

Book Review: *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture
and the Kibyôshi of Edo Japan*

Dr. Andrea Horbinski

Volume 1, Pages 169-173

Kern, Adam L. *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the Kibyôshi of Edo Japan*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019.

Keywords: Book review, manga, anime, anime and manga studies

Author Bio: Andrea Horbinski holds a PhD in modern Japanese history with a designated emphasis in new media from the University of California, Berkeley. Her book manuscript, “Manga’s Global Century,” is a history of Japanese comics from 1905-1989. Her articles have appeared in *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *Convergence*, *Internet Histories*, and *Mechademia*.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0
Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/)

Adam L. Kern's *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the Kibyôshi of Edo Japan* has become an indispensable text in the fields of manga studies and the history of early modern Japanese popular culture since its publication in 2006. In 2019, Kern and the Harvard University Asia Center published a paperback second edition with a new preface, making the book widely available at a not wildly unreasonable price – especially welcome given that the original edition sold out in 2007.

In the more than dozen years since its initial publication Kern's book has been cited extensively, but Kern's arguments have been widely misrepresented as boiling down to the idea that *kibyôshi*, the “genre of woodblock-printed comicbook [sic]” (xxv) that was wildly popular in 18thC Edo Japan, constitute the origins of manga—a tiresome notion that willfully ignores salient differences between popular culture and mass culture, between early modern and modern. To his credit, in the new preface to this second edition (the only new material in the entire book, which is actually a facsimile reprint) Kern confronts this chestnut head-on, declaring that “my contention is that the *manga* emanated *indirectly* from the *kibyôshi*” (xxv), going on to state that “the *manga* is the offspring of mixed parentage, not a slightly modernized clone of one or the other [Western cartoons and *kibyôshi* et al]” (xxvi). Regrettably, however, the new preface is actually quite short, with Kern limiting most of his substantive discussion to briefly sketching some of the developments in manga studies and comics studies since 2006. He laments, rightly, that “Comics Studies, while drawing some inspiration and legitimacy from the global popularity of *manga*, nevertheless has effectively isolated *manga* as the exception among non-Western comics that proves the rule of the superiority or, at least, primacy of Western comics” (xxvii). Unfortunately, accurately, succinctly put.

The book itself divides into two halves, presenting a thorough study of the “little yellow comicbook” in its historical and cultural milieu. The first section, in five parts, sketches out the landscape of An’ei-Tenmei culture and Edo identity, with the *kibyôshi* a crucial part of the same; considers the *kibyôshi* in the context of other forms of popular literature and entertainment; examines the *kibyôshi* in terms of comics expression, with a particular eye towards differentiating it from the assumption that its sole interest is as manga’s progenitor; and finally concludes with an overview of the form’s rise and fall, concluding that *kibyôshi* were a victim of their own commercial success. Relying heavily on the primary texts of the *kibyôshi* themselves and copiously illustrated throughout (including ten full color reprints), Kern’s central insight is that the era of the *kibyôshi*’s greatest popularity was also the cultural peak of the An’ei-Tenmei eras (1772-1789, in toto), “a period of time largely marked by the perception of the eastward swing of the cultural center of gravity away from western Japan (Kamigata), with its old imperial capital of Kyoto and other nearby cities (especially Osaka), toward the new shogun’s capital of Edo” (7). Compared to the well-known, Kyoto-centered Genroku era in the late 17thC, the An’ei-Tenmei and Bunka-Bunsei aka Kasei (1804-1829, in toto) eras have often garnered less attention in scholarship, but as Kern notes, the An’ei-Tenmei era in particular was when Edo began to come into its own as a cultural, not just commercial, center in its own right. The *kibyôshi*, Kern argues, “not only mirrored and constructed urban commoner culture, but was also one of the major vehicles for the assertion of that culture in the political sphere” (8). *Kibyôshi*, like the hybrid comics forms of *ponchie* (“*Punch* drawings”) and then manga in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, “became the most salient form of political satire” (8)—which, Kern argues, is part of, but not the entire, reason why its heyday was so short-lived,

as the Kansei Reforms are generally agreed to have marked the beginning of its gradual decline, although he is at pains to note that the Reforms destroyed “the satirical strain within the *kibyôshi*, not the *kibyôshi* itself” (10).

A literature specialist by training, Kern’s methodological approach to his material is commendably catholic: in his own estimation, he combines “a potpourri of pop culture, philology, visual culture, *histoire du livre*, and some other things thrown in for good measure” (25). In this, as he notes, his approach is only commensurate with the capacious and wide-ranging grasp of the *kibyôshi*, which display “a remarkable degree of allusively to the whole range of literature and culture available for consumption in eighteenth-century Japan” (13). Equally commendably, Kern is willing to meet the *kibyôshi* on its own terms, which given their subject matter are sometimes less than totally serious.

Whether in the new preface or in the original book, however, Kern is not quite willing to abandon the respectability politics that have bedeviled writing about manga and comics since that writing began. Though Kern is right to decry the lack of scholarly attention paid to *kibyôshi* in either Japanese or English, and to highlight the *kibyôshi* as a mirror and pillar of the rich popular urban culture of An’ei-Tenmei, he retreads the familiar *cursus honorum* of the ascent of the graphic novel to respectability in Anglophone cultural criticism, from *Maus* to Chris Ware to *Persepolis*, and thereby participates in it himself, as when he declares that “...*kibyôshi*, although assuming the guise of children’s comic books, was anything but silly kid stuff” (9). He also devotes multiple paragraphs in the new preface to defending (by qualifying) his initial claim that *kibyôshi* were not a pornographic genre, arguing that a collection of pornographic *kibyôshi* made available online since 2006 “appear to hijack the *kibyôshi* genre’s characteristic yellow covers, artistic style,

and storytelling conventions without actually being *kibyôshi* themselves” (xxxix). On the face of this brief discussion, Kern’s hair-splitting does not appear to hold much water, but without more detail it is difficult to judge. His decision to refer to *kibyôshi* (and manga) as a genre rather than as a medium, and his use of the term “comicbook,” are also idiosyncratic but ultimately recondite decisions.

If that were all, that would be enough, but the book’s second half is what truly elevates it from key text to landmark—and in the new paperback edition, one worthy of consideration as a classroom text. Specifically, the second half reprints, fully translated, three full *kibyôshi* themselves, along with introductory essays. All three are by one Santô Kyôden, ranging from an acknowledged masterpiece of the form (Chapter 6), to a less popular sex comedy (Chapter 7) and a self-referential battle of media forms (Chapter 5). By fully translating the text within the images, Kern restores much of the immediacy of the *kibyôshi* reading experience to Anglophone audiences. Coupled with the first half’s thorough consideration of *kibyôshi* as comics, as media, and as historical phenomenon, Kern’s work stands the test of time and amply illustrates his contention that, despite not having given rise to manga, the *kibyôshi* “offers a similarly informative, visually compelling, and perhaps even an ultimately meaningful glimpse into one of the world’s most fascinating civilizations during one of that civilization’s greatest cultural efflorescences” (13). Students and scholars of manga studies, comics studies, and Japanese history will find much to reward them in *Manga from the Floating World*.