

THE PHILIPPINE MANGA: Examining the Aesthetics and Identity of Black Ink

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ABSTRACT

Since the untimely demise of the Philippine Komiks industry, new comics trends have emerged to supplant what was left of the reading public. For the many studies done in Philippine comics today, there are rising concerns as to the effect of manga among contemporary artists. This leads to the question of the legitimacy of Philippine manga. This paper aims to investigate these fears by briefly tracing the development of manga as well as survey other Asian countries' reception towards the manga. This paper will also examine the influence of Japanese manga among Filipino creators of Black Ink, one of the biggest publishers of Filipino-made manga in the country, and of how it is constitutive of the construction of the Filipino manga.

Keywords: Manga, Komiks, Pop Literature, Asian Culture, Philippine comics, Comics Theory

Introduction

For a country that has far been colonized so many times, it is always the question of identity that is most often problematic. Since the end of the Second World War, politicians, artists, writers and critics have often problematized Filipino identity. This long debate is not only reflected in politics but in art as well; felt even among comics creators who were left at the tail end of the once great Philippine Komiks. With its closure being heavily felt in the 1990s, a rift was believed to have occurred between those who grew up reading *komiks* and the younger generation whose reading fare are from foreign comics, most notably from the West. This rift created a new market of readers and creators feeling the need to reinstall Filipino comics appreciation and literacy by either mimicking their beloved comics stories or trying their hands in making something new. Among the new group that eventually emerged were Filipinos inspired by anime and manga. It was first noticed among the issues of original works of small fan groups of anime and Japanese manga in tiny conventions, selected specialized book stores and magazine shops.

Since 1988, komiks magazine titles such as *Funny Komiks* and *Jolly Kid* featured artworks that are manga-like in nature (Fondevilla 2007). Notable works such as the manga anthology *Culture Crash* have also surfaced from collective ideals of university-based fans. In July 1999, together with publisher Jescie James Palabay, Elmer Damaso, Jerard Felix Beltran, and Melvin Calingo pooled their resources and came out with the first issue of *Culture Crash* which was launched in August 2000. It was the first of its kind to be officially published and distributed in book stores nationwide. The spark of inspiration from its success spawned other titles, both from a collective group to small, individual creators.

However, despite the critical reception by a younger crowd, the style is still discriminated by those who have been exposed to the old komiks, believing it as mere spin-offs of Japanese manga and of the resurging anime invasion (Fondevilla 2007). The question of the legitimacy of Philippine manga has always been contested ever since the group style became well-known with the publication of *Culture Crash* (Flores 2004). As critics of the medium see it as a cheap imitation of the real thing, there is the lurking fear that by accepting manga we are also blindly accepting and promoting a culture other than our own (Calingo 2007). This initial discrimination received by these manga creators from both their traditional komiks creators and the Americanized Filipino comics peers

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was all because of what is generally perceived as simplistic drawing style and allegedly staccato narrative framework. Critics in the Philippine comics medium have always lamented how the next generation of comics creators that appeared during the last century have become too influenced by foreign material. For some, nothing can be compared to the glorious days of the old komiks industry.

Reminiscing the Old Industry

Komiks hailing from the old industry have always been identified as Filipino by many critics. Its popularity actually connects the gap between the elite and the masses as nearly everyone in the archipelago read komiks. This came about due to the following reasons. Firstly, the price is affordable by the masses. At one time, for only twenty-five centavos an average reader can already enjoy a single komiks crammed with serialized romantic dramas that Filipinos are often familiarized with. Secondly, in its glory years, komiks can be found virtually everywhere. This was during the time when television sets were still rare and the masses depended on komiks for a quick entertainment fix, lasting until the late 1980s. Third, the stories allude to the very fabric of Filipino life, simultaneously showing both life's realities and dreams of romantic escapism (p.301, 1997). There was even a time that one cannot claim to be Filipino without any knowledge of at least one local komiks story or character. Written in the vernacular, the stories follow a romantic view of the Filipino life, displaying underdog heroes who rise up to the challenges of life albeit helped by miraculous circumstances or by other people that act as fairy godparents. The slice of life it portrays is reflective of the everyday Filipino's reality of poverty, labor, family and dreams. Not only are they reflective in the stories themselves but on the illustration as well. Though these komiks were in black and white, the art was usually exceptional. Clodualdo del Mundo Sr.'s tale of poverty in *Kadenang Putik*, would not have greater impression without Fred Carillo's attention to detail. In Francisco Coching's take on the world of fandom, he created *Movie Fan*, a comedy of manners that critically looks into the life of a female protagonist who gets into all sorts of situations just to be close to the idol she is hounding. Standing on the common ground of the middle class, the komiks reader can easily relate to the heroine's disposition as well as affectations. And there is also Elpidio Torres, illustrator of such unforgettable stories such as *Dyesebel* and *Bondying*, who is regarded by many of his peers as to capture the exact likeness of Filipinos.

With a meticulous eye for detail and refined use of dark tones on white paper, it is no wonder that American comics enthusiast generally refer to these great komiks illustrators as baroque in style.

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Sadly, the baroque-like style enjoyed by many in komiks did not last long. Many of the original artists have either eventually retired or simply moved on to greener pastures. It was either that they were pirated into American mainstream comics, such as Alfredo Alcala and Alex Niño, or both writers and illustrators alike have decided to venture into film much like what Clodualdo del Mundo Sr. and Francisco Coching had done.

Since the collapse of the Don Ramon Roces-owned komiks empire, critics often problematize the quest for a legitimate Filipino komiks. There are those who accept the theory that the more identifiable the Filipino nationality of the character being drawn, the more Filipino the character becomes (Calingo 2007). Melvin Calingo, one of the creative minds on *Culture Crash*, describes Filipino comics as something that is done by a Filipino, made for the Filipino and elicits Filipino pride.

Regardless of whatever style a Filipino artist has opted to use, the work done by a Filipino artist can be identified as truly Filipino. To define Filipino pride is to acknowledge Filipino culture as reflected in one's contemporary atmosphere. It must be clearly seen as a worldview of every character created, meaning they must sound and act like Filipinos. Finally, it must be depicted in terms of action and situation in which the atmosphere becomes familiar to the Filipino reader. Merely showing hints of familiar sights, dropping recognizable Filipino words and familiar faces are not enough to call a work Filipino.

However, when it comes to visual depictions of the Filipino condition, adapting to certain styles whether local or foreign, is unavoidable. No art form can ever grow within itself. This is the clear case that has happened in the evolution of the manga. This may as well also be the case if we ever dream of seeing comics created by Filipinos thrive, not exactly like its predecessor, but as something distinctly Filipino.

The biggest scare that can happen in a so-called art conservatism is that of Graphic Arts during the late 1970s well up to the 1990s. Due to its overwhelming market reach and lack of competition, mismanagement eventually affected Graphic Arts. Because certain editors are in fear of losing reign to new upstarts, an overwhelming coercive monopoly solely controlled the editorial content, preventing innovative ideas to enter the closed komiks market. Then, since the management thinks writers and illustrators have nowhere else to go, they are given below minimum wage in order to cut costs and stay profitable. It is no wonder, therefore, that many talented artists and writers left, leaving the dying industry with cheap labor coming from unskilled and somewhat lazy writers and

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illustrators churning conventional and rehashed age-old concepts and ideas (Mijares 2007).

To dream of the old industry rising up from its ashes is pitifully romantic, as it will only dampen the enthusiastic efforts of writers and artists in their experiments to evolve in their own ways (Alanguilan 2007). For others to incorporate manga style in their art form is only one of them. The main problem manga-inspired Filipino creators often face is the quality and legitimacy of the cultural value of their art style. However, it should be understood that by simply measuring manga-inspired Filipino creation with that of the Japanese manga can lead only to an unhealthy self-criticism and inferior outlook. Before determining the current situation of manga-inspired Filipino comics and of how far it may lead to what can be called as Filipino manga, one must first understand the conditions in which the Japanese manga have been conceived.

Both Fondevilla (2007) and Flores (2004) agree that on face value, drawn faces in the Japanese manga are not even remotely Japanese in features. Both facial and body structure are broken down to universally recognized iconic semblances, and emotions are given recognizable symbolic representations as well (McCloud, 2006). But what exactly is manga and how is it that, despite being iconic, is identified as Japanese?

Evolution of Manga

To question the legitimacy of adopting manga into the Filipino context is also to examine how Japanese is the Japanese manga. In reality, manga did not simply come out from a strict traditional line. It has a long legacy of appropriated visual art and narrative.

Manga, as it is known today, did not start off as a cultural phenomenon until Osamu Tezuka's rise to fame in the 1950s with his creation of *Tetsuam Atom* (Astro Boy) that was inspired by Walt Disney's *Pinocchio*. Manga's origin has always been contested by two particular theories.

Lente (2008) claims that back in the 12th Century, caricature-styled drawings called *Toba-e* appeared and were later developed allegedly by a Buddhist monk. He used a form of narrative picture scroll then called *Choju-giga* to mock human foibles using representative animals. Legendary print maker Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) was credited to have coined the term *manga*, to describe a series of leisurely sketches on various themes that he began publishing in 1814. Manga was based from two kanji words; the first character *man* means "involuntary" or "unconsciously", the second

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ga means “picture” that is represented as a border. The term later evolved into being described as “humorous drawings”. However, other critics such as Sharon Kinsella, disagree as these ancient picture scrolls are created only for the private pleasures of the elite, unlike the manga which is made for mass consumption.

Japan’s opening of ports in the mid-19th Century to Western foreigners after a hundred years of solitude have also led to the eventful cultural interchange that also affected manga. Charles Wirgman (1832-1891), a British cartoonist, migrated to Yokohama and began *Japan Punch* in 1862. It contained political cartoons as well as humor that are similar to its United Kingdom magazine counterpart back home.

In Paul Gravett’s *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics*, he essentially marks manga as a postwar phenomenon, owing much to the influx of American comics and pop culture. He argues that if without the disruption of Japan’s heritage, there would be no manga culture. The ravages of the Second World War left Japan without any proper technology such as television and movies, resulting to the development of a reading culture among its masses. Japanese reading public, both old and young, became exposed to *gekiga* (dramatic pictures) and *akahon* (red books), cheap collections of comic stories for children. While America banned nationalistic drama in Japan, the ancient art of *kami-shibai* (paper dramas) flourished with illustrations of *gekiga* whose stories range from children’s books to fantastical genres like science fiction and adventures (Lente 2018). With these manifestations came the illustrative storytelling tradition of Japan, brought about by the combination of local culture and stylistics of the West.

This foundation of the early form of manga is even further developed by Osamu Tezuka, credited for integrating the Walt Disney style of drawing and Western cinematic narrative into what is later known as the Japanese trademark illustration, the modern day manga. Ever since he was a child, Tezuka has always been a big fan of Walt Disney. His adaptation of big, oval-eyed characters pays homage to many of the early cartoons before and during that time, making it easier for characters to emit different modes of emotion into recognizable visual images. Also inspired by German and French movies, Tezuka experimented on extended framing sequences of facial reactions using different angles and close-ups not to mention pages-long action sequences (Whaley 2007). As his stories expanded in an epic length of hundreds if not thousands of pages, they popularized the now standard form of serialization so as to publish them with minimal, regulated expense. As he grew to the level of stardom, Tezuka turned his eye on animation.

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Inspired by William Hannah and Joseph Barbera's economy of cell framing in their cartoons, he translated his epic story *Tetsuan Atom* from manga into animation. With the development of Japanese animation now called anime and with the premiere broadcast of *Tetsuan Atom* in January 1, 1963, succeeding generations of manga artists have expounded, experimented and further developed the craft of manga, synchronizing them with the creation of more manga-based anime, a marketing strategy first initiated by Tezuka himself. The eventful media-mix of interlocked live-action television, movie, anime, video games and merchandising helped manga into becoming a cultural success (Fusanosuke 2003).

Through the years since Tezuka's time, a lot of *mangakas* (manga artists) have explored the craft which resulted to numerous other sub-genres amongst various demographics. This study no longer dwelt on each of their history, development and craft as it will stray away from the original intent of examining our own Filipino made manga. But to note, these are some of them:

<i>Kodomo Manga:</i>	comics for little kids
<i>Shōnen Manga:</i>	comics for teenage boys
<i>Shōjo Manga:</i>	comics for teenage girls
<i>Seinen Manga:</i>	comics for young adult males
<i>Redisu Manga:</i>	comics for young adult females
<i>Shōjo Manga:</i>	romantic comics for teenage girls
<i>Shōjo-ai and Yuri Manga:</i>	romantic comics for girl love and for lesbians
<i>Yaoi Manga:</i>	romantic comics for homosexual men
<i>Shōnen-ai Manga:</i>	romantic comics for men
<i>Seijin Manga:</i>	comics for adult males
<i>Redikomi Manga:</i>	comics written by women for late teen to adult women, depicting more realistic, everyday accounts; literal translation: lady's comics
<i>Dōjinshi Manga:</i>	comics written and illustrated by amateurs or indie groups (usually circulated among a close group of other manga amateurs)
<i>Yonkoma Manga:</i>	four-panel comics, usually published in newspapers
<i>Gekiga Manga:</i>	comics focusing on serious topics; geared toward mature audiences
<i>Ecchi Manga:</i>	comics focusing on heterosexual/lesbian erotic themes (softcore pornography) read by men

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Hentai Manga: comics focusing on hardcore pornography

Within each manga sub-genre are other types that specify to particular tastes and preferences of each demographic such as collecting (*Pokemon*), adult sports (*Hajime No Ippo*), crime and mystery (*Death Note* and *Detective Conan*), kid battles (*Beyblade*), among others.

Manga's Impact in Asia

The impact of Manga in Japan may have its roots with its cross-cultural history. However, its impact to the world has something to do more with consumer culture. Strinati (1995) observes that the marketability of a creative product determines how it will be accepted as a cultural artifact. If the product gains enough widespread consumption, it will create ideas and concepts that are either reinforced or subverted among the masses. The Japanese Manga-Anime phenomenon in the 1960s has led to the simultaneous influence over neighboring Asian countries. With the exportation of *Tetsuan Atom* into becoming *Astroboy* in the West, the manga-anime eventually became a cultural artifact, influencing a vast number of aspiring Asian artists, particularly in Taiwan and China (Fondevilla 2007).

Neighboring countries and places such as South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, have long problematized the influx of Japanese manga as it dwarfs the sales of their domestic comics (Lent 1999). Moreover, Lent (1999) views, that these three countries share the same predicament. There is a strong Japanese manga following among the masses resulting to its equally strong cultural influence. Local cartoonists suffer from lack of support, including insufficient publication outlets. Piracy was rampant as well as legitimate translations.

Both the governments of Taiwan and South Korea perceive Japanese manga with disdain and contempt that they banned it. South Korea even made a step in "Koreanizing" the illustration style of their artists through workshops. Indeed, for these countries, despite mass consumption, critics consider Japanese manga as an obtrusive art form.

For Yang Wang, the Japanese manga invasion of China was an inevitable result of both political and economic upheaval. It was partially a result of the Sino-Japan peace and friendship treaty in 1978, allowing foreign programs, including Japanese anime shows, to be broadcasted on the TV station owned by Chinese Communist Party. Despite the

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widespread of anime due to lack of locally owned animation outfits, including the importation of Japanese manga, piracy of selected Japanese manga also infiltrated China that local genres were lost as there is now a tendency to assimilate into the Japanese style. Worse is that pirated copies that bypassed government censor can be very dangerous and misleading to children.

Given the way manga had eventually spread throughout Asia, it is important to note the intensity of its cultural impact on comics outside Japan. Nye describes such phenomenon as soft power, wherein people can be attracted to particular culture other than their own. As universal and shared values are enriched, there is a chance that cultural preference can be slowly changed as well as political ideals. Perhaps it is this reason why there are people who see that manga is encroaching their culture.

There is an argument raised by Nick Desideri in his study of Japan and Korea's soft power entitled *Bubble Pop: An Analysis of Asian Pop Culture and Soft Power*. Desideri (2013) posited that Japan's anime and manga would have offered the country incredible levels of cultural influence, but it can never translate this cultural capital to political power (p. 7). Asian countries who feared the loss of their comics culture may have actually mistaken manga culture with Japanese political propagandas. With Japan's imperialist past and its participation in the Second World War, the only influence anime and manga can offer is an escapist fantasy, which fails to reflect national/political ideologies. Desideri's study of Asian pop culture, explains that Japan had lost its strong cultural holding on manga primarily because of three things. Firstly, manga is in printed format that requires literacy and comprehension from the reader. Second is Japan's past offenses on neighboring countries during the second war. Third is of the Japanese government's very late and misguided attempt to "monopolize" and capitalize on the industry. For instance, in the introduction of the International Manga Award in 2007, thousands of manga enthusiasts from around the globe participated only to be disgruntled upon finding out that all the judges are Japanese. The last move "indirectly alienated fans and potential contributors who saw the art form as simultaneously universal and Japanese, resulting in a net loss of soft resource."

To consider manga as universal may not be too far-fetched. Manga readers and creators outside Japan may incorporate the style but are free to separate the "Japan-ness" from their own manga.

McCloud (2006) sees manga in its contemporary art form as a very influential art style. The illustrations of characters are so iconic that readers can immediately identify with them. The rendering of its

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environment compels the reader to get involved in the scene. Its scope often relates back to real-life experiences and interests of the average reader, and its graphic devices can effectively move readers emotionally. Despite the evolution of the manga art style, ranging from the internal participation of an emotional moment in a *shōjo* romantic manga, to the adrenaline rush of subjective physical motion of an action-packed *shonen*, it is very easy for anyone interested enough to pick up and immediately apply the manga style.

Critics of this globalized notion about the Japanese manga, however, lament on the narrowed imaging of Japan. Norris (2009) mentions how critics accuse Western manga advocates of Orientalism. They argue that “reducing manga, animation and visual art to cultural stereotypes is a convenient way to claim some authority and dominance over these forms, and avoids more complex questions of the diversity and variation within Japan.” (Norris, 2009)

There is an essentialist approach, highlighting manga and anime’s transnational virtues and popularity overseas as caused by the softened Japanese presence, making it an easy art form to domesticate. There is a hint of truth in this as one can see in some of the less notable, if not early, manifestations of foreign-made manga. Some of those are criticized for their misguided attempts to crystallize the diverse craft of manga into a singular art form as well as incorporate Japan-like imagery and names without properly identifying them according to their Japanese cultural roots.

However, as it is implied by previous studies, it is possible that even a group style such as manga can be broken down into its base elements, separating what is culturally rooted from what can be incorporated, to be restructured and appropriated by non-Japanese creators into their own culture. If Osamu Tezuka was successful in appropriating elements of Western films and cartoons, is it possible for non-Japanese to do likewise to manga? And if so, as countries that have revitalized its comics industry along with the development of their own manga style, is the dream of having a Filipino manga not far behind?

Manga in the Philippines

In the 70’s, Filipino children were bombarded with Japanese anime that is full of giant robots fighting alien monsters. Shows like *Mazinger Z*, *Mechanda Robot*, *Daimos* and *Voltes V* raided television screens, carrying a much mature take on its narrative as compared to the slapstick

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humor and simplistic, cardboard cartoon characters of the United States. It opened the minds of its audience to complicated storytelling techniques and life-like characterizations (Fondevilla 2007). However, at the height of Marital Law, Japanese anime was banned. It spawned a lot of speculations about its cessation such as rising political views, adverse psychological effects, and even the accusations of anime being subversive to the government (Fondevilla 2007). Then, after EDSA Revolution, Japanese anime made a resurgence that, up until today, has garnered new generations of followers. Along with it came a new trend called *Manga*.

Unlike other Asian countries, the general populace of Filipinos only has access to dubbed anime. If ever there were evidence of an existing manga in the country since the 70's to the 90's, no one can be sure. Perhaps only those who are privileged enough to travel to Japan at that time might have come across the manga in its original Japanese form.

When the popularity of comics waned due to cheap labor and substandard quality that plagued the industry in the later years of the 1980s to 1990s, the encroachment of American comics increased with the barrage of superhero and non-superhero titles coming from DC Comics, its sister Vertigo, from Marvel down to Image Comics. Because of the acquired taste coming from overseas, readers of the present generation now demand better quality that is at par with American counterparts. With the lamenting of old comics creators of a once glorious past and that of the saturation of American comics culture, manga never had the proper chance to be fully accepted as an art form. This overshadowing of Western comics during and after the fall of komiks may be the reason for the general public's lack of in-depth knowledge in the manga art style back then as they can only view the art form second-hand through anime.

Despite the scant resources for manga art before the internet, some Filipino comics aspirants have found it as their inspiration to deviate from the overwhelming West-inspired Filipino artists. But as comics art critics and artists would say of the early manga-inspired Filipino comics, it is not manga, it is only anime in printed form.

Since the publication of *Culture Crash*, the younger generation of readers who were too late to appreciate the Komiks industry turned its eyes on the manga as a source of inspiration. Though *Culture Crash* may have only fourteen issues, it opened up a culture that seemed new despite the long exposure of Filipinos on anime. Not long after came other works such as *Questor* that have been inspired by the manga genre (Flores 2004).

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Flores (2004) and Fondevilla (2007) problematized this manga legitimacy among Filipino komiks readers. Using *Culture Crash* as vantage point, they both pointed out its being a hybrid of both Japanese and American comics culture. The art may be manga, but the coloring effects are distinctly American comics inspired. They even pointed out how the manga art style used was simply a crystalized or popularized form. Flores (2004) even adds that not only was *Culture Crash* illustrated in a generalized art style, but the manifestation of a Filipino culture in its stories is merely superficial. Fondevilla, (2007) views this as an ordinary trend as Filipino manga is still far too young to develop its own style. To note, every artist who is just starting are actually guilty of copying their idols and it is only a matter of time whether or not they are able to develop their own unique style (Alanguilan 2007).

The question now lies at the present, wherein Filipino comics readers can now access Filipino made manga almost anywhere from the internet to conventions of indie creators, and even in bookstores where industry-produced Filipino manga are sold. If there is such a move among Asian countries of domesticating manga to make their own versions, just how far has the manga-inspired Filipino-made comics evolved to showcase itself as Filipino?

Black Ink and Its Manga Form

For the many years that the manga style is in use since the days of *Culture Crash*, it is interesting to note that there are noticeable changes in the manga format as well as a few levels of improvement in its content. Both established publishers and independent creators alike have reverted back to the colorless format of the genre. It can be argued that it gives back manga's rightful look, not to mention the lesser cost, as compared to having it fully colored for each page. Also, unlike with many of the independent creators that still resort to the folded and stapled shape of their entire issue, Black Ink opted to stay with the mini-book style of 23 x 15 cm, a standardized format they have utilized since the early days of their publication.

Another aspect of Black Ink is that the collaboration by the writer and artist for each issue is done separately. An entire story is independently written by a writer from concept to finish and is only rendered by the artist afterwards. In other comics and graphic novel publications, they usually accept manuscripts that are nearly done, whether created by a single author or collaborated by a team of writer and artist who have both conceptualized and worked together on the development of their story. Black Ink has instead opted to retain the

traditional method of pairing, a practice done during the final years of the Komiks industry.

The biggest difference is that, as compared with the original hundred-paged Japanese manga that has an ongoing storyline, many of Black Ink's 62 pages' format is a self-contained single story. In presentation, there are significant differences; but what about the content?

According to McCloud (2006), the narrative structure of a comic book is constructed through the use of visual style, closure and transitions. Visual styles are the rendered illustrations that use visual cues which help increase the meaning of the written narrative. As narrative and visuals go hand-in-hand in comics, visuals are also considered as part of the entire narrative language. Closures are the panels that encapsulate each illustration, which controls the sense of time and action, adding to the mood each illustration would like to emit. Panels sequenced in succession are called transitions in which the entire narrative can now take place. For McCloud (2006), manga has its own set of language within the parameters of this visual narrative. It is within this parameter that this study examines the manga element in the narrative of the selected Filipino manga in question.

Searching for the Filipino Manga Narrative

To investigate nature of the Filipino manga of Black Ink, five graphic novels have been selected for this study; four of them being certified as best sellers, *Facebook Lovers*, *Fake Job*, *Never Been*, and *Behind the Scenes*; and the other one is randomly selected for its demographic coverage, *Drift*. Though each of the titles has particular story arcs respectful of their publication category, many are readily identifiable by their motifs that align to their respective sub-genre.

Among the several genres in the original Japanese manga, Black Ink appears to have catered to one major genre, the *shōjo* and scant titles that are patterned after the *shōnen*. The earliest *shōjo* manga for teenage women in Japan was first written by men, following the familiar if not traditional format of heterosexual romantic love.

Shōjo manga is most often concerned with the female protagonist's relationship troubles, often resolving in "cloyingly sweet endings that reinforce patriarchal notions about the proper roles of men and women" (Hurford 2009). Serving as a mirror of Japanese girls' and women's desires and expectations, the manga reflects female aesthetics and fulfills female dreams in the expression of their subjects, developing

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their own ideas of what roles men and women should take. The cultural nature of this relationship is often patterned after the concept of *seme* and *uke*. Taken from Japanese martial arts term that is now applied to Japanese intimate relationships, “the *seme* (‘attacker’) is the dominant insertive partner in the relationship, while the *uke* (‘receiver’) is the passive receptive partner” (Turner 2016).

It is of little wonder that Black Ink, a branch company owned by one of the biggest distributor of romance novels, will opt to cover such a demographic. Given this initial image, Black Ink’s decision to shape itself into the manga style have opted to adapt shōjo’s distinctive sub-types that can possibly target the LGBTQA+ population and young adults who are also into dark fantasies and action themed romances. What is so interesting is that much of Black Ink’s titles cater to four distinctive manga sub-genres namely, *Shōjo-ai*, *Shōnen* and *Yaoi*.

Two of the selected graphic novels can be identified to follow the shōjo-ai namely, *Facebook Lovers* written by Diana Lam and illustrated by Ej Selloria, and *Never Been* written by Nina May and illustrated by Earl Jan Lee.

In its take on relationships, *Facebook Lovers* follows suit with the notions of a typical shōjo manga as it conveys how the protagonist reflect and enact upon the desire to be with the beloved. It also flows with “sweet moments” that often try to heighten the romantic mood of the story. In difference to the typical shōjo manga, the protagonist happens to be a female named Ember who eventually becomes the *seme* as she initiates the way to have a reconnection with Alfie, the beloved male. The role of the female is often traditionally the receiver of the action whereas male characters are the ones who take initiative in the relationship. The depiction of the female lead in *Facebook Lovers* actually reflects the present day gender sensibility on women that is also increasingly predominant in contemporary Filipino worldview. *Facebook Lovers* shows how a young girl can shed off her inhibitions set by patriarchal standards of courtship and go after her man than just simply waiting for her prince to come.

Set in the present day in an undisclosed university, the characters in *Facebook Lovers* has the feel of the typical life of college teenagers, showing their usual hang-ups in balancing school responsibilities with personal life. What is also interesting is the use of contemporary local language that seldom, if not rarely, code switch to English. The dialogue is very informal and identifiable for each character’s personality.

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Never Been actually took a much more traditional turn of having the female as the receiver of affection. In its take on the usual boy meets girl motif, the author added a twist of having her two characters having a predisposition wanting to have any love affairs due to personal reasons. Despite the premise, the entire story remained conventional in depicting dreamy romantic encounters and contrived situations that must bring about their happy ending. Even the dialogue sounds a bit unnatural, making the characters unrealistic.

Unlike the first two stories, the motif for the story of *Fake Job* written by Reira Francisco and illustrated by Regine Lim is rather new as it slightly twists the norms of the *shōjo*. It features a male character who pretended to be a woman just to get a job. Despite the long tradition of cross-dressing heterosexual men in Japan, the idea for this motif appeared in manga only at the beginning of the 21st Century. In contemporary Japanese culture, cross-dressing heterosexual men are called *otokonoko*, roughly translated as either male daughter or male girl (Clegg 2014).

The tradition of Japanese male entertainers dressing up as women goes far back in the Feudal age, where early Kabuki male performers assume female roles called *onnogata*. With the widening range of the otaku (Japanese geek) culture, the trend became fashionable and profitable with the rise of maid café's, fashion stores and cosmetic products, combining it with the cosplay of female fictional characters by men. Armstrong describes professional male actors playing female parts as neo-*onnogata*, a contemporary derivation of the traditional art of cross dressing on stage.

Clegg (2004) observes that there are levels of acceptability when it comes to men dressed as women. Professional entertainers whose main purpose is to play female parts in a traditional theater may be respected. Tolerability may also include contemporary media and legitimate stage entertainers. The third type is the clinically designated cross-dressers or people that challenge the binary rules of male and female. This includes transsexuals, transvestites and homosexuals who “feel compelled to dress in the current culture’s idea of the opposite gender’s apparel, often just for themselves, for sexual gratification, or through the impetus of an obsession” (Armstrong 2002). They are considered as transgendered people whose political views of sexuality are recognized and tolerated. The last are the drag queens or the open gays whose exaggerated display is employed with wit and humor that they have constructed another version of “woman.”

Armstrong’s (2002) findings on the displays of homosexuality in Japan are that they are tolerated as long as they do not “threaten the

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creation of traditional family units” (p. 80, 2002). As long as they are in the mainstream entertainment, they are seen as curiosities, novelties and harmless entertainers.

Otokonoko, as a manga genre, started out only in 2004. As it is often mistaken as a Boy Love genre, certain conventions are made such as the *otokonoko* character must be a straight male, not a hermaphrodite or a gender bender. He must look convincingly like an attractive girl. Yet even with the twist, *otokonoko* can still be identifiable with the *shōjo* relationship structure.

Fake Job is not entirely different as the lead character, Sanjo Macatulad, is a professional cross-dresser. The only difference is that he considers it as a secret, alternate life where he is publicly recognized as an actual woman. His need for an additional job forced him to assume yet again the female role in order to have a high paying job working as a personal assistant to a very beautiful foreign actress from Hong Kong. With the usual tropes of an *otokonoko* facing male suitors while falling in love with the lead woman, *Fake Job* is very much faithful to the new genre. This leaves to question the authenticity of the Filipino culture as there is little serious tradition of cross-dressing heterosexual men in media history.

In difference to the first three, the narrative of *Behind the Scenes* was patterned after the *shōnen-yaoi* or commonly known as boys’ love, a type of manga that deals on the male homoerotic attraction the heroes feel for each other. Stories may range from romantic to sexually explicit. Like other manga genres, *shōnen-yaoi* is sold openly and widely in Japan. Much like the other manga sub-genres, *yaoi* has its roots elsewhere.

It was not until the 1960s through 1970s that women artists started to take over the *shōjo* genre, making changes in their themes and characters (Turner 2016). It was through the innovations under *shōjo* manga by female artists Hagio Moto and Takemiya Keiko that *yaoi* was born. An acronym that stands for *Yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi* [no climax, no end, no meaning], the term was used as “a euphemism to distinguish it from more complex narratives found in other genres” (p.5, 2016). Quite ironically, today it is predominantly produced and consumed by women who are ordinarily committed to heterosexual relationships. *Yaoi* today is most often identified by others outside Japan as *shonen yaoi* though it started off under the *shōjo* genre.

As a manga, *Behind the Scenes* had followed the tropes of the *yaoi* in which the male characters are depicted as *bishōnen* [beautiful boys]. Herian

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is clearly identified as the attacker as he clearly stirs the relationship while Leo, despite his seemingly masculine image, is the receiver who eventually falls for Herian's advances. As with the narrative followed the manga genre, *Behind the Scenes* can never be truly identified as Philippine gay literature.

Typically, the story has no connection to the usual motifs of Philippine gay literature as it does not dwell on the question and legitimacy of homosexuality. Rather, the developing love between Herian and Leo are simply given in the story and are incidental, similar to any heterosexual love story under the *shōjo* manga. Taking in the cue from the original Japanese *yaoi*, homosexuality in this sense is now an accepted fact that is as ordinary as heterosexual relationships, disregarding gender discrimination and the taboo subject of boy to boy love. It must be noted, however, that *yaoi* manga does not actually reflect Japanese gay relationships. Hurford (2009) conferred that the relationships portrayed in *yaoi* manga stories often bear no relation to real-life gay male relationships as it is "not concerned with the realities of living a gay or closeted lifestyle in Japan, and are not interested in male same-sex love unless it occurs between fairly young, generally beautiful or androgynous young men" (Hurford 2009). Making realistic gay relationship in *yaoi* manga might only detract from the pleasure that many of the women who read *yaoi* find in the genre.

However, Filipino sensitivity to homoerotic stories is still evident, not in the story itself, but on the back cover of the manga where an age rating label is placed, identifying it as BL (boys' love) and a warning that is for mature readers only with explicit content. This labeling delineates from the original intent of the Japanese *yaoi* whose original target market are teenage girls. This labeling is indeed sensible since *Behind the Scenes* does contain explicit content such as showing the two "beautiful" men kissing and embracing with their shirts off. By intentionally not showing any full sexual action, the scenes become tender, romantic moments.

Drift can be identified as counterpoint of the *shonen-yaoi* manga, this time having female protagonists as lovers. The story is actually a confusing and unfocused mixture of detective, action and romance. It involves a murder, a friend's pursuit for justice, and a car napping ring without focusing much to the development of the love story between the main characters, Aira and Lory. The narrative itself may have its quirks, but it does contribute as part of the growing literature in manga written by Filipinos.

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In Japanese manga, stories that involve love between women are called *Yuri*. It refers to the Japanese sub-genre of lesbian love or lesbian-themed manga and anime. Nagaïke (2010) mentions that *Yuri* has its roots from the “concept of girls’ romantic bonding that originated in Japanese literature during the modernization era” (Nagaïke 2010). It is originally written by and for girls, and is openly available in Japanese book stores and stands. She even adds that *Yuri* manga does not merely imply women having a sexual attraction to other women, but also all addresses other forms of female to female spiritual bond. Among the many varieties of genres in Japanese manga, *Yuri* only came quite recently. In 2003, a Japanese publishing company named Magazine and Magazine started publishing *Yurishimai*, directed exclusively at female readers. This initiative, though short, has started a trend that lasts up until today. However, the real concept behind girl to girl relationship bonding in Japan goes as far back as the 1900s, starting with the publication of *Hana Monogatari* (Flower Tales), a serialized novel by Yoshia Nobuko (1896-1973) published in *Shōjo Gahō*, a magazine for women. Set in a girls’ dormitory, it evoked a romantic language, bordering to emotional and somewhat overtly sexual bonding between two girls. Followers of the *Hana* eventually evolved into *shōjo bunka* (girls’ culture).

The term *yuri* rhetorically implies to the type of lesbianism that broadly include “both women who are sexually attracted to other women, as well as any form of female-female spiritual bond.” Considered as the equivalent of boys love, politics in *Yuri* relationship follows the same as any *shōjo*. Dominant females often show signs of the *uke* while the object of their affection is still considered as *seme*. From 2007 to 2014, two types of *yuri* manga appeared as a form of fan service, one for the female reader where erotic tones are constrained to spiritual bonding, and the second appealing to male readers wanting sexualized views of female bodies and dress (Friedman 2017). This has left at least three major Japanese publishers of *yuri* manga into featuring girl love lesbian content without lesbian identity. This has all changed, however, when female manga creators slowly opened up of their sexuality.

Highlights of the *Yuri* as a genre features erotic undertones in terms of dialogue, affectionate kissing, and to an extreme of breast touching. *Shōjo* manga avoided sexually explicit romantic relationships between girls despite having evidences of the *Yuri* in some of its stories. This is because most of their readers are female, making the concept of lesbianism distanced from women’s corporeal desires for other women and concentrates instead on its spiritual side of female to female relationships (Nagaïke 2010).

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Compared with the intricacies and issues that surround *yuri* as a genre, *Drift* fails to acknowledge such lesbian sexuality as it concentrates more on the fight sequences rather than on the romance. This delineates from the actual *yuri* of female love, setting up the main character Aira to display exploitative butch qualities for the entertainment of masculine readers.

As with the stories told by contributing writers in *Black Ink* show varying degrees of alteration in writing under their respective manga genres, artists who are assigned to the writers' scripts have their own ways of interpreting each narrative.

On Drawing the Current Filipino Manga Art

Alanguilan (2007) mentioned that influences coming from various artists around the globe can be used to inform, enlighten and help any young artist to assimilate what is needed for him to develop a style of his own. It is to his lament that today's younger artists are going way ahead of getting themselves published while still heavily influenced and had not yet found their own styles at all. It can also be said that budding yet unrefined artists who are too hasty to be published will only produce mediocre illustrations. It is because of these published illustrations that often gives a bad reputation on certain comics genres. A number of *Black Ink* titles such as *Never Been* and *Fake Job* has a tendency to show unpolished artwork that it appears to have been either rushed or was uninspired. They appear cluttered, constricted, and the characters don't seem to react to their environment.

Although *Black Ink's* intention of producing manga-inspired Filipino graphic novels have opened a venue for avid fans of the genre to write and illustrate their own stories, it somewhat lacks the high standard quality check that many Japanese manga publishers incorporate.

In Japan, each manga is credited to its creator who conceptualizes the story as well as creates its initial look. In reality, every manga issue is not entirely drawn by a single artist. Japanese manga, as well as a few Asian manga, undergo a certain process before publication. The main *mangaka* (artist/author) conceptualizes the idea for a story, rendering it in visuals. The editor helps in the development and marketing, making sure of its quality. Before serialization, each manga title for the proposal is given a chance for a one shot. Selected titles are voted whether or not they are fit for serialization. This voting is always done in strict confidentiality where not only the story or concepts are critiqued but the entire artwork as well, citing if there will be recognizable iconic looks that can be trademarked.

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Those selected will have a chance to see the light of day. As the creation of the manga is in progress, the main *mangaka* will either do the initial drawings or sketches or will concentrate only on the character renderings. There will be assistants who will contribute in rendering backdrop scenes, screen tones, inking and among other things. The main artist will come back to either approve or make the finishing touches. The finished product goes to the editorial board that will market and forward the project for printing.

In the Philippines, there used to be a culture of artists school nearly similar to Japan's manga (Alanguilan 2007). This accounts for the distinctive Filipino style which American comics publishers have noticed during the golden years of Filipino komiks artists, both local and abroad. Eventually, this culture died out since the early eighties up until the last breath of Komiks. Needless to say, it paved way for other artists to explore new grounds of self-discovery. For Alanguilan (2007), this is for the better as artists today need not be confined to any group style so as to further explore their unique traits and possibilities. As compared to the process of creating manga, komiks took a different turn when publishers felt the need to quicken the process. Because writers in comics before used to be fictionists, the illustrations are done by a different person.

Every issue of Black Ink's manga undergoes a process very similar to the way komiks was created, not as how Japanese manga is conceived. Each story a writer hands over to an editor will be evaluated and is elected a likely artist that will render the illustration. Typically, in komiks, there is no direct contact between writer and illustrator. Once the script is received by the illustrator, there is no more chance for the writer to make any changes. There are, of course, occasions in Black Ink in which the writer and illustrator are met up in a meeting prior to the publication of their manga. This is to ensure that both parties are satisfied with the final look of the manga and also to quantify its quality in both craftsmanship and narrative. As for the illustrator, her way of drawing will now depend on two points: how far she understands the tone of the story and of what influences her as an artist. This is one of the major differences of Black Ink as compared to the Japanese manga publishers. Whereas every issue goes through rigorous and strict process, Black Ink opted to use the traditional komiks process.

The main concern of many critics of the manga is how generalized the group style is, especially on the Filipino artist illustrating such works. As with *Culture Crash*, Fondevilla (2007) and Flores (2004) saw the hybridity of Japanese anime with American comics. Both of them finding critics see the visual manga art of *Culture Crash* as "crystallized." For Alanguilan (2007), despite how good it may seem to have a group style it

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can also restrict the individuality of an artist, hampering her natural instinct to evolve. But what exactly is this crystalized form they are talking about? In his early days as a budding artist, Osamu Tezuka, said to be the god of manga, started out as a big fan of Walter Disney, creator of Mickey Mouse. While influenced by the cheap cottage comics of the *akahon* (red books), he borrowed a lot from his idol as well as from western films and cartoons. This is to account for the iconic look that manga character faces are now famously known for: the oversized set of eyes, small lips and nose; their heads are typical of the general shapes of heads ranging from the V shape of a sharp chin, to gaunt square face to round and child-like in feature. Disney has incorporated large-eyed characters with thin lips to greatly enhance the projection of emotions in cartoons. Since it is difficult to render in a cartoon the type of body language that can portray emotions, facial expressions are incorporated to give this heightened effect. Tezuka's option is no different and yet in each succeeding creations he slightly varied his style to accommodate various themes of his stories. Then, as fans of his artwork grew, they followed suit, resulting to the standardized general look of the manga. Many unaccustomed to the style see it as purely Japanese, meaning to see such an art style is to identify it as having "Japanese looks." But there is nothing remotely Japanese of any of the features shown in a manga character's face (Calingo 2007).

To point out certain clarifications, the lamentation of Filipino manga critics is that there are indeed ways in which this Japanese group style can be personalized. Cohn (2002) claims it is easy for any budding artist to start out with manga as "the iconicity makes it accessible and easily decodable to individuals across the globe, while its conventionality reflects that its patterns are shared by many visual speakers" (Cohn 2010). This is in comparison to the myriad of American and European comics artists whose art styles are so vast that it takes too much time to choose and emulate. To deviate from the iconic Japanese visual language may take time, but it is possible. Examples of these deviations are from contemporary artists like Obata Takeshi and Yawaza Ai (figs. 1 and 2).



Figure 1 – “Death Note art by Takeshi Obata

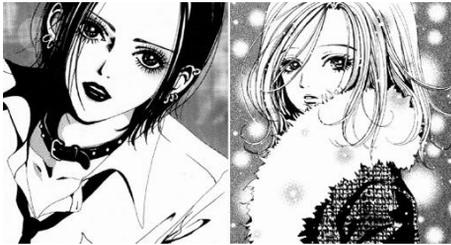


Figure 2 – “Nana” art by Yawaza Ai

Takeshi Obata relied on heavy inking and sharper edges to enhance the mood of his dark pseudo-fantasy crime story *Death Note* which is about a teenage prodigy fed up with how people commit crime became a megalomaniac as he uses a mysterious notebook that can actually cause death when a person’s name is written in it.

Yawaza Ai rather used thinner, more rounded tone to evoke the sad romance story *Nana*, about two female roommates who happen to have the same first name where one wants fame and recognition, and the other love and happiness with her boyfriend.

At a glance in the figures three to four, both Peachy Balais and Ej Selloria’s artwork seem crystallized due to the iconic Japanese visual language especially on the faces of the characters. But to closely examine, you can distinctly see the differences.

Since the story given to Selloria is a *shōjo*, it must follow the typical *shōjo* look where characters are teenagers bearing rounder cheeks, wider and rounded eyes and button nosed (fig. 3). Balais takes a different turn on her rendition of the *yaoi* love story between boys. Since they are depicted as young professionals whose age may range from 20 to 30 years old, she gave them a slightly elongated v shape face, sharper eyes and noses

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(fig. 4). Even in their body structure, Balais created an angular look whereas Selloria used a rounder, subdued one. With regards to the way the characters are dressed, it detracts from the typical Japanese uniforms and dress codes, particularly with *Facebook Lovers* where students attend school wearing casual clothes.



Figure 3 – “Facebook Lovers” art by Eli Selloria



Figure 4 – “Behind the Scenes” art by Peachy Balais

In Japan, manga is often read in reverse, different from the typical book. The so-called back cover that we identify with is actually the front cover of a Japanese manga and each page is read from right to left panel, from upper column to down column. This follows the way traditional Japanese language is written down. It is therefore logical to have this flow so as not to interrupt the reader’s enjoyment. As Americans started to import manga in the 80’s, there arose an effort to translate them in English. In so doing, they even have to restructure the entire manga import to suit the reading style many Americans are accustomed to. As a result, American-made manga does not follow the traditional way of printing. This goes the same with Filipino manga. Black Ink’s format is similar to the Americans and Filipino komiks as it is read from the usual front cover to back cover, from left panel to right panel, from top column to down column. If upon the creation of an original manga made by creators outside Japan read from left to right, can it affect the transition of panels? In argument, it is irrelevant as linear relationships of panels are not fully dependent on strict arrangements based on reading method preferences. Cohn (2010) explains that panels can combine to form larger structures in hierarchic embedding. To explain this, an earlier study regarding the narrative structure of manga must be noted.

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As popularized by McCloud (2006), the meaning of sequences can be derived from the linear relationships that are formed between panels and its transitions. McCloud hypothesized that manga's anthology and *tankōbon* (single issue) formats allowed for authors to devote more panels to drawing out scenes and focusing on the setting or mood (Cohn 2010). This, according to McCloud, accounts for the preference on immersion rather than immediately achieve a goal.

With a limited amount of pages, only a few titles in Black Ink are able to incorporate what McCloud calls subject-to-subject. *Behind the Scenes* has utilized this style only scantily where the bedroom scenes showing Leo and Heiran are heightened to a dramatic effect (fig. 5).



Figure 5 – “Behind the Scenes” art by Peachy Balais
Peachy Balais



Figure 6 - “Drift”
art by Godley Malabanan

Drift on the other hand accelerates the adrenaline rush not only through subject-to-subject but also with what McCloud (2006) call as *subjective motion*. Subjective motion technique is where subjects such as cars and motorcycles remain static in the eyes of the reader but the background is streaked, making the reader feel as if he is part of the action (fig. 6).

Reviewing the areas covered by this study shows how much has changed in the field of creating manga-inspired Filipino komiks since the days of *Culture Crash*. Though it is still too early to label them as Filipino Manga, there is a clear sign that there are rooms for improvement. The stories published by Black Ink clearly have not showed any direct reference to any Japanese name, places and cultural backdrop. It also has encouraged both writers and illustrators to delineate a little from the format while

remaining faithful as much as they can to the genre. Given more time, writers and illustrators may be able to explore and reconstruct the manga genre to suit their own needs as means of representation and identity.

Hence, if the story themselves have room to explore a culture beyond Japan, what is it then that makes it less Filipino? Should the question of art be the main point? But what is Filipino art anyway in today's Filipino comics? Today's comic book creators have already greatly distanced themselves from the past komiks illustrators as they can no longer relate to them since they are of two different worlds. Today's Filipino comic book creators have a birthing of their own, equally as painful and as exhilarating as what happened during the time of Tony Velazquez. It is an exciting moment in the coming of a new golden age.

Serving Filipino Manga for Consumption

We may lament on the death of komiks and the art style that never cascaded in today's artists. Then again, to be molded in a group style is to be limited in potential (Alanguilan 2007). To lament how manga art has stilted the creativity of the Filipino artist is unsound since to begin with, the universality that the iconic manga look helps develop more the artist to decode the intensity of her narrative, to put forward the story in a very understandable way without the hindrance of a highly detailed artwork (Fusanosuke 2003). What is lamentable should be when the artist becomes immensely satisfied to stay within the constraints of the chosen art style and never fully develop beyond it.

Calingo (2007) describes his comics style as Manga-inspired Filipino Comics as it is for him more appropriate than calling it Filipino Manga. He mentions that a culture is not entirely defined by just style. As styles are often appropriated into a kind of pastiche, many of the now recognizable art in contemporary Filipino comics and graphic novels are in fact blank parodies of distant idols. To say the least, the manga of Black Ink shows promise, despite closely following specific manga art styles and narrative.

For genres such as Filipino manga to flourish, illustrators are challenged to render their visual narrative with what the story portrays. It must, as the Asian manhua are trying to do, deviate if not slightly from the typical tropes of the pure bred Japanese manga.

To go to that horizon today is still possible if only given enough time. But to be too strict as to dampen the spirit of an aspiring visual storyteller is counter-productive. To belittle an art style before it can flourish and expand is to stifle the efforts of a budding artist to explore and

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grow. Despite the length of time between *Culture Crash* and *Black Ink's* manga, it is still too early to tell how far Filipino manga can be.

Writers of the manga-inspired Filipino comics must no longer pattern themselves from the tropes of Japanese Manga but instead concentrate in finding their own roots in their immediate environment. This, however, does not mean to totally deviate from their desired manga genre, only that to incorporate its elements with a blend that can be identifiable to locality.

Artists must therefore learn to be truly passionate in their craft and aim to stand out among others. They must go beyond the easy way and the quick buck goal if ever they wish to be remembered into the next generation.

From another perspective, the development of a true Filipino manga that is beyond the strict confines of the Japanese manga form must also come from the publishers' initiative of granting not only artistic freedom but a more reasonable contract that encourages both artist and writer to strive better and churn out the best in them.

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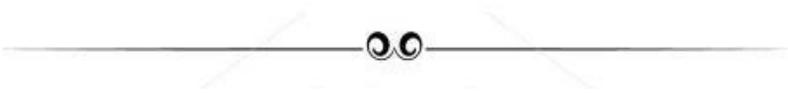
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