

Manga & Japanese Influence Overseas — an Unrequited Love Story? The French Case



Author Alix Mathieu

By Alix Mathieu

Manga: “Fantastic Gateway to Japan” for French

At the last Japan Expo, at Parc des Expositions in Paris, an incredible crowd in cosplay outfits or suits — young adults, families, students from all over France and Europe — gathered in the exhibition halls, voices and laughter filling the large rooms. During this annual convention, fans of manga, anime, video games and Japanese culture meet up and enjoy the show. Living proof of the Nipponophile community’s vitality, the Japan Expo now brings together more than 240,000 people. Indeed, since 2000, interest in manga and anime has never stopped growing in France — manga represented, for instance, 37.5% of the comics market in 2012. But the importance of the French crush on manga goes far beyond the economic level.

Manga is “a fantastic gateway to Japan”, explains Victor Saint-Jean, a 21-year-old French student on a one-year exchange program in Tokyo. “It has really given me a taste for Japan,” he says. From a young fan of the manga series *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Saint-Jean has grown into a political science student, a Japanese language student at Keio University, and a real enthusiast of Japanese culture. Now he has finally trodden on Japanese soil, he looks back fondly at his first experiences of “Japan”. Through manga, he had first glimpses of what Japan could be and became interested in discovering this new culture: “As a kid, I was used to fantastic universes, for instance in anime like *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Then I read a manga called *20th Century Boys* and it was the first time I saw really what Japan was, the reality.” With a sparkle in his eye, he describes how this “story of a shattered dream in the 70s” plunged him into a new world and led him to apply for the only high school in his region that offers Japanese courses. Since then, he has not stopped his immersion in Japanese culture, be it through classes, expositions, exchanges or travel.

For Adrien Bunel, 21, a French exchange student in Japan, manga and anime have also been crucial in shaping his identity and his path. “I have been into Japanese anime, manga and video games since always,” he says. “At age three I started Pokemon and at four and a half I was trying to play the game on Gameboy Color, even though I couldn’t read.” From Pokemon to Hayao Miyazaki’s works, from Miyazaki to Hokusai, Bunel has gradually become a wholehearted enthusiast of Japan. “It was my dream to go to Japan,” he says, “so when I had the opportunity to live in Tokyo, I took it.” Like Saint-Jean, Bunel’s interest in Japan extends into diverse spheres. After learning Japanese by himself for two years, he has reached intermediate level, has taken classes on pre-modern Japan, and will embark next year on a dual degree between SciencesPo, a French University, and Tokyo University. It has apparently been a single step from manga to Japan’s best university.

Not Well Regarded at First

Bunel and Saint-Jean’s cases, although singular, are not isolated and reflect the fondness some French people have developed for Japanese manga and culture. But although France is now known for its taste for Japanese works, manga and anime have not always been regarded highly.

When anime were first aired in the 1980s, with series like *Goldorak*, criticism emerged from all over France. Artistically speaking, the animations were said to be too cheap, while politicians described them as violent and obscene. But this bad reputation diminished progressively — and throughout the 1990s the market expanded continuously, collections were created, more anime aired and new authors translated.

Saint-Jean, who read manga mostly in his hometown’s library, remembers having seen manga becoming more and more popular over the years. The manga section of the library, he says, “started with only a tray of manga, then two trays and now we have an entire section of the library dedicated to them!”

Not only have manga and anime gained audiences, but they have also started earning peer-recognition and arousing political awareness. In 2003 for instance, the manga *Haruka-na machi e* (Quartier Lointain in French) won a prize at France’s most famous comics’ festival, Le Festival d’Angoulême. *Mangaka* (cartoonists) once ignored at conventions and festivals have become respected and honoured guests, much has been written about the success of Japan in the cultural market, schools of manga drawing and writing have opened, and more recently a French minister, Fleur Pellerin, visited the Japan Expo, while the Agricultural Ministry launched an information campaign using manga as its key channel, recognizing its influence among the young population. The progression of manga and anime in France is a formidable success story, and it grows from solid roots.

France could indeed have provided a fertile environment for manga seeds to sprout. While the first anime were launched on a popular and widely watched program for children, called *Dorothy’s Club*, manga found echoes in a French-Belgian culture for comics (BD = *bande dessinée*, comics in French). Editors of comics are well implanted, French-speaking authors prolific, and audiences broad. As manga, French comics had difficult debuts, but have earned a certain measure of nobility and recognition among the other arts. This French culture of BD has sometimes badly served manga, which were disregarded by “true BD lovers”, but has also bolstered it: sensibilities for the genre pre-existed and an entire economy and culture of comics were ready to embrace this new style. It could have drawn a certain part of the BD public to the manga. Saint-Jean explains, “My father has been into BD since he was a boy, and at 40 years old he started reading manga.” Thierry Saint-Jean,

Victor's father, at 58 years old, finds in manga artistic values and a maturity that managed to overcome his first thoughts about Japanese comics. Even if in France BD might still be nobler than manga, they have helped create a formidable and vivid environment for new works to burgeon in.

The manga culture in France has even developed its own and original characteristic: an active fan community. Not only manga have successfully invaded the libraries' trays, but conventions and festivals about manga and Japan often enliven the streets of France. Gathering huge crowds, these events not only host cosplayers like Bunel and readers like Saint-Jean, but also gamers, Japanese food lovers, and so on. Martial arts are displayed, taiko drums or pop music resonate in the air, and sushi and yakitori are sold to feed the appetite of the French lovers of Japan. As Saint-Jean points out, these events are a key part of these Nipponophiles' culture: "There is a feeling of belonging to a community; it's very dynamic and lively." For Bunel, who has participated in five conventions, it was "the place to be". This community is not only looking for the latest goodies and figurines they can buy, but also craving to experience more of Japan. On the Internet, blogs flourish on how to draw like a *mangaka*, how to learn Japanese by oneself, and how to understand the universe their heroes evolve in.

Is Manga Japan's "Soft Power"?

This appeal of Japanese manga and anime is considered as part of "*bunka* power" — the soft power made in Japan. After Douglas McGray's famous article "Japan's Gross National Cool" appeared in *Foreign Policy* in 2002, a first attempt was made by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his government to conceptualise and support Japanese soft power, under the broad notion of "Cool Japan". Yet, the benefits of soft power are still widely discussed among scholars, as Jean-Marie Bouissou, a French historian specialist on Japan, points out: "Now Japan [thanks to popular culture and manga] appears as a kinder, friendlier country. [...] how this can be translated into actual influence is, however, not clear." But it has undoubtedly created a young international community more aware of Japan and more inclined to travel to and discover the country. For Nicolas Mel, 20, another French aficionado of Japanese animation, the government policy has worked well: "Cool Japan really hits its target, [it works] kind of like an 'American way of life', made in Japan." And indeed, people like Victor, Adrien or Agathe Teillard, another French exchange student in Tokyo, have been brought to Japan through manga and anime, and will spread the name of Keio or Todai overseas. In the future, they could become valuable partners for Japan. As Victor said, manga has truly "opened the door to Japan" for many.

Is the French Love for Manga Unrequited?

But when arriving in Japan, foreigners fond of anime and manga don't necessarily encounter a lot of sympathy. Bunel says he generally avoids talking with Japanese about his interest in anime and manga. "Here it is even more subject to prejudices than in France," he explains. "It can offend people if we sum up their country by this." Saint-Jean is more optimistic, but has also met surprised reactions when discussing with Japanese: "It surprises them that we can be interested in their country. They don't expect a foreigner to know anything about it." To them, Japanese people seem to be oblivious of what role Japan plays overseas.

Some Japanese students also say that in Japan, fondness for anime or manga is sometimes badly received. Foreigners coming to conventions can often be stigmatised as *otaku* (obsessive, self-absorbed) — which has a "negative image for normal Japanese people", says Kazuma



Manga café in Paris

Kobatake, a student at Tokyo University. "Because it's so creepy," adds Atsuki Kimoto, his friend. Whereas in France, it is socially acceptable to be a reader of comics and go to conventions — and even valued as something "original and hipster", according to Bunel — Japanese people might judge that behavior according to Japanese standards. According to many, the line between being an *otaku* or a casual reader is thin and going to a festival or convention is one way to cross it. Most Japanese manga readers "are not *otaku*, I think", says Mizuho Yamazaki, 23, "but the majority at a convention would be, I'd say." So in the eyes of Japanese people, foreigners going to conventions could be considered socially awkward, even if that behavior is well-regarded or not so stigmatised in their own countries.

For others, the policy of Cool Japan is misleading — because it doesn't give a good representation of Japanese culture. Mizuho Yamazaki, a former art history student at Keio University, says "I'm not sure if it's good to name it 'Cool Japan' and to make it the main axis [...] it's a good starting point, but how much do these people understand Japanese culture? [...] I'd be happy if they acquired an interest in Japanese culture itself, not only the subculture." For her and for many other Japanese people, attracting foreigners to Japan through this channel offers only a biased idea of Japanese culture — one that puts in the shadows more traditional elements. Even though manga themselves come from *ukiyo-e* (traditional paintings and prints of everyday life), as Yamazaki says, she is worried that foreigners may get only a superficial idea of Japan. Yet this first glimpse of Japan seems to open up the way for tourism that is not limited to *otaku* culture, as shown by the European Manga Conventions that display a cultural diversity and as tourists visit temples, shrines and other historical beauties Japan has to offer every year.

Cultural stereotypes are often the foundation stone for tourism and exchanges — just as France is not only about the Eiffel Tower, good food and love, so Japan is not only about manga and animation. But both countries can benefit tremendously from these images and show their cultural richness to the world. Cultural diversity, openness and exchanges — in manga as in other fields — in the end help to build "a cultural bridge between the countries", as co-creator of the French Japan Expo Thomas Sirdey says.

As French authors start producing their own manga — known as Franga — with a great admiration for Japanese works, that subculture could be seen as the tip of the iceberg of Franco-Japanese amity. The international community of Japan-aficionados bubbles with life — one can only hope it will not end as a sad case of unrequited love. **JS**

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