Practical Manga Research: Difficulties and Possibilities of Manga Exhibitions and Manga Museums

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Preliminary remarks

In recent years, various manga-related cultural institutions have been established, where along with already existing galleries, museums, and department-store venues manga exhibitions are being organized. I myself am involved in the production of manga exhibitions on a daily basis – at the Kyoto International Manga Museum as well as other places in Japan and abroad – and I have also conducted research on this phenomenon. From this perspective, I shall introduce some topics and discussions below, contemplating on how to approach such shows, and how to interrelate exhibition making with academic research.

The background for the establishment of "manga museums" in Japan

With respect to manga exhibitions, we have to consider manga-related cultural institutions in the broad sense, mainly for two reasons. First, manga exhibitions in general were first recognized as such when held at cultural institutions like museums. And second, analyzing the raison d'être of manga-related cultural institutions goes hand in hand with discussing the difficulties and possibilities of manga exhibitions. Thus, I shall start with a brief survey of the historical background of establishing manga-related cultural institutions.

In Japan, manga museums started to spring up in the 1990s. The social status of manga was on the rise at that time, induced by the death of Tezuka Osamu in 1989. Not only the manga industry, but also the mass media began to re-evaluate Tezuka, which led to a change in the general opinion about manga as something driven forth by him. Noteworthy in that regard was the Tezuka Osamu Exhibition held at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, in 1990, an important event in the history of postwar manga, as the state acknowledged Tezuka's manga as "art."

In the early 2000s, the boom of Japanese manga in Europe and America brought upon a change in the evaluation of manga not as "art" but "culture." Now, the state was looking for powerful commodities to match the global economic competition and thus "rediscovered" manga as one form of "soft contents." The "Cool Japan" policy set in. At the same time, the government put a new emphasis on regionalism within Japan, fostering the economic independence of local communities. Consequently, more and more local governments started to focus on manga as a "touristic resource" to revitalize their region; after all, it had become easy to adopt manga as public "culture."

Difficulties for manga museums and manga exhibitions

In Japan, manga museums continue to be established by local governments even now, but not all of them function as expected. Handling manga at museums and in exhibitions is difficult in the first place, because manga is part of popular culture and as such characterized by actuality, popularity, and everydayness. Museums, as formed in the process of modernization, are supposed to collect and preserve materials of socially acknowledged public value that may disappear otherwise. Manga, on the other hand, is a culture of the Here and Now, rapidly changing as if rejecting any social acknowledgement and hence giving rise to certain inconsistencies. We have not discussed sufficiently either, what it means to place manga culture, which is closely tied to the everyday, in the non-everyday space of a museum. Having developed as light entertainment in Japan, manga culture's popularity manifests itself in approximately 700 million printed volumes per year. One of the most important functions of museums is archiving, but due to manga's popularity, manga museums are confronted with a much bigger amount of materials than ever seen before.

Possibilities of manga museums and manga exhibitions

It might be difficult to deal with manga characterized as it is by actuality, popularity, and everydayness, but conversely this offers an opportunity to rethink museums, exhibitions, and also scholarship, that is, the very institutions that caused the difficulties in the first place.

*The surplus value of manga exhibitions: Three positions

The biggest dilemma in running manga exhibitions and manga museums is how to create a surplus value for the visitors who often have to pay more in order to see materials which can easily be found at bookstores. There are three answers to this question from three different positions with respect to organizing manga exhibitions.

The first one is the position of artists, that is, those of them who consider exhibitions and museums a new media for exploring new ways of expression, impossible in print media like magazines. This can be frequently seen in European and American comics exhibitions, but also in Japan. The best examples are Inoue Takehiko's *The Last Manga Exhibition* (2008) and the *Inoue Takehiko interprets Gaudi's Universe* exhibition (2015), for which the artist created original work specifically customized to the presentation. Informed by ideas related to contemporary art, there are also attempts by curators to turn the exhibition itself into an installation which employs manga as a kind of "material." Representative in that regard are Kanazawa Kodama, former curator at the Kawasaki City Museum, and Takahashi Mizuki of Art Tower Mito. In this sense, the former's *Yokoyama Yūichi Exhibition* (2010) in particular appears to be of the same type as *The Last Manga Exhibition*.

The second position is to regard exhibitions as a place to make popular and entertaining commodity generate more profit. After the success of the *One Piece Exhibition* (2012) with over 500.000 visitors, the major publishers started to activiely construct the "manga exhibition market." Large-scale shows organized by publishers such as the *Attack on Titan* (2014), and the *Naruto* (2015) exhibitions will probably form one mainstream in the future. At the latter two, original drawings are displayed in large quantity. But apparently, these do not provide the real surplus value for most visitors; it rather rests on the very site that offers fans of the exhibited work or artist the opportunity to confirm themselves as fans and to purchase limited-edition souvenirs that are available on spot only. In this sense, the *Kyoto Kuroko no Basket* [Kuroko's Basketball] *Exhibition* (2015), which induced incessant waiting lines, resembled the

Attack on Titan exhibition in purpose and structure, although it was held not at a museum but the event hall of a department store and completely different with respect to scale and contents. It did not offer any original pages, but the possibility to take photos in front of card boards of the characters as well as to purchase limited-edition goods at its store.

The existence of such exhibitions can, of course, not be rejected. It is exactly those which match the particularity of manga as an entertaining commodity rooted in the Here and Now. But they are also significantly limited insofar as they feature currently most popular content only. And since they are only places of "reconfirmation" for fans, or more specifically, their affection for certain manga characters, they usually do not offer new views, readings or informations, which would allow to approach works from a different angle.

Thus, a third position becomes necessary, that is, scholarly manga research dedicated to the construction of readings and the verification of facts. To look at it the other way round, manga exhibitions of the third kind cannot be made without manga researchers. To name a recent example, the Oita Prefectural Art Museum invited manga researcher Itō Gō as supervisor for its exhibition *Drawing Manga! Lines, Panels, Kyara* (2015), which was based on my own concept that Japanese manga culture systematically reproduces people who draw manga on a huge scale. Admittedly, such attempts are still rare. While at art galleries and museums, it is natural that curators equal researchers, making manga exhibitions and researching manga have been treated as two different things so far. This is also related to the fact that most manga museums are not equipped with researching staff.

The non-everyday experience of exhibitions and museums creates new everyday experiences

But presenting new interpretations and information about works and materials is not the only purpose of exhibitions; otherwise books would suffice. The most important thing is to provide an experience unique to the medium of exhibition, something I am always aware of. And I have met this challenge probably best with the exhibitions for the International Manga Museum, Kyoto, *18,000 Original Manga Drawings by Tsuchida Seiki* (2014), *Yokoyama Yūichi* (2015) and *Manga and War* (2015) as well as *Shifting the Everyday: The Japanese Everyday as Witnessed in JOJOLION*, commissioned by the Agency for Cultural Affairs for the Lucca Comics and Games Festival 2014.

With respect to manga exhibitions, it is important to consider, that reading manga is mostly an everyday experience. But museums and exhibitions in general as well as the displayed works and materials in particular exceed the realm of the everyday. The act of placing manga in such a space creates a defamiliarization, which differs fundamentally from art galleries or museums. Likewise important is the possibility to feed back the new kind of manga experience within the museum space into the realm of the everyday. Not the presented interpretation or information, but the form of experience suggested by the medium of the exhibition itself is to affect the manga experience in everyday life. At least the Kyoto International Manga Museum is a test site for observing such changes in manga culture. Such change is possible, because both the displayed manga works and the readers who enjoy them are part of the same popular culture here and now. For example, an exhibition about Japan's pre-historic Jōmon culture may present astonishingly fresh ideas, but it will never have the same effect on the life of contemporaries as an exhibition on popular culture, including manga. If asked about my notion of experiment, I would answer, an enterprise aimed at feeding back something to the respective culture. That is to say, experimental manga research, including exhibition making, is the attempt to effect manga culture itself, or simply put, to make it more interesting.

Conclusion: What popular culture research conjoins

The issues I presented here did not arise, because manga culture was suddenly "discovered" as a subject of scholarly research in the 2000s. Popular culture, characterized by actuality, popularity, and everydayness and existing in all eras, has become a field of scholarship in the process of modernization. Actually, the discussion of manga museums as popular culture museums which my talk has developed, leans to a significant extent on the history of popular-culture research within Folkloristics, the field I come from. In its attempt to explore Japan's "folklore" through actuality, popularity, and everydayness, this field was formed by an approach very similar to today's popular-culture research, including manga. Folklorists have described and analyzed folklore, while relocating it to special museums, ascribing new meanings to it, and they have also considered in what way this could influence the everyday life of the folklorists themselves.

With this I only mean to say, that in view of the present form of popular-culture research, manga research is most definitely not an independent and particular field. For the popular-culture research of the past, by folklorists to begin with, the "intertwining theory and practice" itself was at the heart of their methodological identity, something we can learn a lot from. Conversely, I think, the subject of this conference – Comicology – could also be considered in a much wider sense, related to popular-culture research in general.