



Jaqueline Berndt

Abstract

Manga (as printed graphic narratives) has become an aging media with regards to reader demographics, technology, and business model; accordingly, series with elderly protagonists are seeing a boom in recent years. From the perspective of intersectionality, the question arises how the potential age diversity relates to gender, especially in terms of manga's traditional system of gendered genres. The comparison of two representative series—Kaori Tsurutani's *Metamorphosis Veranda* (since 2017) and Yuki Ozawa's *Sanju Mariko* (since 2016)—reveals how publication site (webcomic, print magazine) and a related foregrounding of genre-specific style effect demographic range. One stylistic device is the gutter, or *mahaku* [liminal time-space], which serves genre-specific nostalgia as well as affectively engaging page compositions in addition to closure.

Keywords

Manga · Gendered genres · Shōjo manga · Josei manga · Age diversity · Aging society · Gutter · *Mahaku* · Page layout · Panel

In popular as well as academic discourse, manga is being perceived as youth culture. In practice, however, it has become an aging media over the course of the

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last decade. Already in 2005 Gō Itō¹ called for a paradigm shift in manga criticism noting that Japanese kids did not take their departure from the still, monochrome and paper-based graphic narratives of manga anymore, but rather the audiovisual and colored moving worlds of animated TV series and video games. The shrinkage of the prime target group of manga magazines, teenagers, and their affinity for new media has caused a landslide change in Japan's comics culture and industry. It had since the late 1950s been leaning on specialized weeklies and monthlies, where manga series were usually published first. But since 2005 the magazine has been outstripped by the previously subsidiary book (*tankōbon*), at least pertaining to the annual sales of printed manga. What poses a loss also holds a potential, though. The fact that the book format became paramount has helped graphic narratives to go beyond youth-centered taste communities and facilitate age diversity, serving casual readers across the traditional genre categories which have been not only age but also gender-specific (*shōnen* [manga for boys], *shōjo* [girls], *seinen* [male youth], and *josei* [women]).

As the primary media for young people, manga began to lose its attractiveness in Japan ironically at the very moment when the Japanese government launched its policy of nation branding in the very name of manga, having it stand in for the whole of 'Cool Japan'. A point in case is manga's promotion by elderly politicians and their inclination to privilege elderly male manga artists as well as a generically masculine style, when commissioning brochures and other materials. Yet, such artists (like Takao Saitō and Kaiji Kawaguchi) do not necessarily warrant the universality in appeal that authorities might hope for. While their popularity among senior politicians, civil servants and salaried office workers, or salarymen, attests to the wide acceptance of manga as such and a cross-generational range of basic manga literacy, it reveals also the established view of male manga genres as the representation of a standard, that is, the privileged as unmarked position against which the subordinated stands out as marked (see Kacsuk 2018).

The extension of manga readership into old age was first noted in the mid-1980s, as evinced by the journalistic Anglicism *silver manga* that circulated temporarily back then. But in actuality there were no special manga magazines targeted at retirees or a new subgenre resting on them. Manga remained closely tied to youthfulness, even as readerships matured and diverged (not rarely did

¹In this article, Japanese names are indicated in line with Western custom, that is, first name followed by surname.

teenage protagonists serve to nourish the inner child of grown-up consumers). This changed only recently. About a decade after Japan had become a forerunner of the aging society in 2005 (see Thang 2011, p. 172), manga narratives began to attest to the fact that Japan's "graying crisis" has also given rise to a new elder culture among urban middle-class people, which effected "a switch from the passive connotation of 'silver' – as in 'silver seat' (priority seats on public transportation)² – to a proactive existence" (Thang 2011, p. 180) often expressed with the Anglicism *senior*.

Senior-centered manga are at the center of the discussion below. In 2018, they made the news in Japan, mainly under the name of granny manga (*obā-chan manga*) (see Tengu-u 2019 [2017]). A significant number of series featuring protagonists of the 'old-old group', that is, age 75 and over, accomplished bestseller status and received prestigious awards. Representative examples are introduced in the following sections with respect to both protagonists and readership, the latter being deduced from the employment of gendered genre devices. The *gutter* and its Japanese conceptualization as *mahaku* come to the fore in that regard. As a whole, the article addresses intersectionality with respect to how the inclusion of the elderly relates to manga's system of gendered genres: do the new senior-centered productions facilitate age diversity by going beyond fixated genre domains (with the female genres appearing as derivative and secondary), or do they reinforce the traditional divide along gender lines (which has, among other things, provided an empowering feminine space by means of segregation)?

Grannies (and Grandpas)

Over the past few years, elderly protagonists have increasingly taken center stage in manga narratives. Often, this happens in a specific type of manga: published first on webcomic sites before appearing in book editions; privileging the episodic form over large narrative arcs, not rarely approximating the vertical four-panel comic strip; foregrounding the joys and sorrows of everyday life and therefore inclined to be categorized as *essay* (rather than *story*) *manga*; exhibiting a preference for simple line drawings, and 'handmadeness'³ ranging from panel borders

²See also the so-called Silver Human Resource Centers, established since the late 1980s.

³I have discussed this in a different context in German (Berndt 2018). A revised English version is forthcoming in *Mechademia* 12.2, titled *Conjoined by Hand: Aesthetic Materiality in Kouno Fumiyo's Manga "In this corner of the world"*.

to dialogue lines; exercising restraint in detailing the backgrounds or using screen tones. Furthermore, these comics do not only look less ‘mangaesque’ than the global mainstream, they are also often created by illustrators without substantial ties to the manga industry (magazine debuts to begin with, and art-college instead of comics-school education standing out as well).

For example, since 2017, publisher Shinchōsha’s site *Kurage Banchi* [lit. Jellyfish Bunch] has been hosting *Ōya-san to boku* [My Landlady and I] by comedian Tarō Yabe (1977–), who was the first non-manga artist to receive a Tezuka Cultural Prize in 2018 for his simply drawn comic strips. Serialized on the same site, *70 Uizan* [First Child at 70] by professional manga artist Ryōsuke Time (1976–) has seen five *tankōbon* volumes due to the popularity of its comforting story: a 65-year-old freshly retired salaryman and his 70-year-old wife are having their first naturally delivered baby. Similar to these male artists who deliberately avoid stylistic references to *shōnen manga* or *gekiga*, the female-male pair of illustrators, working under the name Nekomaki, have published their series *Neko to jīchan* [lit. The cat and the grand-pa, or *Le vieil homme et son chat*, as the French translated edition has it] on the Kadokawa corporation’s website *Media Factory*. Picturing the everyday life of a widower in the course of the seasons, the short episodes have not only been collected in five books so far (Kindle editions of which are available in full color), but they have also been adapted to a ‘feel-good’ movie, *The Island of Cats* (2019).

Unlike the examples mentioned above, although similar in style, Yūichi Okano published his autobiographical comic strips depicting the care of a divorced man in his late 50s for his dementia-stricken mother, first in the news magazine of a small town in Nagasaki Prefecture, before a collection was released under the title of *Pekorosu no haha ni ai ni iku* [Going to Meet Little Onion’s Mother] (2012) by a local publisher. From 2016 onwards, the manga has seen its continuation in the nation-wide weekly magazine *Shūkan Asahi*. Interesting to note is not only how a long-marginalized subject made its way from the geographical and industrial margins to the center, but also that this still happened in analog media (which was to change finally in the aftermath of the Fukushima Triple Disaster of March 2011).

In printed periodicals, the traditional backbone of the manga industry, elderly characters had been confined to secondary and comical roles for a long time. As distinct from the predominating genre fiction, the 16-page short story *Tanabe no Tsuru* [Tsuru Tanabe] by female artist Fumiko Takano (1957–) already highlighted in 1980 the marginalized position of elderly women in the modern Japanese family. At the beginning it introduced little Tsuru, who likes to play with dolls and paper cut-outs. But a dialogue line contains the word ‘granny,’ and on

the fourth page the reader learns from script attached to her image that she is actually the grandmother of the Tanabe family, and 82 years old. Her visualization as a little girl seems to suggest that she has turned infantile out of senility, and precisely this prompts the 16-year-old Ruri to lock granny out of her room. But eventually, on the manga's last page, Ruri changes her mind, and when she asks Tsuru not to tell her mom about her smoking, Tsuru replies: "But to the toilet, I can go by myself" (Fig. 12.1).

In contrast to this last dialogue line which seems completely out of context, the panel features Tsuru from below, implying dignity and perhaps even cleverness, that is, the possibility that she just presents herself with infantility out of self-defense. The page was cited by Fusanosuke Natsume in *Manga no yomikata* (How to Read Manga) as an outstanding example of guiding the reader's gaze by

Fig. 12.1 Fumiko Takano, *Tanabe no Tsuru* (1980). Image credits Fumiko Takano, *Zettai anzen kamisori* [Absolute safety razor]. Tokyo: Hakusensha, p. 82



changing angles in regularly arranged panels (Natsume 1995, pp. 184–185). More than a decade earlier Masuko Honda, a pioneering scholar of children’s literature and girl studies, had discussed *Tsuru Tanabe* with regard to the similarities of girl and elderly woman pertaining to their marginal, because non-productive, position within family and society (see Honda 1983). Aging was not of utmost importance yet, and Takano’s story was not a typical manga anyway: it was published in the first issue of a short-lived alternative manga magazine, the quarterly *Mankinchō*, which featured new wave artists such as Katsuhiko Ōtomo. Yet, from today’s perspective, *Tsuru Tanabe* appears to have anticipated burning problems such as elderly people’s loneliness and self-neglect.

The “girl-grandmother relation” (Aoyama 2014, p. 49) is still a central narrative trope and not confined to kinship as one of the surprise bestsellers of 2018 evinces: *Metamorphose no engawa* [*Metamorphosis Veranda* in the English translation, and *BL Métamorphose* in the French]. Serialized on Kadokawa’s website *Comic Newtype*, it is the first major work by artist Kaori Tsurutani (1982–), who had made her debut in 2007, but mainly worked as an assistant for other female artists such as Hikari Nakamura and Akane Torikai.

Metamorphosis Veranda has two protagonists: Ms. Ichinoi, a 75-year-old widow who teaches calligraphy from home, and Urara, a reticent 17-year-old high school student who is a fan of *boys love* (BL) *manga*. Finding themselves marginalized in their respective environment, they begin to form a relationship when Ms. Ichinoi enters the bookstore where Urara works and rediscovers manga, albeit with a new twist: BL had not been a proper genre in her youth, and its fandom had not flourished yet either, but it is still better read in secrecy as Urara and also Ms. Ichinoi’s daughter demonstrate with their behavior. At the beginning of volume 2, Urara takes the elderly lady to a fanzine sales event (modelled on J Garden in Ikebukuro and acknowledged in the book’s imprint).

As the title indicates, this is the story of a metamorphosis, although not a particularly mangaesque one consisting of fantastic changes from old to young age or from ordinary to superhuman powers in a highly codified, cute illustration style. Such manga series do exist as well, for example, Ayumi Tsubaki’s *xx demo mahō shōjo ni naremasu ka?* [Can She Become a Magical Girl Even xx?], which features a 88-year-old granny who occasionally turns into a magical girl to battle bad guys, although not with violence but didactics. *Metamorphosis Veranda* uses mangatypical signs to relate the characters’ embarrassment (including sweat drops that appear in speech balloons or even ‘free space’), and occasionally it employs also handwritten words reminiscent of *shōjo* manga’s extradiegetic comments, but overall, restraint is exercised to let realism rule as related to characters’ interconnecting, encouraging each other, re/gaining agency of their life. In the narrative, this

change is mediated by manga, and BL manga at that, which serves as an *engawa*, the wooden-floored edging strip of traditional Japanese houses (not congenially translated as *veranda*) that connects the inside with the outside. In a few cases, the two protagonists actually occupy that part of Ms. Ichinoi's old dwelling.

Several sequences picture Ms. Ichinoi reading manga within the manga. When she gets immersed in the narrative, the otherwise regular panel grid changes, as if conjoining her gaze onto the intradiegetic manga panels with the reader's extradiegetic gaze reenacting hers. And while the underlying page turns from white to black, the intradiegetically watched manga drawings are set straight, adjusted to the restored grid, although still in paler lines (Fig. 12.2).

One sequence shows Ms. Ichinoi immersing herself into the past, indicated additionally by a different typeface, and eventually projecting her own marriage onto the BL couple. Thus, *Metamorphosis Veranda* does more than feature a senior protagonist in all her realistically presented physical frailty or an intergenerational encounter on the *engawa* as liminal space and the role of manga in it. It also draws attention to the separating and conjoining operations that take place on the manga page, for example, by means of the *gutter*.



Fig. 12.2 Ms. Ichinoi reading manga within the manga (reading direction: from right to left). *Image credits* Kaori Tsurutani (2018). *Metamorphosis Veranda*, vol. 1. Tokyo: Kadokawa, pp. 12–13

Gutter/less

Metamorphosis Veranda ranked at the very top in the female category of the annual guide *This Manga is Amazing! 2019* (Kono manga 2018), although it is not serialized in a gender-specific manga magazine, and it does not exhibit the obvious markers of generic manga femininity (such as illustrations of the protagonist as fashionable dress-up doll laid over panel tiers or adorning book covers, close-ups with huge eyes and very small mouths, densely collaged page compositions).⁴ This distinguishes *Metamorphosis Veranda* from *Sanju Mariko* (80-year-old Mariko). Thanks to the latter, which has been running in the printed women's manga monthly *BE LOVE* since 2016, Yuki Ozawa (1964–) has finally experienced success with the first volume already selling half a million copies. The narrative follows Mariko Kōda, an 80-year-old widow,⁵ who is in exceptionally good shape and still works as a freelance author. But even she faces the societal hardships of elderly people once she leaves home. For example, she cannot rent an apartment without the signature of her son as guarantee, because landlords seek to avoid cleaning up after seniors' lonely death (which then happens to a former colleague of hers even in a multigeneration family house). Thus, Mariko stays in a manga, or internet, café for a while, and when she gets fired by the literary magazine she had been contributing to for ages, she launches her own web journal with the help of a young nerd and a gamer-granny, trying to present a free space to former star authors who have grown old and impoverished. Like in *Metamorphosis Veranda*, grannies interconnect with youths, also on social networks, and they do not rarely feel united by their difficulties to get along with the middle-aged generation, ranging from Mariko's editor-in-chief to anxious but overworked children.

Much more exaggerated and fictitious than *Metamorphosis Veranda*, Ozawa's manga is appreciated by readers in their 40s up to 70s for its feel-good impact, or 'healing' capacity. Obviously, it manages to accommodate the generically feminine profile of the magazine in an inclusive way that works across gendered tastes (instead of repelling readers disinclined to *shōjo* aesthetics). In short, three aspects stand out: first, the restraint to beautify faces which still play a prominent role, but lack noses when depicted frontally, and are rendered in 'organically'

⁴For discussions of generic manga femininity see Bauwens-Sugimoto (2016) and Antononoka (2019).

⁵The Japanese title word *sanju* means "80 years old", with a celebratory connotation.

alternating bold and thin lines, often dispersed in small dashes (grimaces that relate affective states also help to avoid idealization); second, the story is told in a straightforward way without complex flashbacks or dream sequences, but most narrative events rest on talk not physical action. *Sanju Mariko* averts the risk to become verbose by visually dynamic page compositions, forming the third aspect of its accessibility (Fig. 12.3).

Instead of a more or less consistent grid, irregular arrangements predominate, alternating between a few horizontal tiers and lengthy vertical panels, panels with and without background, images directly drawn on the underlying page with some panels superimposed, straight and oblique gutters. In addition, *Sanju Mariko* contains many gutterless sequences (Fig. 12.4).

The comics-specific gutter has been conceptualized in Japanese as *mahaku*, combining *ma*, the spatio-temporal interval or in-between, with the spatial *yohaku* as represented by the un-inked parts of brushed line drawings. Having coined the term, Natsume emphasized historic change: from the film-like articulation of time in clearly determined panels to a spatial composition that gives preference to simultaneity over sequentiality (see Natsume 1995, p. 191). Such undermining of the individual panel in favor of interrelationality has been exemplified by *shōjo* manga, or more precisely, productions of the 1970s that aimed at an interiority-oriented ‘deepening’ of graphic storytelling by means of collages that included incompletely framed or even unbordered panels (see Masuda 2002).



Fig. 12.3 Mariko facing her younger self. *Image credits* Yuki Ozawa (2017). *Sanju Mariko* [80-year old Mariko], vol. 4. Tokyo: Kodansha, n. p.



Fig. 12.4 Mariko holding a grudge against the publisher's rejection of her online journal project. *Image credits* Yuki Ozawa (2019). *Sanju Mariko* [80-year old Mariko], vol. 10. Tokyo: Kodansha, n. p.

This trend was superseded in 1980s women's manga by 'flat' layouts as a different way to irritate the gutter's initial function. Female artists who had started their career in magazines for male youths and not girls, introduced regularity to increase immediacy and tempo. Yet, instead of 'boxing' space and time, they created a diffuse time-space that allowed for various encounters on the surface of both narrative event and printed page (see Masuda 2002, p. 117). Gutterlessness, or panels sharing one and the same border, was crucial in that regard.

While the compression of gutters is not confined to 'female' productions, in *Sanju Mariko* it may easily connote the genealogy of women's manga as a genre (a pioneer of which was the serializing magazine *BE LOVE*, launched in 1980) just as the occasional multilayered pages associate the *shōjo* manga genre. The intertwining of 'deep' and 'flat' layouts, which has flourished since the 1990s, does not necessarily refer to a higher symbolic meaning though. In *Sanju Mariko* it serves primarily to dynamize the surface of the page and increase variety by means of formal juxtapositions, foregrounding aspects of the gutter that escape its conceptualization as cognitive closure or metalepsis (as, for example, elaborated in Baetens 1991). This again connects to media experiences, of the elderly characters as well as the, by tendency, elderly readers.

The strict gender divide, which was central for manga in the past, seems to have turned into a reminiscence. Precisely this facilitates the demographic inclusiveness of the magazine-based *Sanju Mariko* with its clearly ‘feminine’ style, and presents an equivalent to the stylistic reserve of the web-based *Metamorphosis Veranda*. Yet each of the two manga series discussed here goes beyond naturalized notions of girls’ or women’s manga with regard to character types, narrative tropes, visual style or publication site. In its own way, each raises awareness for the historical contingency of manga’s gendered genres.

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