examine the mutually beneficial aspects of the expansion of the manga market. I will show that the amalgamation of these changes have created a niche market opportunity for aspiring foreign-born *mangaka* that points toward the future expansion of the comic essay genre.

3.1 The Decline of Print-based Media

It is no secret that the publishing industry has been challenged by the advent of the Internet and the proliferation of smartphones and other mobile electronic devices over the past twenty years. The Japanese market, although one of the largest in the world, has not been immune to the trend toward digitization. A number of scholars have discussed how the Japanese market has been faced with a unique set of additional challenges with regard to its aging

population and declining birthrate, resulting in a shrinking pool of readers.¹⁰⁹ And while print media continues to comprise the majority of the market, speculation as to the future viability of print media has been especially bleak, with the rapid increase of digital newspaper subscribers, increasing popularity of e-readers¹¹⁰ and reading apps, and steady decline of brick-and-mortar bookstores¹¹¹ seemingly pointing toward a downturn in the publishing industry. “Japanese publishers long enjoyed consistent growth in the postwar era. However, this growth peaked in 1996. Since that point, publishers have experienced a decline in performance that has continued for 15 years.”¹¹² Additionally, “Both the book and magazine markets have been shrinking, with a decrease of more than 1 trillion yen in 2014 from the peak year of 1996.”¹¹³ Accounting for 20% of all book and magazine sales, manga is a multi-billion yen export industry¹¹⁴ that potentially will feel the significant impact of this decline.¹¹⁵ An initial review of the sales figures and publishing statistics found in Dentsu’s *Information White Papers* clearly indicates a drastic downturn in the paper-based manga market, with an overall sales decrease of 91.6% in 2015 compared to previous years. The drop in new manga print sales can be attributed not only to the rise in influence of digital media and dissemination of information via the Internet, but the

¹⁰⁹ Media Innovation Lab, Dentsu Innovation Institute, Dentsu Inc., “Research Report: Information Media Trends in Japan 2016 Information Media White Paper,” (Dentsu Inc. Tokyo, 2016), 7.

¹¹⁰ According to a 2016 survey conducted by Mainichi Newspapers, 19% of those readers surveyed read e-books. Japan Book Publishers Association 2017, 33.

¹¹¹ As of 2015, the total number of bookstores in Japan was 13,488, with 10,000 stores having closed during the past ten years (Ibid., 16).

¹¹² “Word from the President,” Japan Book Publishers Association, accessed February 15, 2018, <http://www.jbpa.or.jp/en/about/index.html>.

¹¹³ Media Innovation Lab, 8.

¹¹⁴ Manga accounted for 73% of total global print exports in 2015, totaling 9 billion yen in revenue. Japan Book Publishers Association 2017, 26.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

popularity of used-book retailers such as BookOff, comic cafés, and national chain bookstore Tsutaya’s manga rental system,¹¹⁶ as well as the stagnation of the cross-over¹¹⁷ manga market in general. The number of “hit manga” released in recent years has also decreased, along with the reach of their popularity when compared to classic franchises such as *Dragonball* (1984) or *Sailor Moon* (1991)—rebooted in 2014 as *Sailor Moon Crystal* due to its enduring popularity—and with fewer new series being adapted into animation.¹¹⁸

However, while paper manga sales are falling, the impact on total sales¹¹⁹ has been mitigated by the increase in digital sales,¹²⁰ resulting in the total sales volume staying relatively the same.¹²¹ The year 2015 marked a clear turning point in the industry, when for the first time, the number of digital titles rose to 10% of total market representation.¹²² “Possibly this year [2017], annual sales of digital comics may surpass that of paper for the first time, according to a report released by the Tokyo-based Research Institute for Publications, which follows the publishing industry.”¹²³ These changes, therefore, cannot be said to point to the downturn of the manga industry, nor do they indicate a decrease in popularity of manga as a genre, either domestically or overseas. Rather, they have presented publishers with a new set of challenges

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹¹⁷ Crossover media is a critical symbiotic relationship between the manga and animation industries, in which popularity assists in fueling sales across both markets.

¹¹⁸ Dentsū Sōken hen. 電通総研 編, “A Research for Information and Media Society: Jōhō media hakusho 2017” A Research for Information and Media Society: 情報メディア 白書 2017 [A Research for Information and Media Society: Media Information White Papers], *Daiyamondo Sha* ダイヤモンド社 24 (2017) : 71.

¹¹⁹ Total digital and paper manga sales in 2015 amounted to ¥443700,000,000 (99.6% of previous years).

¹²⁰ Digital manga (magazines & *tankōbon*) sales in 2015 amounted to ¥116,900,000,000. Paper manga (magazines & *tankōbon*) sales amounted to ¥326,800,000,000.

¹²¹ Dentsū Sōken hen., 71.

¹²² Ibid., 75.

¹²³ Nagata, “As manga goes digital via smartphone apps, do paper comics still have a place?”

and possibilities that point to a surprising change in the landscape of what has traditionally been viewed as a closed industry.

3.2 Manga Meeting the Challenges of a Digital Market

In response to this trend, publishers are taking advantage of the unique opportunities the changing market affords manga, a genre particularly well-suited for adaptation to digital platforms and the evolving preferences of the modern Japanese reader. According to Dentsu's annual media research report, the modern reader tends to spend less time with text-based media, and more time with visual media.¹²⁴ Manga's emphasis on the visual element facilitates the establishment of an emotional connection with the reader, while the minimal amount of text lends itself to quick digestion, which is of growing importance in a world that is increasingly fast-paced. *Yonkoma* manga in particular lends itself to digitization as it does not require zooming in and out and zigzagging through the unique page layouts of traditional story manga.¹²⁵ Organized into four subsequent panels, they can be easily scrolled through on a computer, tablet, or smartphone.

Yonkoma, as opposed to traditional story manga which tend to follow a set of fictional characters over the course of a single linear narrative, are composed of short 'episodes' based on the author's daily life and personal experiences. They are not dependent upon the dynamic, varied panel arrangement of traditional story manga to further the story and keep readers turning the pages to find out what happens next. Thus, each episode can stand independently, making it easy for the reader to pick a starting and stopping point without interrupting an overarching

¹²⁴ Media Innovation Lab, 3.

¹²⁵ They are generally arranged in four panels, although some *mangaka* may use up to six on a single page. A more dynamic panel arrangement may also be used, however, in the first few pages, which often serve as a sort of prologue or foreword, in which the *mangaka* introduces him or herself.

storyline (see Figure 11). Although they currently account for only a small portion of the total manga market, the growing popularity of *yonkoma* can be attributed at least in part to this easily-digestible format.¹²⁶

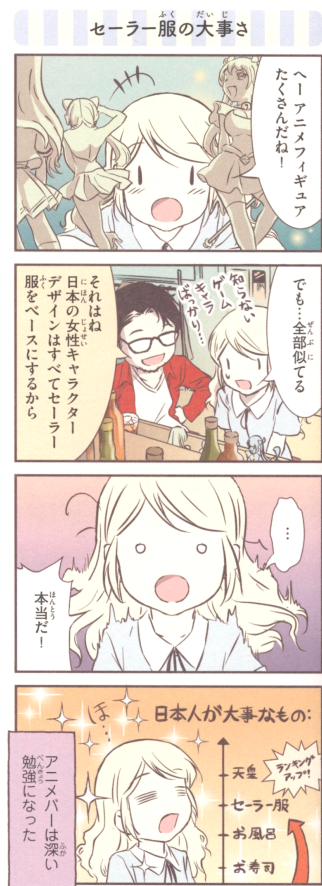


Figure 10 *Yonkoma* episode from Åsa Ekström's *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan* 2, p.25. (Tokyo: Kadokawa/Media Factory, 2015).

Format plays an integral role not only in terms of reader experience, but from a publishing standpoint as well. Digital platforms provide a further avenue for advertisement, resulting in increased (or rather, recovered) revenue. Publishers, having recognized this, are taking the opportunity to boost print sales through the distribution of free licensed manga

¹²⁶ In 2015 *yonkoma* manga made up a mere 20 of the 53,152 total new titles published in all genres of manga. Dentsū Sōken hen., 73.

chapters as well as amateur artists' complete series via smartphone apps¹²⁷ and e-readers.

According to Murata Tomoyoshi, manager of LINE¹²⁸ Manga's editorial team, a recent survey of LINE users revealed a strong connection between the way readers discover new manga series and the use of the app, which was preferred to paper manga magazines.¹²⁹

Digital comics are expanding as a result of visual media, works introduced by the media, free trial reading, and banner advertisements. Furthermore, digital comic magazines have also grown increasingly owing to the fact that since January 2015 Kodansha started digital distribution of all comic magazines serially, as well as the onslaught of apps for weekly juvenile comic magazines by major publishers. [All Japan Magazine and Book Publisher's and Editor's Association, AJPEA] points out that 'due to the opportunities for readers coming into contact with digital comics remarkably increasing, readers with the habit of reading comics electronically is steadily increasing.'¹³⁰

The explosive popularization of smartphones is expected to propel this trend even further in the future. *Shōnen Jump* magazine deputy editor in chief Hosono Shuhei in an interview with *The Japan Times* described the trend toward digitization as "...the best time for the manga industry. There has never been this many readers, not even when the Jump magazine was at its peak, selling 6 million copies (a week)."¹³¹ This positive response to the change in the industry comes at an opportune time not only for publishers, but for aspiring new artists as well.

3.3 Opening the Manga Market Through Web-based Distribution

¹²⁷ "The overall mobile phone penetration rate is 95.3%. By type of phone, smartphones with a penetration rate of 67.4% surpassed the traditional mobile phones' rate (64.3%) for the first time." Media Innovation Lab, 1.

¹²⁸ A freeware communications app for web-based calling, messaging, and video conferencing.

¹²⁹ Nagata, "As manga goes digital via smartphone apps, do paper comics still have a place?"

¹³⁰ Books Rhue Books ルーエ, "Kami to denshi no komikku ichiba, 0.4% gen no 4437 okuen/ shuppan kaken shirabe 紙と電子のコミック市場、0・4%減の4437億円／出版科研調べ" [Paper and digital comic market, 0.4% reduction of 443,700,000,000 yen/ publication department research investigation], Nisshoren 日書連, April 1, 2016, http://www.bmshop.jp/cgi_bin/bbs/shinbunka/read.cgi?no=6934, (accessed November 15, 2017).

¹³¹ Nagata

Web-based distribution of self-published manga has allowed for many artists' increased visibility. Amateur artists and hobbyists are garnering recognition prior to signing a formal contract with a publishing company through SNS such as LINE, pixiv, Twitter, Instagram, and even personal blogs, where artists and readers can connect without the social and financial pressure of in-person promotional events.¹³² *Yonkoma* drawn from everyday life in particular are gaining rapid popularity, as their autobiographical nature tends to create a strong sense of empathy with the reader.¹³³ Whereas in the past, the “normative pattern” tended toward *mangaka* first establishing a reputation prior to publishing works of an autobiographical nature, the emergence of comic essays as a genre in tandem with the expanding market for digital publications has created a niche for aspiring *mangaka* to break into what has been described as a traditionally closed market by turning this pattern on its head.

Unlike traditional story manga, which are typically serialized in weekly, biweekly, or monthly comic magazines such as *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, *Margaret*, and *CoroCoro*,¹³⁴ before being compiled into *tankōbon* (an independent volume), the number of *yonkoma* scouted for publication from the Internet is rapidly increasing.¹³⁵ Although a number of comic essays have been published directly into *tankōbon* (Oguri Saori's *My Darling is a Foreigner* series is one such example), it is far more common for amateur artists to have their works compiled into

¹³² Yamasaki, interview.

¹³³ “Essei manga ga SNS de ninki no riyū to wa? Shuppanyō ni mo arata na ugoki エッセイ漫画が SNS で人気の理由とは？ 出版業界にも新たな動き” [What is the reason essay manga are popular in SNS? And a new movement in the publishing industry], *DaVinci News* ダ・ヴィンチニュース, June 13, 2016, <https://ddnavi.com/news/305909/a/>. (accessed August 7, 2017)

¹³⁴ *Shōnen Jump* is one of the longest running weekly manga magazines targeted toward young male readers established by Shueisha in 1968. *Margaret* is a *shōjo* manga magazine targeted toward middle school-aged female readers established by Shueisha in 1963 which began running biweekly in 1988. *CoroCoro* is a monthly manga magazine established in 1977 by Shogakukan targeted toward elementary school-aged boys.

¹³⁵ Yamasaki, interview.

tankōbon directly from the Internet, as was the case with Ekström's comic essays. It may seem counter-productive for publishers to ask readers to pay for comics that are readily available for free online, but Kadokawa Media Factory and pixiv x essay editor Yamasaki Shun explains the reason is twofold;

The reason for making books from works already popular on the Internet is that there is a higher possibility that they will sell. In Japan, there are so many books being published that even if a completely unknown author suddenly publishes a book, even released it often ends up being unknown. On the other hand, if you are a writer who has already acquired readers (fans) through SNS and blogs, you can assume that a certain number of readers are sure to pick it up once it's published. The reason to publish not only e-books but also paper books is that there is still a high demand for paper media in the Japanese market (although in terms of manga alone, digital publication shares are said to exceed paper shares within a few years). Also, when books popular on the Internet are published as [paper] books, in terms of added value, they often include episodes that cannot be read online.¹³⁶

The added value applies not only to readers, but publishers as well, as the cost to return ratio for the production of *tankōbon* is much more lucrative than that of disposable manga magazines.¹³⁷

To compile a *tankōbon* from web-based *yonkoma* would likely then be even less costly in terms of production with a much higher rate of return considering the pre-established Internet fan base.

Publisher Kadokawa has seized this opportunity to partner with the popular illustrative SNS pixiv (ピクシブ) in a collaborative effort to seek new talent for its comic essay print sector with the pixiv x essay contest, which launched in June of 2013. Adapting their methods from the traditional pattern of scouting for new talent via manga competitions offering cash prizes advertised in high-circulation manga magazines,¹³⁸ the pixiv x essay contest boasts cash prizes

¹³⁶ Yamasaki, interview.

¹³⁷ Kinsella, 43-44.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 52.

up to ¥100,000 and the offer of serial publication on their website for official prize winners.¹³⁹

Perhaps even more importantly, the competition provides artists the opportunity for their works to be discovered by publishers and readers alike. Kinsella emphasizes the importance of such manga competitions for both winners and participants:

Though magazines are obliged to some degree to publish the work of prize winners, editors may decide to keep in contact with either the winners or the losers of manga competitions for indefinite periods of time after this initial point of contact. For artists, becoming a manga competition prize-winner or having work published in a magazines, preferably a high-circulation magazine, is their universally acknowledged professional début (*debū*).¹⁴⁰

The opportunity for professional début is especially appealing for aspiring foreign-born *mangaka* as many of these competitions are neither restricted to the Japanese, nor competitors within Japan. Publisher Shueisha also runs several international manga competitions, including Jump's Universal Manga Contest, which welcomes multilingual digital entries in multiple genres. A number of other outlets are also open to entries from foreign countries, such as the Kitakyushu International Manga Competition for *yonkoma* run by the Kitakyushu Manga Museum, and the Manga Jiman Competition facilitated by the Embassy of Japan in the UK for *yonkoma* and story manga.

3.4 Conclusion

The mutually-beneficial system of web-based distribution is clearly a plus for amateur artists hoping to make their début, but may have even wider-reaching effects. The opportunity to gain the attention of a publisher without having to undergo the process of *mochikomi* (presenting one's work in person) allows for the further expansion of the manga market overseas for aspiring

¹³⁹ DaVinci News, *What is the reason essay manga are popular in SNS? And a new movement in the publishing industry*.

¹⁴⁰ Kinsella, 54.

foreign-born *mangaka* who are unable to promote their manga in person in Japan (the very same struggle Foo lamented in the afterword of her comic essay). Thus, the challenges of the digital age may prove to be more a boon than a burden for publishers and *mangaka* alike. The increase in opportunity for aspiring foreign-born *mangaka* will be further explored in the next chapter with a discussion of vocational programs in Japan encouraging the enrollment of students from overseas.

CHAPTER 4

‘DRAWING’ FOREIGN STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS IN THE FUTURE OF THE MANGA INDUSTRY

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the pressures and influence of the digital publishing market have had far-reaching effects on the manga industry. In addition to the creation of the opportunity for aspiring *mangaka* such as Ekström to gain a visible presence online, vocational schools (*senmongakkō* 専門学校), in their efforts to advance alongside technology and market trends appear to have much to contribute to furthering the positive effects of these changes; namely the opening of the Japanese market to foreign-born *mangaka*. Kyoto Seika University’s program in particular, through its encouragement of international student enrollment, innovative courses offerings, and proactive efforts to increase the global visibility of manga through the establishment of the Kyoto International Manga Museum¹⁴¹ and International Manga Research Center “... has always played a leading role in academic research in the field of manga both in Japan and abroad, based on its research and education activities over the past 30 years,”¹⁴² and seems to have been an inspiration to other vocational schools across the country.

In this chapter I will further examine the developing market for publications by foreign-born *mangaka* in terms of the indispensable support they receive from such vocational programs: technical training, skill development, and perhaps most importantly, networking. I will cite as evidence the emergence of Japanese universities and vocational schools across the country creating programs for aspiring *mangaka* which encourage overseas admissions, the Japanese

¹⁴¹ The Kyoto International Manga Museum, opened in 2006, is home to an extensive permanent collection of indigenous manga as well as a small collection of works by foreign-born *mangaka* which have been featured in a variety of exhibits and events promoting the international development of manga. Ekström’s *Sayonara September* series is among the museum’s collection of European manga; her discovery of its display is illustrated in an episode of *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan 3* (115).

¹⁴² Kyoto International Manga Museum, “About Kyoto Seika University International Manga Research Center,” accessed April 4, 2018, <https://www.kyotomm.jp/en/about/summary/imrc/>.

government's promotion of international student enrollment and support systems, and the valuable role of comic markets. I argue that this combined set of circumstances illustrates Japan's move toward globalization, and the support systems created by vocational programs such as Kyoto Seika University's are indispensable to foreign-born *mangaka* hoping to break into the Japanese manga market.

4.1 The Emergence of Vocational Manga Studies Programs

The number of Japanese universities and vocational schools creating programs for aspiring *mangaka* which not only accept, but encourage the enrollment of foreign students has increased dramatically over the last decade.¹⁴³ Beginning with Kyoto Seika University, well-known for its pioneer degree program specifically geared toward the training of future *mangaka*, programs have begun to develop all over the country (see Table 1 on the following page).¹⁴⁴ A number of these offer four-year undergraduate degrees (Kyoto Seika University even offers graduate MA and PhD tracks) in technical training and skill development in the creation of manga through the instruction of experienced faculty privy to the ins and outs of the industry. The opportunity for networking and job-hunting support through institutional connections is a powerful draw, not only for Japanese students, but international students as well, whose numbers continue to grow at a steady rate. At Kyoto Seika University alone, international student

¹⁴³ Miki Tanikawa, "Japanese Universities Draw Foreign Students With Manga," *New York Times*, December 26, 2010, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/27/business/global/27manga.html>.

¹⁴⁴ Kyoto Seika University, known as Kyoto Seika Junior College until its official founding as a University in 1979, offered its first course on manga in 1973. Kyoto Seika University, "History," accessed January 22, 2018, <http://www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/eng/about/history/>.

enrollment over the last three years (2015- 2017) has increased by nearly 25%, and of these 200 students, 143 are studying in the Department of Manga.¹⁴⁵

School	Region	Programs/Courses (and foundation years)	Overall Program Enrollment	Foreign Student Enrollment
Japanese Animation & Manga College 日本アニメ・マンガ専門 学校	Niigata	Manga Creation Comic Illustration Character Design Animator Manga Illustration Master	*not available	*not available
Digital Hollywood University	Tokyo	Graphic Design Anime (school opened 2005)	Undergraduate 1093 Graduate 270 (2017)	35.1% international student ratio
Tokyo Designer Gakuin College 東京デザイナー学院	Tokyo Osaka Nagoya	Manga Department Illustration Department Graphic Design	48 49 45	*only available for ALL programs, not specific to any one dept. = 368
Nagoya Zokei University of Art & Design 名古屋造形大学	Aichi (Nagoya)	Manga Animation / CG Illustration Design Graphic Design	782 (2015)	*not available
Kyoto Seika University 京都精華大学	Kyoto	Department of Manga (2000) Graduate School of Manga Masters Program (2010) Graduate School of Manga Doctoral Program (2012)	941 (45 students enrolled in the graduate program)	143 undergraduate students (49 enrolled in the animation track) 44 graduate students
Ohara College of Information, Design and Art 大原情報デザインアート 専門学校	Osaka (Namba) Tokyo	Manga / Illustration (2003 - Namba branch only) Animation (2017 - Tokyo branch only)	*not available	*not available

Table 1: Illustrates a variety of programs based on region, course offerings and their foundation years, as well as a breakdown of student enrollment.

¹⁴⁵ 153 foreign students in 2015 to 200 as of May 1, 2017. Kyoto Seika University, “Current Student Enrollment,” last modified May 1, 2017, accessed January 22, 2018. <http://www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/eng/about/number/>.

[In 2015], more than 40 works from [Kyoto Seika University's] manga department graduates were published in the form of *tankōbon*. After graduation, there are many students who work as professionals, but the same university is also under great pressure to change the so-called style of paper-based manga. Therefore, [Kyoto Seika University is] looking to establish a 'new-generation manga course' beginning [in 2017] to develop self-produced online publications.¹⁴⁶

The inception of this new course has no doubt been influenced by the digital publishing trends discussed in the previous chapter. It is also a reflection of the University's desire to provide support to its students, as the model of "self-produced online publications" has been proven to pave the way for amateur artists' official débuts. Ekström herself attributes her success to a similar system of institutional support. Ekström attended Tokyo Designer Gakuin College, during which time she began writing her debut comic essay *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan* (*Hokuō joshi Ōsa ga mitsuketa Nihon no fushigi* 北欧女子オーサが見つけた日本の不思議).¹⁴⁷ She began uploading episodes one at a time as part of a graphic design report for which she was required to update a blog with her work on a daily basis, a task much more easily accomplished with the creation of a single *yonkoma* than detailed page of story manga.¹⁴⁸

4.2 Encouraging International Student Enrollment

Despite the expansion of these innovative programs and their acceptance rates, course offerings are almost exclusively in Japanese, and the lofty requirement of Japanese-Language

¹⁴⁶ "Kyoto Seika Dai manga gakubu kosei o ikasu byōgashidō 京都精華大マンガ学部 個性を生かす描画指導" [Kyoto Seika University Manga Department Drawing Leadership that Makes the Best Use of Individuality], *Mainichi Shimbun*, November 25, 2016, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20161125/dde/012/070/015000c>. (accessed July 20, 2017)

¹⁴⁷ Adachi Education Group, <http://www.adachi-gakuen.jp/en/tdg/>.

¹⁴⁸ Fujii Ryō ふじいりょう, "'Hokuō joshi' mangaka Åsa Ekström san intabyū '北欧女子' 漫画家オーサ・イエークストロムさんインタビュー" [Hokuō joshi mangaka Åsa Ekström interview], *Gajetto Tsūshin* ガジエット通信, September 17, 2015. <http://getnews.jp/archives/1151511>, (accessed November 15, 2017).

Proficiency Test (JLPT) N1 or N2 proficiency is often necessary to enroll.¹⁴⁹ This obstacle, according to Digital Hollywood University president Tomoyuki Sugiyama, is especially challenging for students from western countries, who make up a minority of the international student body—the majority come from neighboring Asian countries.¹⁵⁰ Yet, international enrollment in these programs may continue to grow due to a number of factors, not least among them Japan’s need to fill the widening gap in the workforce created by the declining birthrate and rapidly aging population.

The Japanese government, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), announced its plans in 2013 to initiate a program which would effectively double the number of international students in universities across the country by 2020, in time for the Tokyo Olympics. In order to draw more international students, part of the plan consists of increasing the number of lectures offered in English, and improving the support system for international students through career services support initiatives.¹⁵¹ Independent universities have also set their own goals for increasing international student enrollment. Sugiyama, in a 2010 interview for *The New York Times*, stated that he hoped in the future Digital Hollywood University would be able to boast a 50% foreign student body population.¹⁵² Standing at 31.4% in 2017, that goal seems increasingly attainable. Digital Hollywood University is not the only program aiming to inspire future foreign-born *mangaka*. Dr. Oussouby Sacko, the first African-born president of a Japanese university was elected president

¹⁴⁹ The second-most difficult level on a scale of 1 (being the most difficult) to 5 (being the least difficult).

¹⁵⁰ Tanikawa, “Japanese Universities Draw Foreign Students With Manga.”

¹⁵¹ “Gaikokujin no ukeire e ichidan no kufū o tami ga hiraku Nippon 外国人の受け入れへ一段の工夫を民が拓くニッポン” [The plan to move to allow more foreigners : The people open Japan], *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, January 5, 2015, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXXKZO81546360V00C15A1PE8000/>. (accessed April 21, 2017)

¹⁵² Tanikawa, “Japanese Universities Draw Foreign Students With Manga.”

of Kyoto Seika University in April 2018. Dr. Sacko, despite Kyoto Seika University's current standing at 20% overall foreign-student enrollment, also hopes to double that figure by 2028.¹⁵³ Dr. Sacko was once a foreign-exchange student himself and understands the struggles faced by those unfamiliar with the language and culture. These barriers apply not only to those students hoping to study at Japanese universities and in vocational programs, but to any aspiring artist hoping to have their manga published on the Japanese market.

4.3 Comic Markets

In an interview with YouTuber “Sharla in Japan,” Ekström acknowledged that there are many pathways to becoming a successful *mangaka* in Japan, but the “easiest way” is still to make the move to Japan and learn the language.¹⁵⁴ Enrolling in school enabled Ekström to obtain her visa, under which she was then able to promote her manga at Japanese comic markets, such as Comiket (*komiketto* コミケット)¹⁵⁵ and COMITIA (*komitia* コミティア),¹⁵⁶ where editors from various publishing companies are available for *mochikomi*, which is how Ekström signed on with her publisher, Kadokawa.¹⁵⁷ Not only this, but the sizeable portfolio she had assembled, and her *Hokuō joshi yonkoma* blog in particular, were helpful in landing her contract.¹⁵⁸

AnimeJapan, an anime trade show, is also connected to several of the aforementioned technical

¹⁵³ Motoko Rich, “In Homogeneous Japan, an African-Born University President,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2018, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/asia/japan-african-university-president-sacko.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Ekström, interview by Sharla in Japan.

¹⁵⁵ Japan's largest bi-annual comic market which specializes in the sale of *dōjinshi* (self-published works often derivative of popular mainstream manga and animated series as well as video games and other related genres).

¹⁵⁶ A comparatively smaller market for the sale of original manga (not *dōjinshi*), illustrations, short stories, novels, essays, and music.

¹⁵⁷ Ekström, interview by Sharla in Japan.

¹⁵⁸ Ekström, *Nordic Girl Åsa discovers the Mysteries of Japan 2*, 124.

schools (Nihon Gakuen Kogakuin, Tokyo Net Wave, and Tokyo Gakuen Film Techniques Training Colleges/Toho Gakuen High School) which have hosted booths at the convention in the past to provide career counseling to aspiring *mangaka*.¹⁵⁹ Both Comiket and AnimeJapan host English-language websites, making it easier for foreign-born *mangaka* to access information on participation in these popular yearly events.

The more strenuous alternative is for aspiring *mangaka* to bring their portfolio to different publishers at their home offices and request feedback from an editor, who will only do so if the work appeals to them. In her comic essay, Foo dedicates an entire 37 page chapter to the struggles of undergoing the process of *mochikomi* at different publishing houses, a process that ended up taking nearly five years before she was finally picked up by her publisher, Kadokawa.¹⁶⁰ Not only is it stressful and time consuming, but in her case, expensive as well as she made multiple trips to Japan from her native Singapore in order to promote her work.¹⁶¹

No matter the circumstances, the process of *mochikomi* is arguably a stressful one, especially in the case of foreign-born *mangaka* who, lacking a support system, may otherwise be unable to successfully promote their work due to a number of factors, not least among them the potential language barrier. While there are publishing companies attempting to make the process more accessible to non-Japanese speakers at comic markets, as illustrated by both Ekström and Foo's cases, enrolling first in a manga program lends a great advantage not only in terms of technical training and skill development, but most importantly, networking.

¹⁵⁹ "Post-Event Report," AnimeJapan2016, accessed August 8, 2017, <http://www.anime-japan.jp/2016/en/report/outline/#linkCategory4>.

¹⁶⁰ Foo, 100-134.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 138-139.

4.4 Conclusion

It can be seen here that the growing number of Japanese vocational schools and universities offering manga courses in tandem with the encouragement of international student enrollment, and government-sponsored program to facilitate the increase, points toward a clear opportunity for foreign-born *mangaka* to enter the evolving manga market. Although currently there are only a handful of foreign-born *mangaka* creating comic essays, it is not impossible to imagine that the number will increase in the future. According to Yamasaki,

“I think [the number of foreign *mangaka*] will increase. I think the number of *mangaka* who draw with the so-called ‘Japanese manga touch’ are increasing all over the world, and it seems that the opportunities for these *mangaka* to publish comic essays about Japan will also increase more and more. Even though the number is still few, sometimes works by foreign authors gain attention at the Comic Essay Newcomer Award held at the editorial department.”¹⁶²

Not only is the number of aspiring foreign-born *mangaka* on the rise, the combination of created opportunity through vocational programs, along with the burgeoning niche market for these types of works has laid an initial foundation upon which they will be able to build a successful career. Granted there are many factors which contribute to the level of success of a *mangaka* such as Ekström that may not be realistically achievable for everyone who attempts it, but the opportunity is certainly ripe for those willing to take a chance. This alone is an indicator not only of the changing manga market, but a further step toward a globalizing Japan. The next chapter will explore other areas of Japanese arts and entertainment previously closed to foreign participation in which foreigners have become successful in order to further illustrate this point.

¹⁶² Yamasaki, interview.

CHAPTER 5

A GLOBALIZING JAPAN?

Given the success of Ekström, who has broken into an area of Japanese culture previously closed to foreigners, in this chapter I will provide other examples of foreigners who have made successful professional careers in the traditional Japanese performing arts to further support the hypothesis that the opening of not only the fields of sports, pop culture, and entertainment, but also the traditional arts to foreigners reflects a globalizing Japan. Silvain Guignard (*biwa*¹⁶³ performer), Maud Archambault (professional *min'yō*¹⁶⁴ performer), and Katsura Sunshine (*rakugoka*¹⁶⁵) can be considered pioneers in their fields, not only as some of the first foreigners to professionally pursue these traditional Japanese performing arts as a career, but also because they have done so successfully. The key to their success, similarly to Ekström, lies in their facility in the Japanese language and desire to participate in and preserve their art form without changing it. In other words, the ability to assimilate into the Japanese culture has enabled their success, reflecting the same brand of “tamed globalization” that Ekström embodies in her career as a foreign-born *mangaka*.

¹⁶³ A Japanese lute which evolved from the Persian stringed instrument, having come to Japan around the seventh or eighth century via the Silk Road. The *biwa* was originally used by blind itinerant monks to communicate Buddhist teachings, and eventually became the instrument of choice for the performance of war tales (*gunki monogatari*), such as the famous 13th century *Tale of the Heike*, for its powerful and expressive modulative sounds. Several different forms of the instrument exist in Japan today.

¹⁶⁴ The Sino-Japanese compound term *min'yō* (lit. ‘folk song’) derives from the 18th century German concept of ‘volkslied’ or ‘folk.’ The evolution of the term and its various encompassing aspects have been debated by scholars, but it is generally agreed that it should refer to the early twentieth century unified concept of songs which were the products of local cultures. For simplification purposes in this thesis, however, *min'yō* will be used in reference to all aspects of the modern iteration of performance *min'yō* and *min'yō geinō* (lit. ‘folk performing arts’)—song, dance, and instrumental accompaniment—unless otherwise stated. David W. Hughes, “Folk Music: From Local to National to Global,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music*, eds. Alison McQueen Tokita and David W. Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2013), 281-282.

¹⁶⁵ A solo comedic-storytelling performer, typically male, who dresses in kimono, makes use of only a small cloth (*tenugui*) and paper fan (*sensu*) as props, and performs all aspects of the show seated on stage in *seiza* style.

5.1 The ‘Foreign’ Element

Japan is currently experiencing what could be considered a unique phenomenon—the preservation and dissemination of traditional Japanese arts through a foreign catalyst.

In a recent article for *The Japan Times*, reporter Otake Tomoko argued that,

...being from the birthplace of a particular art or culture does not give that country’s people a license to dictate its future. But more often than not, foreigners who specialize in Japanese arts and culture make immeasurable contributions in their fields; without their passion and sensibilities, many of the existing Japanese art forms would have long ago become stale or even died out.¹⁶⁶

This can be clearly seen in the immediate post-WWII period, when in an effort to tamp down on militarism, the occupying US forces placed restrictions on *kabuki* plays that “glorified feudalistic values.” As a result, the majority of plays were banned, and for two years *kabuki* theater experienced a period of stagnation that nearly led to its eradication. Luckily, Faubion Bowers, personal interpreter to Douglas MacArthur, “argued that *kabuki* was a treasure not only to Japan, but to the world,” allowing it flourish once more.¹⁶⁷ *Kabuki* was added to Japan’s list of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritages in 2008.¹⁶⁸

Just as Hokusai inspired Van Gogh and Monet, sparking the Japonisme movement in 19th century Europe, and Japanese artists such as Shiba Kōkan were in turn influenced by western perspective and landscape techniques, this endless give-and-take provides both genres with the vitality Otake suggests would be infused through foreign participation. However, ethnomusicologist David W. Hughes proposes that “[a] fundamental tenet held with pride by

¹⁶⁶ Tomoko Otake, “Foreigners flourish in the realm of Japanese arts,” *Japan Times*, June 29, 2008, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2008/06/29/people/foreigners-flourish-in-the-realm-of-japanese-arts/#.WhON7hNSzBI>.

¹⁶⁷ *Begin Japanology, Kabuki*, Documentary, directed by NHK, April 5, 2012.

¹⁶⁸ “Japanese Elements on the Representation List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, August 16, 2017, http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/coop/unesco/c_heritage/i_heritage/japan.html.

most Japanese (though waning with globalization) is that no foreigner can ever master the intricacies of the ‘unique’ Japanese culture...”¹⁶⁹ While there may be certain areas of Japanese culture and society that have been largely impervious to this phenomenon of non-native involvement, perhaps in part due to closed-communities (i.e., practices kept within the family, highly regionalized and rare art forms, among other factors), it is not impossible to imagine a future in which non-native practitioners are accepted if not encouraged, as can be seen in the discussion from the previous chapters in regard to the Japanese comic industry.

A simple Internet search will quickly reveal the vast number of foreigners who have made a name for themselves in various other fields of entertainment in Japan; Silvain Guignard (*biwa* player), Maud Archambault (professional *min'yō* performer), Randy Channell Soei (Japanese tea ceremony master), Yasokichi Konishiki (Hawaiian sumo Ōzeki), Åsa Shouryū (Mongolian sumo Yokozuna), Hakuho Shō (Mongolian sumo Yokozuna), Kotoōshū Katsunori (Bulgarian sumo Ōzeki), Alex Ramirez (current manager for the Yokohama DeNA BayStars and former Nippon Professional Baseball outfielder 2001-2013), Matt Murton (former Nippon Professional Baseball outfielder for the Hanshin Tigers 2010-2015), Atsugiri Jason (comedian), Katsura Sunshine (*rakugoka*), Chris Hart (J-pop singer), JERO (*enka* singer), Peter Barakan (DJ, broadcaster, and Japanese TV personality), and Dave Spector (Japanese TV personality), to name a very few.

In an increasingly globalized world, it can be argued that Japan will necessarily adopt a more open policy toward immigration and multiculturalism. As was touched upon in the previous chapter with the discussion of encouragement of foreign student enrollment in vocational manga schools, this can already be seen through the steps toward increasing the

¹⁶⁹ Hughes, 236.

number of foreign students and skilled workers from abroad,¹⁷⁰ as well as the rising number of international marriages,¹⁷¹ and ‘foreigner-friendly’ measures being instituted prior to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.¹⁷² While Japan looking to spread the influence of its soft-power initiatives such as Cool Japan overseas, immigration policies may inevitably result in a certain measure of increased foreign influence on the largely homogeneous culture. However, despite the reasonable expectation for the participation of non-native practitioners to increase in the future that would logically follow, their success cannot be assured.

An important distinction must then be made between cross-cultural influence and the effect of the “foreign” element in regard to the allowance of foreign participation in the arenas of Japanese arts and entertainment. It cannot be denied that to a certain extent, the very nature of an artist or performer’s being from a foreign country and the currently limited number of non-native professionals lends a novel element to their work, drawing the attention of both foreign and domestic audiences. However, in regard to non-native practitioners of the traditional performing arts, their “foreignness” may serve simply as an added element of admiration and curiosity, as in the case of the three performing artists that will be discussed in the following section; it appears to have no bearing on the art form itself. This is true of Ekström, who, although she works in a medium of Japanese pop-culture, has not set out to influence the “Japanese grammar of manga”. As was discussed in Chapter 2, she works within the established framework of its established

¹⁷⁰ The total number of foreign individuals visiting, studying, and obtaining permanent residency in Japan has increased by 20,959,018 between 1985 and 2016. Ministry of Justice, http://www.moj.go.jp/housei/toukei/toukei_ichiran_nyukan.html.

¹⁷¹ For the purposes of this paper, “international marriages” refers to marriages in which one party is a Japanese national, and the other is not. Japan has experienced an increase of 8,999 such marriages between 1985 and 2016. Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/81-1.html>.

¹⁷² Among the proposed preparations for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Japan has launched a national toilet improvement campaign, in addition to a street and stop sign, and foreign map pictogram overhaul to reflect more “global” representations, as well as implementing a push for English language education and the hiring of professional English-speaking guides around the host city.

visual language. However, it is the safe multicultural nature of her work that has drawn in many of her readers. The flexibility of the pop-culture genre lends itself more to the promotion of the “foreign” element. Unlike the more rigid traditional arts, pop culture by its very nature waxes and wanes. In this way, the influence of the foreign element may be necessarily fleeting—all at once the impetus for recognition and the excuse for its allowance—any bearing it might have on the art form is ultimately inconsequential.

What then, does the future hold for these traditional performing arts of Japan? According to Hughes, “Clearly the ‘folk’ of Japan, who once identified primarily with a small-scale local community, found themselves drawn increasingly into a national culture during the twentieth century and have now – inevitably and naturally – become entangled in global cultural trends.”¹⁷³ In terms of an increasingly globalized Japan, the admission and acceptance of non-native practitioners of these art forms certainly has a future. In terms of foreigners who wish to participate professionally in the traditional performing arts, however, there appear to be caveats to their success; 1) complete immersion in the language and culture and a lifelong dedication to the art form, 2) the permission and guidance of a Japanese master, and 3) the desire to preserve and disseminate said art form without the inclination to put one’s own foreign stamp on it. The next section will examine the professional careers of several such non-native performing artists within the context of a globalizing Japan.

5.2 Representative Foreign Practitioners of Traditional Japanese Performing Arts

5.2.1 Silvain Guignard

¹⁷³ Hughes, 300-301.

Silvain “Kyokusai”¹⁷⁴ Guignard, a leading Chopin scholar and Swiss national, first came to Japan in 1983 in order to study the *biwa* at the prompting of his University of Zurich professor of ethnomusicology. Initially drawn to the instrument for its “shades of expression,” in Guignard’s opinion, “it’s the mastery of the *biwa* player if he really can make you give the feeling you’ve sung something and... it flows into the instrument. That’s the charm and the difficult part of playing this music.”¹⁷⁵ Guignard was introduced to *chikuzenbiwa*¹⁷⁶ master and ‘Living National Treasure’ Yamazaki Kyokusui while studying the instrument at Osaka University. He maintains the distinction of being her first and only non-native Japanese student.

A patient and humorous teacher whose life was dedicated to her art, when Yamazaki agreed to take Guignard on as a student it was with the understanding that a student of the *biwa* has only one teacher, and the expectation that if his skill measured up appropriately, their student-teacher relationship would continue for the rest of her life. Guignard showed great dedication, and impressed Yamazaki with his ability to learn quickly. He studied under Yamazaki’s tutelage for twenty-two years, right up until her death in 2006 at 100 years old. “[Guignard] believes that in order to pass on the techniques he learned from Yamazaki to the next generation, he must be faithful to tradition.”¹⁷⁷ The *chikuzenbiwa* techniques he learned through years of careful imitation of his teacher he hopes to impart to his students. In this spirit, he currently teaches both classical Japanese music and art at Osaka Gakuin University¹⁷⁸ and

¹⁷⁴ Guignard’s performance moniker.

¹⁷⁵ Begin Japanology, *Japanophiles: Silvain Guignard*, Documentary, directed by NHK, July 14, 2011.

¹⁷⁶ A late-nineteenth century variant of the *biwa* used for storytelling style performances.

¹⁷⁷ Begin Japanology, 2011.

¹⁷⁸ Toshio Matsubara, “MASTERS: A Lifelong Journey with the Biwa Lute,” *Highlighting Japan* 52, February (2012): 26-27, accessed September 9, 2017, http://dwl.gov-online.go.jp/video/cao/dl/public_html/gov/pdf/hlj/20120201/26-27.pdf.

performs professionally across Japan and abroad about 20 times a year.¹⁷⁹

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, Guignard utilizes his extensive knowledge of western music to inform his teachings in order to make the subject of classical music more “accessible” to his Japanese students. Guignard credits his background in western musicology as his “lifeboat,” at least initially, in the vast ocean of Japanese music, so different in its many technical elements. Unlike western music scores, *biwa* scores are made of up two separate tablatures, one containing lyrics and often denoting the instrumental accompaniment by a simple title notation rather than actual notes, and the other a musical tablature consisting of five staff lines which correspond to the strings on the instrument. Approximately 150 of these musical tablatures must be memorized and mastered in order to perform on the *biwa* professionally.¹⁸⁰ It is this combination of unique tablature, along with the accompanying lyrics in classical Japanese, that can be challenging for students of all backgrounds. In addition to the instrumental elements of *biwa* performance and mastery, when Guignard began studying under Yamazaki he had a limited knowledge of classical Japanese, but it took many years for him to become accustomed to its use in a performance setting. Not only was it difficult in linguistic terms, but the physicality required to attain the correct pitch and intonation was challenging as well.¹⁸¹ It is not difficult to imagine the challenges of performing in another language, but an antiquated version of that language combined with the other necessary performance factors of the *biwa* (intonation, breathing and physicality, and multiple tablatures) are nothing short of impressive, even for a musical scholar such as Guignard.

¹⁷⁹ Begin Japanology, 2011.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

5.2.2 Maud Archambault

In April of 2014, Canadian national Maud Archambault became Japan's first foreign professional *min'yō* performer and member of the professional folk singers and dancers association, *Nippon Min'yō Pro Kyōkai*. She was surprised to be accepted, as she had long viewed *min'yō* as a "closed world," but she attributes her success to her technique and connection with the audience. Archambault minored in Japanese language and culture at the University of Montreal and came to Japan in 2001 to teach English with the goal of improving her Japanese language skills. One year later she began learning to play the *hoso-zao* (lit. "thin-necked") *shamisen*¹⁸² at the acclaimed school of *min'yō* musicians Muramatsu Kikunori and his wife Kyogoku Kazue¹⁸³ "out of a desire to learn something culturally distinct."¹⁸⁴ Her experience there sparked an interest in *min'yō*, which quickly segued into her learning to sing these traditional folk songs. From there, Archambault learned to play the *taiko* drum and perform the regional dances that accompany the music. In addition to her proficiency in a wide variety of *min'yō* songs, dances, and instrumental accompaniment, Archambault is also adept in the Japanese language, the art of kimono wearing (*kitsuke*), and strict hierarchical etiquette of the *min'yō* performance world, all necessary and important aspects of her professional career.

Over the past 15 years, Archambault has performed both solo and as part of a troupe at local festivals (*matsuri*), community center events, and private company parties across Japan, won numerous *min'yō* competitions, and hosted a national televised folk music program, earning

¹⁸² The smallest and highest-pitched of the three-stringed, fretless Japanese instrument derived from the Chinese *sanxian*.

¹⁸³ Magdalena Osumi, "Quebecoise shines as 'minyo' singer," *The Japan Times*, September 30, 2014, accessed September 9, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2014/09/30/our-lives/quebecoise-shines-minyo-singer/#.WbSfdNOGPBI>.

¹⁸⁴ "Friends of Japan: Sharing *min'yō*, Japan's Folk Music Tradition," *We Are Tomodachi* 14, Spring (2016): 28-29, accessed September 9, 2017, http://www.japan.go.jp/tomodachi/2016/spring2016/friends_of_japan.html.

her a reputation both within Japan and abroad.¹⁸⁵ She also frequently travels to various regions of Japan to perfect her dance techniques with the help of experienced local performers.¹⁸⁶ Although Archambault never imagined herself pursuing a career as a performing artist, let alone in a foreign country, she has wholly dedicated herself to her craft, not only for herself, but out of a desire to “introduce the fading tradition to people of its origin,” stating, “Lots of Japanese people do not know about folk music or think it’s boring, so I think maybe they don’t really know much about it. They should see what it is all about.”¹⁸⁷ In 2012 Archambault began teaching *min’yō* classes for children¹⁸⁸ in addition to educational workshops for native Japanese and foreigners alike.¹⁸⁹ She hopes to eventually open her own *min’yō* school in Japan in addition to taking her performances abroad in order to help maintain and further the traditional folk art.¹⁹⁰

5.2.3 Katsura Sunshine

The only Westerner to have ever completed a professional apprenticeship as a *rakugoka*, Canadian Katsura Sunshine (born Gregory Robic) has made it his mission to spread *rakugo* across the globe.¹⁹¹ Sunshine initially came to Japan in 1999 as an English teacher with the goal of pursuing the study of *kabuki* and *nō*. Although he only intended on a brief stay, he quickly became enchanted with the country and made the decision to stay permanently. After hearing

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Japanology Plus, *Japanophiles: Maud Archambault*, Documentary, directed by NHK, January 7, 2016.

¹⁸⁷ Osumi, “Quebecoise shines as ‘minyo’ singer.”

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ “Friends of Japan: Sharing *min’yō*, Japan’s Folk Music Tradition.”

¹⁹⁰ Osumi, “Quebecoise shines as ‘minyo’ singer.”

¹⁹¹ Tom Smith, “Katsura Sunshine’s a star at *rakugo* in English,” *Japan Times*, October 15, 2014, accessed September 9, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2014/10/15/stage/katsura-sunshines-star-english/#.WgsplFtSyUk%5C>.

rakugo performed at a restaurant he frequented, in 2008 he began training under *rakugo* master Katsura Bunshi VI.¹⁹² Just one year later he made his comedic debut overseas in Singapore before returning to Japan to complete a grueling three-year apprenticeship.¹⁹³ Although a handful of non-native amateur performers exist, Sunshine maintains the distinction of being the first non-native professional member of the Kamigata Rakugo Association (*Kamigata Rakugo Kyōkai*), and “the second ever in the history of Japan.”¹⁹⁴

Sunshine has performed *rakugo* throughout Japan, as well as overseas in both Japanese and English. He strives to remain faithful not only to the Kamigata tradition, but to the performance of *rakugo* in general, maintaining the format and flow of a typical performance, and translating for his audience only when necessary, maintaining that “...the humour of Rakugo is universal. It is rooted in situations anyone from any culture can enjoy in any language” and thus, is able to “...transcend time...language barriers, cultural barriers, [and] geographic borders.”¹⁹⁵ He opened his own *rakugo* theater, Ise Kawasaki Kikitei, in Japan in 2012.

5.3 Conclusion

A brief study of Guignard, Archambault, and Sunshine reveals that it is the elements they share in common with Ekström that have facilitated their success in breaking into an area of

¹⁹² Hidetoshi Takada, “Canadian rakugo comic Katsura Sunshine eyes the Big Apple with a push from investors,” *Japan Times*, September 27, 2017, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2017/09/27/stage/canadian-rakugo-comic-katsura-sunshine-eyes-big-apple-push-investors/#.WjVMPIQ-fBI>.

¹⁹³ A *rakugo* apprenticeship must take place under the guidance of a designated master. Over a three-year period, the apprentice not only studies and practices the art form itself under the master’s strict guidance, but may also be responsible for performing household chores and errands for their master as well as abiding by a curfew, and refraining from the use of tobacco and alcohol.

¹⁹⁴ Katsura Sunshine, “English Rakugo: Katsura Sunshine, Rakugo Storyteller,” *NHK World*, March 10, 2016, accessed September 9, 2017. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/life/eyesopen/160310.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Japanese culture previously closed to foreign participation. All three performing artists currently reside and have lived in Japan for over a decade, are proficient in the Japanese language, and studied under the tutelage of professional Japanese teachers of their respective performing arts. They have completely immersed themselves within the Japanese culture and performing arts community with the goal of preserving and the hope of educating both native and non-native audiences about the performing arts to which they have fully dedicated their lives. There can be no question of their altering their art to suit their ‘foreign’ roots. Thus, for foreigners hoping to follow suit and become professionally successful, it would appear that a similar formula is necessary. Even so, that is not to suggest that following this pattern will ensure success, but rather that without the acceptance and support of the Japanese, which is in the case of the aforementioned artists contingent upon the element of “tamed globalization”, the chances are slim to none.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

For as long as foreigners have visited Japan they have been writing about their experiences in a variety of genres. Noteworthy in recent years are those authors (and artists) who do so not in their native languages, but in Japanese. Japan's global pop-culture phenomenon, manga, has become the catalyst through which several foreign-born author/artists have recently provided their unique perspectives. Japanese readers' positive reception of these comic essays can be credited in part to what scholar Wakui Takahashi posits is the influence of internationalization, and is reflective of an increasingly globalized Japan. Not only are foreigners keen to write about their view of Japan, but readers are also actively interested in their diverse perspectives. Given the Japanese media's occupation with exploring the sort of cultural differences and the difficulties and awkwardness that comes with them presented in these comic essays; research into the question of its being purely for comic entertainment, or more so coming from a media-centric attempt to define what is "Japanese" in the 21st century is worthy of further investigation.

Although the trend toward the acceptance and success of manga penned by foreign-born *mangaka* comes with its caveats, it is most marked in the popularity of the comic essays written by Åsa Ekström, Benjamin Boas, Foo Swee Chin, and Sandra Haefelin. The inherently "Japanese" aesthetic of their manga and palatable delivery of their message in a safe and humorous format facilitated by the nature of the comic essay genre are important contributing factors to their ability to break into a market previously closed to foreign participation. Ekström, above all, can be considered the representative example of a successful foreign-born *mangaka*, measured by the overwhelmingly positive reception of her comic essays by their intended Japanese audience. Ekström's artistic background, embrace of both the Japanese language and

culture, support system (first at Tokyo Designer Gakuin College, and subsequently via her publisher), and timing are also important contributing factors. Changes in the landscape of the Japanese publishing industry with respect to the decline in print media and rise of the digital market has created a unique opportunity for aspiring *mangaka* to have their work recognized and scouted online. Additionally, publishers' initiatives in the creation of online comic contests, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' establishment of international manga awards, and the development of vocational programs that encourage overseas student enrollment and provide an invaluable level of support for their students, are allowing foreign-born *mangaka* to break into what has been traditionally been considered a closed market. With the proliferation of the international manga market, especially in the US and Europe, and growing comic markets in China and Korea, an examination of the possible factors other than geographical proximity contributing to the majority foreign-student enrollment from Asian countries in these vocational manga programs would be a valuable addition to this research.

Other fields in which foreigners have successfully broken into what has been traditionally considered a “closed” cultural arena include but are not limited to sports, the folk performing arts, and entertainment industry. Although numerous foreigners now participate in these fields, perhaps the most easily accessed is the realm of pop-culture, which is not as strictly dictated as its traditional counterpart. To answer the question of whether the critical variables that have contributed to Ekstrom's success can be applied to other aspects of Japanese culture, those foreigners who have been permitted to participate professionally in these difficult-to-access arts are those who not only successfully assimilate, but do so with no aspirations to alter the art form—their interests lie solely in a dedication to their preservation. This “tamed globalization” approach can be credited with their success, similarly to Ekström, who has proven her facility in

the verbal-visual art of manga, ability to negotiate the balance between observational and overt criticism, and preserve the “Japanese” integrity of her comic essays both in terms of content and aesthetics.

This thesis set out to answer the question of whether foreign participation in what has been traditionally considered a closed market is reflective of a globalizing Japan, and determine the future of the market for comic essays by foreign-born *mangaka*. In light of the evidence presented in this thesis in conjunction with the socio-economic challenges Japan faces today in terms of its immigration policy, it is more than likely that the burgeoning market, although still in its infancy, will continue to expand in the future and is indeed indicative of a globalizing Japan.

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