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# Manga Beyond Japan: How the Term Manga Has Globalized

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## *Introduction*

During these two decades, the concept of manga has changed a lot. Before 2000, “manga” was surely Japanese, linguistically. At present, manga is not a foreign concept anymore, representing a well-known comics style and inspiring various types of international collaboration beyond Japan. National boundaries look like something that can be erased in this case. In terms of manga, some artists work together beyond Japan and other artists publish personal narratives often based on experience from their own perspectives beyond Japan as if manga were a global media from the first. This paper considers how the acceptance of manga has expanded beyond Japan and examines how non-Japanese artists use manga as a special form to go not only beyond Japan, but beyond nationality as such.

## *Manga Linguistically Became English in 2006*

Manga dramatically and dynamically became a global term after I started working on it outside Japan more than 20 years ago. When I began analyzing manga in English in the US, I was always asked what manga meant. My advisors told me to add “Japanese comics” to the word manga, which should also be indicated in italics, because it was foreign. Before manga experienced globalization in the 2000s, there had already been some attempts to introduce manga outside Japan. *Manga! Manga!* (1983) by Frederick Schodt, the pioneer of manga criticism in English, was perhaps the first book-length introduction. It featured a preface by artist Tezuka Osamu, the “God of Manga,” who deplored the West’s lack of interest in accepting manga as follows:

The isolation of the Japanese comic clearly has to do with the way it is published. Captions and word balloons of Japanese comics must of course be printed in Japanese, which is totally indecipherable to foreign readers; translations are rarely provided. Also, Japa-

nese comics, like other Japanese publications, open and are read from right to left, making them hard to follow visually for people used to reading in the opposite direction. Simply as an object to be read, then, a Japanese comic in its raw form is not easily accepted in the West. Rather, it is ignored. (Tezuka, 1983, 10)

Around the same time, comics critic Fred Patten wrote in *The Comics Journal*, which started in 1976, about similar difficulties in introducing manga to the West:

Japanese comics are laid out "backward" to Western conventions, reading right-to-left rather than left-to-right. To translate them into English would require photographically reversing the art, an expensive extra step. For the present, the world of Japanese comic art will remain a phenomenon for Americans to marvel at from afar. (Patten, 1984, 55)

However, as the globalization of manga and anime proceeded, such difficulties with manga expression were overcome. Scholar Frederick Schodt noted the change that made manga linguistically global as follows:

By September 4, 2006, it was clear to me that manga had truly conquered North America. [...]. There was no translation of the word, of course, and -- with the market for English versions of both manga and anime now estimated to be in the billions of dollars -- who would need one? (Schodt, 2008, viii)

The market for Japanese comics in the US reached its peak in 2007:

The market for Japanese comics, called manga, in the United States grew rapidly at the beginning of the twenty-first century at a rate unprecedented in the publishing industry. Sales grew a remarkable 350% from \$60 million in 2002 to \$210 million in 2007 and did not begin to decline until the beginning of the recent economic downturn beginning in late 2008. (Brienza, 2009, 101)

Manga experienced many significant moments of recognition as a global media:

In 2007, [...] it was the first year that a manga title was ranking in *USA Today's* best-seller list [...]. Around the same time, the media was abuzz with the release of *Selfmadehero's* Shakespearean manga, and Japan's International Manga Awards. Manga was well and truly internationally accepted. (Johnson-Woods, 2010, 1)

“Cool Japan” was a key term in that regard, although one might wonder about its effectiveness. Surprisingly, “Cool Japan” is still surviving as a Japanese governmental policy. Called “Cool Japan diplomacy” by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), its aim is to make Japanese culture appealing overseas in addition to contributing to the economy (see METI, 2012–2014). Before METI, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) started pop-culture diplomacy (see Valaskivi, 2013). According to the ministry, pop-culture means: “manga, anime, film, game, light novel, popular music, TV and so on which are significant tools for people from overseas to understand Japan” (MOFA, 2016, no pag.). In 2007 MOFA established the International Manga Awards as part of this pop-culture diplomacy. The award goes to around ten works per year. In 2007, 146 works from 26 regions and countries applied for it. At present every year around 300 works are submitted. In 2017, the government added the term “Japan” to the title of the award. The now “Japan International Manga Award” has both Japanese and English websites both using the term manga (see MOFA, 2014a, 2014b). On the Japanese page, it appears in Chinese characters. In the Japanese language, manga signifies both comics in general and Japanese comics in particular. For example, *kaigai manga* means “overseas comics” rather than what we call “global manga” today. On their English page, the term “manga” is romanized without translation into “comics.” But do both versions of “manga” signify the same?

Regarding the award winners, neither nationality nor comics style actually matter. At the same time, the Japan International Manga Award might suggest an attempt by the Japanese government to cover any comics under the term “manga.” Sociologist Casey Brienza, who has analyzed what she calls “global manga,” poses the following question:

[T]here are comics with no direct links to Japanese individuals or industry being produced and consumed all over the world that at least some producers and consumers would elect to call manga. But if it cannot be said to be labor by Japanese hands or supported by Japanese institutions or investments, is this global manga really manga, and if so, what makes it manga and why? (Brienza, 2018, 91)

Apparently, anything can become “manga” at the very moment it wins the International Manga Award.

*Non-Japanese Mangaka and their Identity Issues in the 2000s*

While the Japanese government pushes the globalization of manga as a policy, as if they would like “manga” to signify any kind of comics regardless of nationality, the term itself remains ambivalent, calling for a clearer definition of content and form. In addition to “global manga,” there are several different words for “manga beyond Japan”: OEL (Original English Language) Manga, OGM (Original Global Manga), GloBL (Globalization + boys’ love [BL]), graphic novels, graphic narratives, graphic memoir, graphic medicine, comics literature and so on. In the US, one also finds the already outdated terms Amerimanga and nissei comi. In the mid-2000s, a substantial number of non-Japanese artists got worried whether they should call themselves mangaka (manga artists) or not because of manga’s associated nationality, which seemed fixed as Japanese.

Svetlana Chmakova’s *Dramacon*, published by Tokyopop in 2006, is a good example of this case. In one scene a boy cries out: “MANGA IS JAPANESE!!! YOU’RE NOT JAPANESE!! SO YOU CAN’T DRAW MANGA!” Pointing to the African-American co-protagonist, readers find him continuing to cry: “SHE’S NOT JAPANESE EITHER!! SHE’S NOT EVEN WHITE!!” (Volume 2, 72). This scene is crucial even now in that it addresses the relation of manga to nationality and thus reminds us of the very fact that manga once surely and narrowly meant publications for Japanese readers by Japanese creators in Japan.

As Tezuka has explained, exporting manga into other cultures, especially to the West, was very difficult before the manga boom. But this was not necessary anyway as the Japanese comics market was huge, and at that time, one third of all publications in Japan were manga. In *Mangaka America*, a collection of essays on manga works by 12 artists, self-claimed American mangaka Adam Warren wrote:

[M]uch controversy swirls around the issue of whether the term manga can apply to Japanese-influenced Western comics work, or should it be reserved strictly for comics produced by Japanese creators? (Warren, 2006, 7)

The long-lasting national conservativeness of the Japanese comics industry did not only affect American artists. Foo Swee Chin (Fsc), a Singaporean artist, who began her career in the 2000s, depicts the moment when she brought her works directly to manga publishers in Japan (*mochikomi*) (fig. 1, after references).

One editor whom she met back then severely told her that they usually would not read an incomplete piece, but as she was not Japanese, they had no choice. Finally he advised her to practice the Japanese language and use G-pen (often associated with recognizably “Japanese” linework) to draw “manga.”

*International Collaborations: Disrupting How Manga Should Be Created*

There are many common understandings of what manga is. In the following sections, I would like to compare two forms of comics in relation to manga in turn. One is an example of manga as teamwork, and the other is manga created from non-Japanese perspectives. A notable difference between Japan and the West is in the system of creating comics. Japanese comics usually have one mangaka’s name for each work, while American comics, for example, have a list of names for various roles such as writer, inker, colorist, illustrator and so on. But in recent years transregional collaborations of manga have increased, mostly for the purpose of producing manga in a more convenient way. One example is *XMEN* (2009) (fig. 2), collaboratively created by Raina Telgemeier, Dave Roman, and Anzu. Anzu was an Indonesian artist employing shōjo manga style. At that time taking Japanese names was one of the strategies to appeal to manga readers in Indonesia. Raina Telgemeier and Dave Roman are American comics authors who grew up reading manga. Later Raina won two Eisner awards for her semi-autobiographical comics *Smile* (2010) and *Sisters* (2014). Another example is *Secrets of the Ninja* (fig. 3) which won one of the 10<sup>th</sup> International Manga Awards in 2017; the first for a UK author. This work is a collaboration of Sean Michael Wilson and Akiko Shimojima. Sean makes original stories and decides the layouts of each page first, and then Akiko draws. Therefore, Akiko is called an illustrator. Sean also collaborates with other manga artists who have experience in working on manga, living outside Japan.

Crediting a work to one name suggests individual authorship. In actuality, working as a team has been a common way to produce manga in Japan with artists receiving systematic and careful support from assistants and editors. But this fact seemed unknown to most participants who began manga creation outside Japan right after the manga boom.

In order to develop their own artists, publisher Tokyopop held the so-called “Rising Stars of Manga Contest” from 2002 to 2008. The contest promised winners a chance to publish their own manga in book form, which fascinated many young artists. However, few winners could utilize the chance to become a professional, because working on one volume of

manga by oneself was too hard for many of them. When I interviewed Tokyopop in the late 2000s, one editor said that they actually would have liked to raise promising artists to become professionals and also to help them produce their works as a team with assistants and editors like in Japan. As this was out of reach, artist Queenie Chan, after she had completed three volumes of her manga *Dreaming* for Tokyopop, invented another way of production which she names “Comics Prose.” It consists of both manga illustrations and prose text on one and the same page to save time (fig. 4).

To summarize this section briefly, the type of manga that quickly went beyond Japan can be characterized as pure “content,” isolated from the initial media environment which had developed in Japan for more than half a century. The above-mentioned unclarity outside Japan as to what makes manga may be due to that isolation, that is, the lack of understanding for manga as a media when it went beyond Japan.

#### *Author or Tourist? Drawing Japan from their Own Perspective*

By now, some authors have been collaborating beyond Japan as if manga were a global media from the first that precisely enabled such nationally hybrid collaborations. Currently the most popular topics of non-Japanese manga are autobiographical sketches of daily life, simply living or traveling and visiting Japan. Interestingly however, in this age when anyone can place their own piece on the net, a need to make manga properly publicized seems to have emerged, that is, going cross-culturally beyond Japan in the form of printed manga publications.

A number of female comics artists who draw manga from a transnational perspective evince this trend: Åsa Ekström from Sweden, Abby Denson from the US, FSc and Evangeline Neo from Singapore. Their most recent manga are based on their experiences, and in them, they appear as one of the main characters. They compare Japan to the countries in which they were born, but they are not just comparing two nations. As their comics are presented from a subjective point of view based on their own experiences, their expressions are more autobiographical life drawings of different cultures than national accounts.

At first, manga beyond Japan let many participants imagine “manga” as a long narrative in line with multi-volume global megahits like *Naruto*, *One Piece*, *Fruit Basket*, *Sailor Moon*, etc. Åsa, too, first drew such *story manga* in Sweden, but once in Japan, she changed to short comic strips. Interestingly, she is not the only one who did that. Abby in the US and FSc in Singapore published graphic narratives in the 2000s. But in the

2010s both of them moved to comic strips based on their personal experiences and daily lives.

In 2010 Abby Denson won one of the international manga awards for her graphic novel *Dolltopia* (2009) (fig. 5). She was also known as one of the comics artists of *Powerpuff Girls*. Her style is not manga, although she has been much inspired by shōjo manga artists who focus on interiority. Abby has attended Japan's biggest comics convention Comike for years, meeting friends and exchanging self-published minicomics and zines with them. Such interrelations led Abby to draw comics about making a trip to Japan from a "manga lover's perspective." Her book *Cool Japan Guide* (fig. 6) sold well, and in 2018 her next book *Cool Tokyo Guide* came out in the US.

FSc has been a professional since the 2000s, publishing several manga and comics in the US, Japan and Taiwan. But her exposure to different comics cultures also made it difficult for her to be accepted by Japanese manga editors. Her manga series *Clairvoyance* for Ohta Publishing was unfortunately discontinued and not republished in book form (fig. 7). Subsequently, she created her own website and publicized her comics and illustrations there for free. Finally her diary-like series of short comic strips entitled *Nihon Lah* in Singlish became a webtoon produced by Japanese media corporation Kadokawa. FSc also published it in a printed book in 2016 (fig. 8).

Another Singaporean artist, who has been drawing comic strips based on her daily life going back and forth between Singapore and Japan, is Evangeline Neo. After having created webcomics for seven years, she has published three printed comics on cultural differences between Singapore and Japan since 2015 (fig. 6). Singaporean comics editor and critic Cheng Tju Lim remarks:

US autobiographical comics are alternative comics [...]. Singapore autobiographical comics are mainstream because artists cannot live on comics but do it as a hobby and can choose their topic without market intention. (Lim, 2014, no pag.)

Interestingly, all these four young female artists are successful now in publishing their own printed work as comics, after they had tried out online comic strips in addition to story manga, or longer graphic narratives. The fact that they have been given the opportunity to publish in Japan may be related, at least in part, to the increased role of tourism. According to the Japanese government, the number of tourists coming to

Japan has tripled since 2011. But the comics of the above-mentioned artists are not travel guides that provide objective and correct information to visitors. In them, Japan appears less as a place for the traveler to visit but rather as a label, with which the artists freely express their own transnational narratives. In relation to the fluid meaning which “Japan” assumes here, comics or manga, too, appear as something to be experienced rather than read; a media of communication with oneself and others in personal daily life.

### *Conclusion*

What manga is, is still a good question, because, as has been demonstrated above, the term manga itself has gained multiple meanings as distinct from two decades ago, when it only signified Japanese comics. The comics and manga introduced above were chosen not just for their popularity but rather for their inclusion of something disruptive to the conventional understanding of manga and Japan. At present, the term manga does not call for an explanation such as “Japanese comics” anymore. On the one hand, manga beyond Japan still carries “Japan” with it. On the other hand, manga’s global potentiality clearly undermines the strong tag of “Japan.”

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へんしゅう きび  
編集さんの厳しさ



おそ せいしん  
恐りで精神がボツとなった

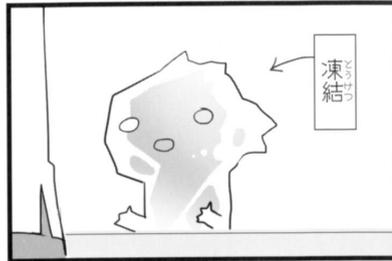


Figure 1. Foo Swee Chin (FSc). 2016. *Singapōru no otaku mangaka nihon o mezasu* (Singaporean Mangaka Goes to Japan), 122. Tokyo: KADOKAWA/Media Factory.



Figure 2. Raina Telgemeier and Dave Roman (script), and Anzu (art). 2009. Cover. *XMEN*. New York: Del Ray.

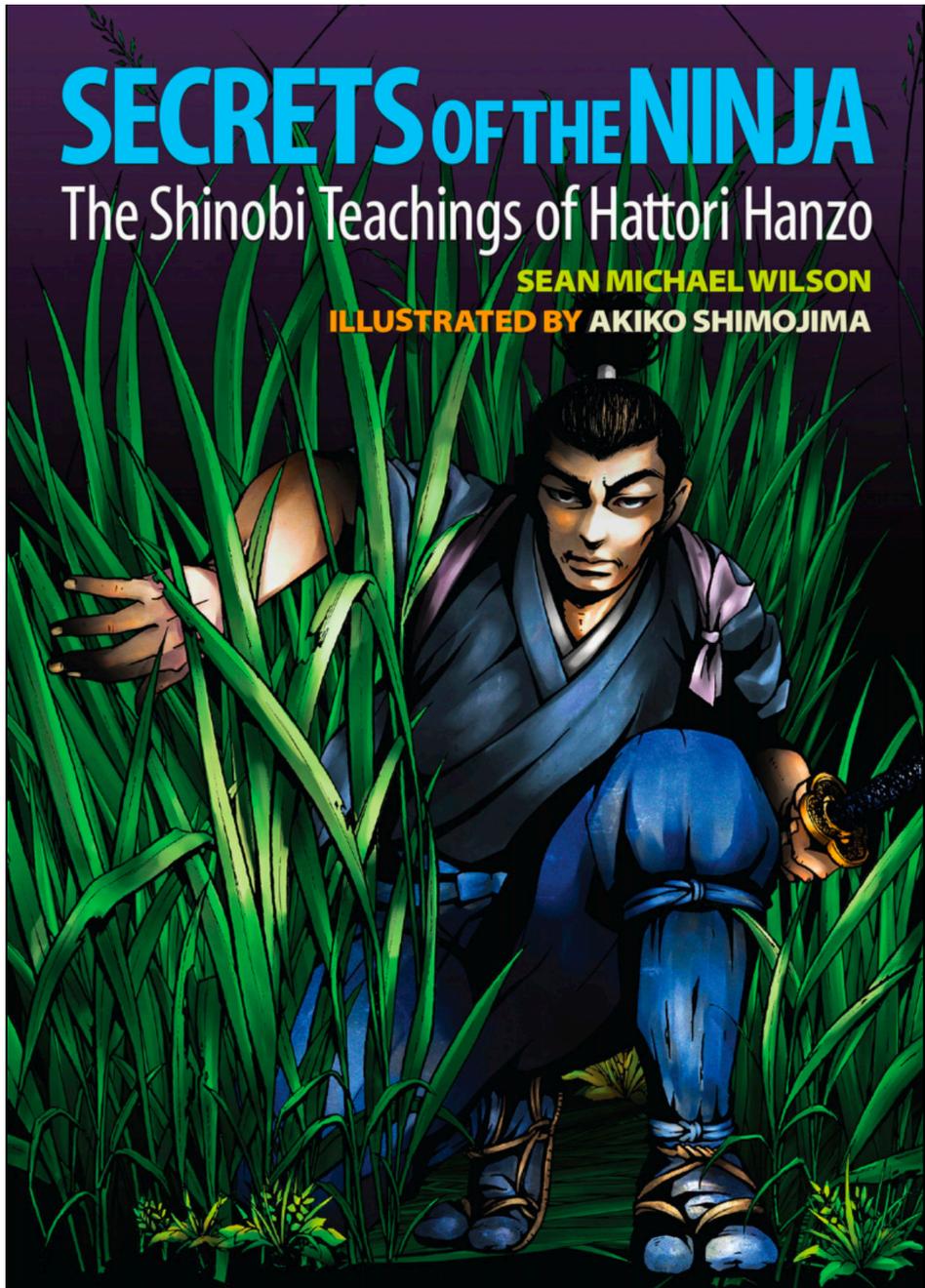


Figure 3. Sean Michael Wilson (script), and Akiko Shimojima (art). 2015. Cover. *Secrets of the Ninja: The Shinobi Teachings of Hattori Hanzo*. Berkeley, California: Blue Snake Books.



Figure 4. Queenie Chan. 2012. *Small Shen*, 40. Sydney, Australia: Harper Voyager.

ABBY DENSON

# Dolltopia

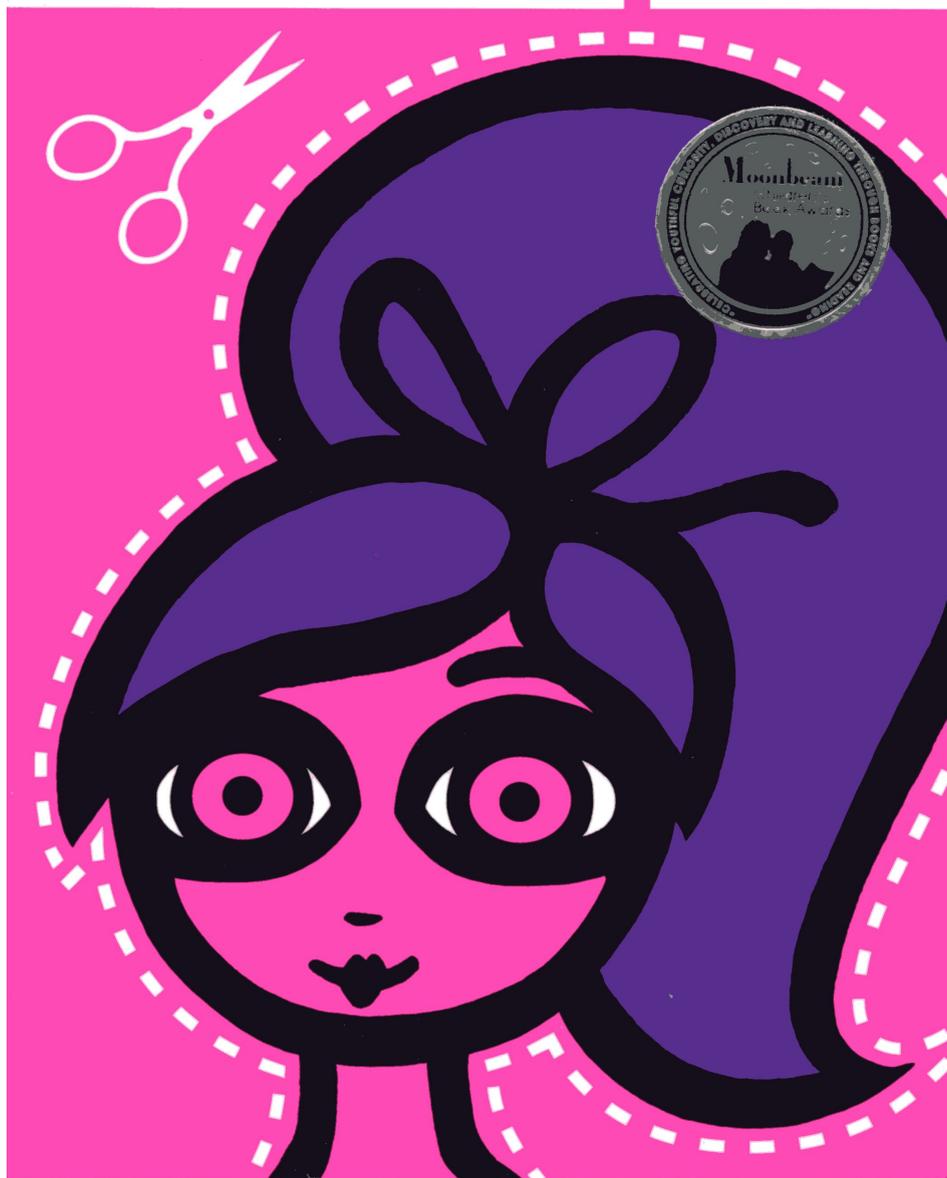
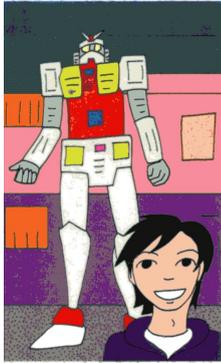


Figure 5. Abby Denson. 2009. Cover. *Dolltopia*. San Francisco, California: Green Candy Press.

A COMIC BOOK WRITER'S PERSONAL TOUR OF JAPAN



ABBY DENSON

# COOL JAPAN GUIDE

FUN IN THE LAND OF  
MANGA. LUCKY CATS  
AND RAMEN

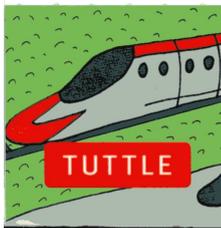
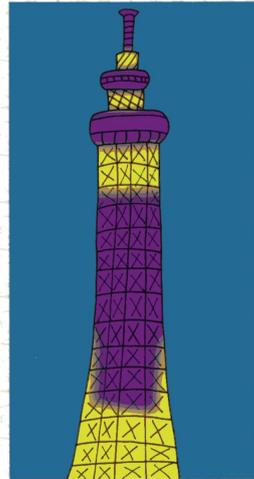


Figure 6. Abby Denson. 2014. Cover. *Cool Japan Guide*. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing.



Figure 7. FSc. 2010. *Clairvoyance*. Tokyo: Ohta Publishing.

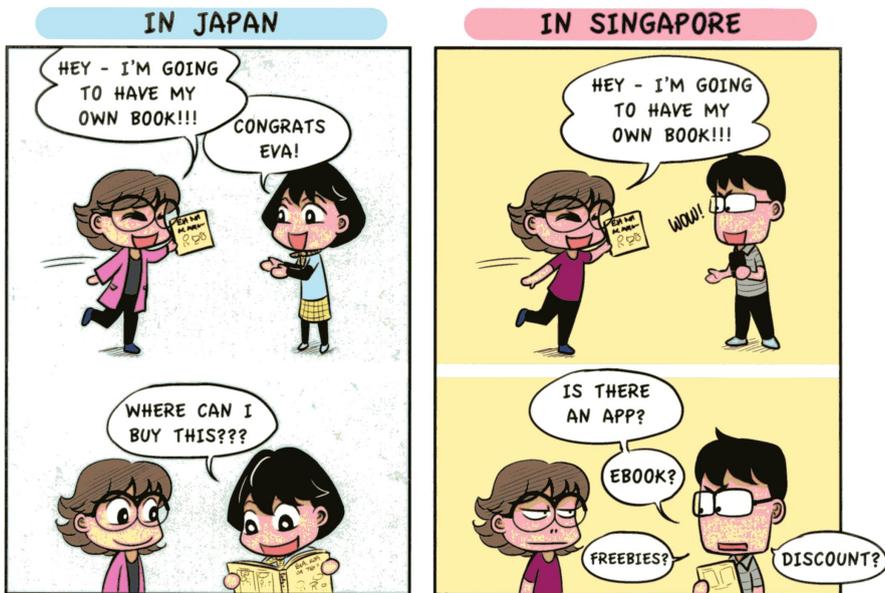


Figure 8. Evangeline Neo. 2015. Back cover. *Eva, Kopi, and Matcha*. Selangor, Malaysia: MPH Group Publishing.