The Origins and Evolution of Manga Expression Theory

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In Japan, manga expression theory has developed over more than half a century into a major subfield within Japanese manga studies and has been widely applied in the practice of manga criticism. As a methodological approach to manga research, it has been deeply influenced by semiotics, rejecting text-centered or narrative-centered paradigms in favor of examining manga's intrinsic principles and inherent structures. Originating from the theoretical groundwork laid by Junzō Ishiko (石子順造), further refined by scholars such as Fusanosuke Natsume (夏目房之介) and Osamu Takeuchi (竹内オサム), and later expanded and reinterpreted by Gō Itō (伊藤剛) and Tomoyo Iwashita (岩下朋世), manga expression theory has developed into a rich and diverse intellectual landscape. However, significant internal divergences remain within the field, making it necessary to distinguish and analyze both its diachronic evolution and synchronic configuration.

Keywords: manga expression theory, Japanese manga studies, semiotics

Introduction

Manga is a narrative medium that interweaves text and image. In Japan, manga enjoys widespread popularity among readers of all ages and has even entered the academic sphere as a legitimate subject of scholarly research. Among the diverse approaches within manga studies, manga expression theory occupies a particularly distinctive position. This theoretical framework directs attention inward, advocating for an examination of the intrinsic laws and structural principles of manga by analyzing its fundamental components. Through such an internal lens, manga is conceptualized as an autonomous art form defined by its own aesthetic and formal characteristics.

It should be noted, however, that the development of manga expression theory has not followed a linear trajectory. Rather, it has evolved into a spatially diffuse, network-like structure, generating a unique discursive field. Nagatake Takeuchi's *The Genealogy of Manga Expression Theory* (漫画表現論の系譜, 2008) was the first work to systematically map this developmental process. Yet, because of its relatively early publication date, it did not address the latest advancements in the field.

The present study revisits manga expression theory by foregrounding its central problematics and theoretical orientation. From a synchronic perspective, it analyzes the core concerns of major critics and researchers; from a diachronic perspective, it traces the theory's historical evolution and lines of inheritance.

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The Establishment of the Manga Expression Theory

Although manga expression theory originated in the 1960s, it did not begin to exert significant influence within Japanese academia until the 1990s. During the three intervening decades, the concept of manga expression theory had not yet been explicitly formulated; this period can therefore be regarded as its prehistory. This section traces the origins of the theory by centering on Junzō Ishiko's expressive framework and examining relevant discourses on manga from this formative stage.

In fact, the emergence of manga expression theory roughly coincided with the rise of manga criticism in the 1960s. At that time, the central figure of the manga world was Osamu Tezuka (手塚治虫), later celebrated as the "God of Manga". Before 1960, Tezuka had already produced several masterpieces, including *Kimba the White Lion* (ジャングル大帝, 1950), *Astro Boy* (鉄腕アトム, 1952), *Princess Knight* (リボンの騎士, 1953), and *Phoenix: Dawn* (火の鳥 黎明編, 1954). Nevertheless, manga culture continued to face widespread social prejudice. The earliest critical writings on manga were not produced by specialists in the field but rather by scholars in education, psychology, and children's literature. Researchers such as Tadamichi Kan (菅忠道), Michio Namekawa (滑川道夫), and Ichirō Sakamoto (坂本一郎), guided by the "idealism" of children's literature, launched fierce moralistic critiques of popular manga, condemning it as "vulgar culture", "degenerate art" or "the residue of commercialism" (Takeuchi, 2008, pp. 16-17). It was not until the 1970s that manga criticism gradually freed itself from such discriminatory rhetoric and achieved qualitative improvement.

A survey of manga criticism from the 1960s to the 1970s reveals that criticism during this period drew heavily on terminology from other disciplines such as education, cultural studies, and intellectual history, which can broadly be classified under the rubric of social reflection theory. These critical practices examined manga from an external perspective, yet in doing so, they contributed indirectly to the methodological formation of manga criticism itself.

It was precisely within this intellectual context that Junzō Ishiko positioned himself against the prevailing current, establishing a distinctive critical paradigm. His theoretical writings already exhibited many of the characteristics later associated with manga expression theory. In his representative essay, Ishiko offered one of the most comprehensive examinations of the time into manga's inherent expressive features, arguing that manga, as manga, possesses its own "unique logic and structure of expression" (Ishiko, 1970, p. 62). The essay emphasized the essential roles of drawing and language, an insight that later influenced the tripartite structural model proposed by 1990s manga expression theory.

Furthermore, Ishiko sought to construct a systematic discursive framework for expression theory, articulating a series of binary categories such as "viewpoint and theme", "line and character", "panel and narrative development", "language and image", "medium and information" and "expression and thought". As Fusanosuke Natsume has noted, "the introduction of these conceptual pairs laid the foundation for the systematization of manga expression theory" (Natsume, 2009, p. 111). It is noteworthy, however, that Ishiko's discursive framework also included thematic and ideological elements such as theme, plot, and thought, that would later be excluded from orthodox formulations of manga expression theory.

Moreover, Ishiko's expressive theory not only stood in direct opposition to the moralistic stance of the aforementioned children's literature scholars but also represented a singular position within the broader field of

manga criticism. Around that time, Junzō Ishiko engaged in a well-known debate with another critic, Jun Ishiko (石子順), over the interpretation of Tezuka's manga. In this debate, Junzō Ishiko rejected Ishiko Jun's class-historical and ideological approach, asserting the distinctiveness of his own theoretical stance. He advocated for a critique of Tezuka's works grounded in formal elements such as "the incorporation of cinematic techniques", "panel progression" and "pictorial composition". On this basis, he positioned Tezuka as "the progenitor of gekiga (劇画)" (Koyama, 2007, p. 14). This critical practice was undeniably original within the field and marked the first explicit application of expressive-theoretical analysis to manga criticism.

In sum, Junzō Ishiko's expressive-theoretical engagement with specific manga works constituted a direct counter-response to the moral educational perspectives of contemporary children's literature scholars and a reversal of the dominant modes of social reflection and ideological criticism prevalent in manga studies. His work not only rehabilitated the cultural legitimacy of manga but also established the preliminary conceptual framework of expressive discourse. By redirecting the analytical gaze from external social factors to the internal mechanisms of manga, Ishiko introduced a series of pivotal concepts that would later underpin the development of manga expression theory as an academic discipline.

The Flourishing of Manga Expression Theory

The 1990s marked the heyday of manga expression theory, represented most prominently by scholars such as Fūsanosuke Natsume and Nagatake Takeuchi. Although the roots of expression theory can be traced back to the 1960s with the pioneering work of Shunzō Ishiko, it was not until three decades later that it achieved full intellectual maturity and widespread academic recognition. During this intervening period, a distinctive current of self-expressive manga criticism emerged. Expression theory temporarily receded from prominence, giving way to the rise of what Tomohiko Murakami (村上知彦), one of the key figures of the time, called the "coffeehouse conversational style" (喫茶店おしゃべり).

Murakami's collection *Twilight Correspondence* (*黄昏通信*, 1979) exemplified this style: adopting a reflective and conversational tone, it wove together the subjective experiences of the dankai generation of manga readers, their personal growth and reading sensibilities, into the practice of manga criticism. His approach, though largely impressionistic, opened a new mode of writing that foregrounded the reader's interiority and experiential engagement with manga. Meanwhile, the groundwork for a resurgence of expression theory was quietly being laid. Works such as Yoshihiro Yonezawa (米沢嘉博)'s *A Postwar History of Shōjo Manga* (*戦後少女マンガ史*, 1980), Nobutake Ōshiro (大城宜武)'s *Manga Theory: A Semiotic Approach* (*マンガ理論：記号論のアプローチ*, 1980), and Osamu Takeuchi (竹内オサム)'s *The World Map of Manga Tarō* (*漫画太郎の世界地図*, 1982) absorbed the insights of Ishiko's theories while expanding them both theoretically and practically, thereby advancing the conceptual consolidation of manga expression theory. Over time, these more objective critical approaches gradually displaced subjective, self-reflective criticism to become the dominant paradigm in manga studies. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the two paradigms were not mutually exclusive; rather, Murakami's subjective criticism and the objectivist stance of expression theory complemented one another in both scope and method.

Following the trajectory initiated by Ishiko, the 1990s saw manga expression theory develop toward greater systematic and theoretical sophistication. This intellectual expansion was fueled primarily by the

translation and dissemination of the semiotic thought in Japan. In 1996, several major works on semiotics were published, including *Semiotics* (記号論) edited and translated by Yoshihiko Ikegami (池上嘉彦), Ikegami's own *Cultural Semiotics* (文化記号論) and Akira Unami (宇波彰)'s *The Thought of Semiotics* (記号論の思想), and Yuji Yonemori(米盛裕二)'s *Semiotics of Peirce* (パースの記号論). The publication of these texts prompted scholars to reorient their focus toward the semiotic dimensions of manga.

At the same time, the stylistic conventions of manga themselves underwent a significant transformation. Beginning in the late 1970s, shōjo manga (少女マンガ), targeted primarily at middle and high school girls, gradually supplanted the once-dominant gekiga, becoming a focal point for both readers and critics. Shōjo manga broke through existing expressive conventions in aspects such as visual composition, panel structure, and dialogue, thus transcending the frameworks of existing theory and compelling a reconfiguration of critical language to accommodate this new expressive mode. Murakami's *Twilight Correspondence* offered a series of perceptive readings of works by Moto Hagio (萩尾望都), Yumiko Ōshima (大島弓子), and Minori Kimura (樹村みのり), articulating a unique vision of shōjo manga's evolution and sparking a surge of critical interest in the genre.

In the theoretical realm, Eiji Ōtsuka (大塚英志)'s *The Representational Space of Postwar Manga* (戦後まんがの表現空間, 1994) introduced concepts such as "the acquisition of interiority" and "the inner speech of consciousness" (Ōtsuka, 1994, p. 65) to elucidate the distinctive expressive techniques of shōjo manga. Similarly, Fūsanosuke Natsume's *Why Japanese Manga Are So Interesting?* (マンガはなぜ面白いのか, 1997) identified "nesting" and "layering" as defining panel-structural features of the form. Both works offered systematic (夏目房之介, 2012, p. 147), theoretically grounded analyses of shōjo manga's stylistic innovations, respectively emphasizing verbal expression and visual structure. Since the 1990s, techniques first developed within shōjo manga have been widely adopted across other genres, and the terminology born from shōjo manga studies has likewise permeated broader manga criticism.

From a broader perspective, the expression theories of this period were united by a shared commitment to reexamining the foundational question: What is manga? Under this guiding problem consciousness, scholars in the 1990s sought to delineate the grammatical rules governing manga narrative. The emphasis on "grammar" was itself a direct consequence of semiotics' growing influence. Inuhiko Yomota (四方田犬彦)'s *Principles of Manga* (漫画原論, 1994) emerged as a pioneering work in this semiotic turn. Although the term expression theory does not explicitly appear in the text, its analytical orientation squarely aligns with the principles of manga expression theory. The work's scope was unprecedented, incorporating a wide range of semiotic terminology imported into Japan since the 1970s to explore the "inherent logic and autonomous structure of manga" (Yomota, 1994, p. 15) from a synchronic perspective. Its analysis spanned lines, graphic signs, panels, speech balloons, language, settings, and color, yet the lack of a diachronic dimension later became a point of contention.

In *How to Read Manga* (マンガの読み方, 1995), Fūsanosuke Natsume explicitly introduced the term manga expression theory. Continuing Yomota's synchronic perspective, Natsume proposed several highly original analytical concepts, including iconic metaphor (形喩), phonetic metaphor (音喩), and ma (間, the interval), and formulated a triadic model consisting of "drawing", "paneling" and "language" (Natsume, 1995, p. 216). This framework exerted a profound influence on subsequent manga studies and is now regarded as a

cornerstone of the field. Natsume's later work *The Adventures of Osamu Tezuka* (手塚治虫の冒険, 1998) sought to integrate a diachronic dimension into expression theory. Rejecting sociological and ideological approaches, it reasserted lines and paneling as the true core elements of manga. Using Tezuka's oeuvre as a reference point, Natsume examined how gekiga techniques transformed Tezuka's expressive strategies and redefined the temporal evolution of manga form. As Osamu Takeuchi observed, "Natsume's expression theory demonstrates a distinct orientation toward systematization and synthesis" (Takeuchi, 2008, p. 91).

Takeuchi's own work during this period, particularly *the Cinematic Techniques in Tezuka's Manga* (手塚マンガにおける映画的手法, 1980) and *Reconsidering Cinematic Methods* (映画的手法再考, 1992), continued this line of inquiry. His studies focused on narrative perspective in manga and introduced the theory of identification, which later sparked significant debate among critics such as Gō Itō.

In summary, the expression theories of the 1990s inherited Ishiko's original discursive framework while refining its analytical scope. Elements such as theme, plot, and ideology, once integral to Ishiko's framework, were gradually excluded, resulting in a clearer and more delimited object of study. By concentrating on the internal structures of manga texts and systematically analyzing their compositional elements, manga expression theory was both conceptually deepened and theoretically purified, paving the way for its maturation as a coherent academic discipline.

New Directions in Manga Expression Theory

From a historical perspective, with the exception of a few figures such as Inuhiko Yomota, the mainstream of manga expression theory has never been purely formalist in nature. Rather, it has always been imbued with a strong sense of contemporary sensibility and critical awareness directed toward the cultural and ideological tendencies of specific historical moments. Consequently, manga criticism has consistently maintained a dynamic relationship with the spirit of its age—sometimes resonating with it, at other times standing in opposition.

In the 1960s, Junzō Ishiko's formulation of expression theory arose as a response to moralistic approaches to manga criticism and sought to legitimize manga (particularly gekiga). Dissatisfied with the dominant paradigms of "social reflection theory" and "ideological criticism", Ishiko positioned his work as a rebellion against prevailing critical fashions. During the 1980s and 1990s, the enormous popularity of shōjo manga brought unprecedented attention to such elements as drawing style, panel structure, and linguistic expression, forcing the discursive system of expression theory to adapt. Meanwhile, the emergence of impressionistic criticism emphasizing self-reflection and the spirit of the age revitalized what had previously been a largely objective and formalist mode of study.

Entering the twenty-first century, the expansion of the manga market and the structural transformation of readership demographics encouraged scholars to adopt "external" perspectives such as industrial analysis, reader-response theory, and influence studies. As a result, the discursive space of manga research once again opened outward, engaging more actively with broader social and cultural frameworks.

In the new century, manga expression theory has continued to evolve along two primary trajectories. The first extends the discursive framework established in the 1990s, pursuing greater theoretical integration and systematization while refining key conceptual categories, thus demonstrating a heightened tendency toward

theoretical self-reflection. The second draws on Hiroki Azuma (東浩紀)'s otaku cultural theory, focusing on the representational modes of character images (キャラ) within manga and thereby introducing new critical perspectives into the field.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the establishment of the Manga Studies (マンガ研究会) further intensified academic interest in manga and accelerated the institutionalization of manga research, which in turn contributed to the systematization of manga theory. Nagatake Takeuchi's *An Introduction to Manga Expression Studies* (マンガ表現学入門, 2005) was the first comprehensive monograph to present manga expression theory in a systematic fashion. Takeuchi argues that manga studies should emphasize the minute details of expression and the grammar of manga in order to elucidate the expressive techniques that have long been automatized and internalized in both creators and readers (Takeuchi, 2005, p. 7). He also systematically analyzes such core components of manga as character design, perspective, panel composition, temporal consciousness, and the interplay between image and language. The work can be regarded as a comprehensive summation of 1990s manga expression theory, while Takeuchi's proposal of the "theory of unification" underscores the distinctive character of his theoretical approach.

Meanwhile, younger scholars such as Gō Itō and Tomoyo Iwashita began to draw intellectual nourishment from otaku cultural criticism, seeking to construct new theoretical perspectives for manga expression theory and thereby rejuvenate a framework that had grown increasingly standardized. The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed the rise of otaku criticism, and following more than two decades of cultural accumulation, Japan's otaku industry entered a period of rapid expansion. Hiroki Azuma's Otaku: Japan's Database Animals (動物化するポストモダン, 2001) marked the first systematic attempt to theorize this phenomenon. Building on the postmodern cultural theories of thinkers such as Baudrillard, Azuma proposed the core concept of "database consumption" emphasizing the aesthetic value of the character image in otaku consumer culture. His work exerted a profound influence across a range of fields, including manga, anime, video games, and light novels. As representative figures in the new century's manga expression theory, both Itō and Iwashita were deeply influenced by Azuma's theoretical insights.

Gō Itō's *Tezuka Is Dead* (デヅカ・イズ・デッド, 2005) stands as a seminal and highly critical work in manga studies. In this book, Itō creatively integrates Azuma's notion of the "character image" into manga criticism, establishing a distinctive and influential framework for expression theory. Itō's theoretical intervention was motivated by dissatisfaction with the contemporary state of manga scholarship. First, the work challenges the "decline of manga" thesis advanced by scholars such as Yoshihiro Yonezawa, Kure Tomofusa (呉智英), and Tomohiko Murakami, arguing that existing theories lag behind the realities of the time, failing to account for the expansion of the manga market, the emergence of new readership demographics, and the hybridization of media, as well as the historical rupture symbolized by Osamu Tezuka's death. Second, while positioning his theory as "an extension of Natsume's expression theory" (Itō, 2014, p. 27). Itō in fact offers a critique of 1990s manga expression theory, identifying two major limitations: (1) its confinement to the analysis of isolated panels without sufficient attention to inter-panel continuity, and (2) its reliance on a Tezuka-centered view of manga history that elevates Tezuka's semiotic system to a level equivalent with the expressive system of manga itself.

In opposition to this "Tezuka historiography", Itō introduces two central concepts: the autonomy of the character image and the indeterminacy of the frame. His critique seeks to clarify the boundaries between manga and other art forms, bridge the historical discontinuities of manga history, and reveal the origins of modern manga obscured by the "Tezuka myth". Methodologically, Itō proposes a "theory of expressive systems" which incorporates external dimensions such as reader response and social context, thus expanding the discursive space of manga expression theory beyond the rigid framework that had dominated since the 1990s.

As a major contribution to manga expression theory, *Tezuka Is Dead* continues the inquiry into the fundamental question of "what constitutes the intrinsic laws that make manga manga" Specifically, Itō replaces the triadic model of "drawing, panel, and language" proposed by 1990s scholars with a new tripartite structure of character image, panel composition, and language. He argues that "most readers do not in fact read the drawings themselves but rather the actions and emotions of the character images" (Itō, 2014, pp. 86-87). Through a practice of textual analysis informed by reader-response theory, Itō exposes the reality inherent in character images concealed beneath the layer of character personality (キャラクター), asserting their independent aesthetic value and identifying the autonomization of the character image as the true origin of modern manga. Furthermore, he observes the inconsistent use of terminology surrounding the concept of the panel within manga studies, calling for a redefinition of key terms. Rejecting the prevailing notions of the "cinematic" and "literary" as inadequate for capturing the autonomous expressivity of manga, he establishes the indeterminacy of the frame as an essential condition of manga as a unique expressive form.

Tomoyo Iwashita's *The Expressive Mechanism of Shōjo Manga* (少女マンガの表現機構, 2013) represents another significant recent contribution to the field. Taking manga expression as its analytical focus, the book examines Osamu Tezuka's early shōjo manga, a body of work that had received little prior scholarly attention. Building on the existing framework of manga expression theory, Iwashita proposes a new paradigm: the theory of expressive mechanisms. On the macro level, this theory conceptualizes manga expression as a dynamic mechanism governing the interaction of its constituent elements. Like Itō, Iwashita rejects approaches that isolate manga from its sociohistorical context of production and reception, instead emphasizing the dialogic relationship between the two. On the micro level, Iwashita further refines Itō's distinction between character image and character personality into a tripartite system comprising character image, character personality, and appearing character, which he terms the "representational system of characters" (Iwashita, 2013, p. 127). Drawing on Eiji Ōtsuka's concept of "sign/non-realism" Iwashita applies this framework in detailed textual analyses of recurring motifs in Tezuka's early shōjo manga—including gender transgression, transformation, and duplication—to examine the processes by which interiority is constructed within manga characters. He also re-examines the "Tezuka historiography" though her focus differs from Itō's: whereas Itō's critique illuminated the post-1990s landscape of modern manga, Iwashita turns her attention to Tezuka's early shōjo works.

In sum, scholars of manga expression theory in the twenty-first century have, to varying degrees, benefited from Azuma's otaku cultural theory, particularly in their pursuit of the autonomous aesthetic value inherent in character images. At the same time, these critical practices reveal that such theories have transcended their initial interpretive boundaries. The works analyzed are not confined to those explicitly marked by otaku culture; rather, existing theoretical frameworks are creatively reappropriated to reinterpret manga that have long been

neglected or insufficiently discussed within both critical and academic circles. Through these efforts, the discursive space of manga expression theory has been significantly expanded, while established narratives of manga history have been questioned and reconfigured, offering new perspectives, methods, and possibilities for the future development of both manga theory and manga historiography.

Conclusion

This study has traced the origins and historical evolution of manga expression theory, outlining the process through which it has been continuously constructed and reshaped. Although the central questions of manga expression theory may appear unified, its internal landscape is in fact marked by numerous divergences. The theoretical discourses and critical arguments surrounding it are both interwoven and conflicting, and through these interactions, manga expression theory has gradually been systematized, expanded, and consolidated into a comprehensive theoretical framework.

From a historical perspective, the discursive space of manga expression theory has always been characterized by dynamic tension. Its main features can be summarized as follows. First, in terms of research orientation, although manga expression theory emerged as a reaction against the social reflection theory—advocating for the study of manga's autonomous forms and structures—it has also incorporated certain productive aspects of that very approach. The works of Gō Itō and Tomoyo Iwashita are emblematic in this regard. Second, in terms of methodology, while the theory's primary concern lies in the formal elements that constitute manga texts, most studies have adopted a diachronic approach, examining the synchronic expressive forms of manga through historical perspectives. A few exceptions exist, such as Inuhiko Yomota's work, which calls for a purely synchronic analysis.

Furthermore, manga expression theory has been repeatedly informed by adjacent disciplines such as semiotics, narratology, stylistics, and film studies. Nevertheless, its principal focus remains manga itself rather than cinema or language. Yet, the definition of manga's essential characteristics continues to rely on a comparative awareness of different media. Regarding the research object, two tendencies can be identified: one emphasizing the micro-analysis of individual panels, and the other examining the continuity and flow between panels. Junzō Ishiko's early theorization addressed both aspects, but by the 1990s, attention had increasingly shifted toward micro-analytical readings of panels, a tendency most fully represented by Inuhiko Yomota's formalist approach. In contrast, twenty-first-century developments have reoriented the focus toward the study of inter-panel continuity. Moreover, Gō Itō's incorporation of "reader response" and "social environment" into the theoretical framework marks a re-opening of manga's discursive space toward external dimensions, with context itself becoming an object of inquiry within manga expression theory.

Ultimately, the establishment of manga expression theory as both a methodology and a research field has been indispensable to the disciplinary formation of manga studies. The development of its conceptual vocabulary and analytical discourse has not only laid the groundwork for specialized academic inquiry but has also enabled productive dialogue between manga and other media. In this sense, the theoretical achievements of manga expression theory have provided a crucial foundation for the practice of manga criticism.

However, orthodox versions of manga expression theory that focus solely on the surface of visual signs inevitably face inherent limitations. While the theories developed in the 1990s introduced valuable insights,

they tended to emphasize internal and static analysis, narrowing the theoretical scope in comparison with Junzō Ishiko's earlier, more expansive framework. In this regard, the twenty-first-century reemergence of manga expression theory can be viewed both as a reaction against that earlier paradigm and as a renewed effort to revitalize Ishiko's legacy. The theories advanced by scholars such as Gō Itō and Tomoyo Iwashita, influenced by Hiroki Azuma's otaku cultural criticism, have expanded the discursive field of expression theory across spatial and temporal dimensions, bridging internal and external analytical perspectives and promoting a multilayered, dynamic understanding of manga signs.

Yet, this expansion also introduces new challenges. The unbounded broadening of research scope risks diluting the conceptual integrity of "expression theory" itself. Every theoretical approach inevitably has its epistemological boundaries and cannot encompass all possible objects of study. Although contemporary manga expression theory aspires to a high degree of theoretical sophistication, its critical practices often fall short of these ambitions. The further delineation of its theoretical limits and the refinement of its core concepts remain pressing tasks for future research and ongoing scholarly dialogue.

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