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Some observers believe Manga of every stripe has peaked in Japan, with the cell phone the likely cause, according to American writer/translator, Frederik L. Schodt. Unlike traditional North American magazine-style comics, Manga comes in a pocketbook-sized package, allowing for a more intimate experience being usurped by the all-purpose cell.

Nevertheless, Manga still remains one of the most powerful publishing phenomena anywhere in the world, making up for some 40 per cent of everything published in Japan (other than newspapers). Shoji Manga makes up some 15 per cent of that total.

The relative popularity in North America and Europe of *Pokémon*, *Hello Kitty* trading cards and *Sailor Moon* graphic novels in English barely begins to explain how deeply Manga has made its way into Japanese visual culture, starting in the late '50s.

Sculptural figures such as Kaikai and Kiki created recently by Takashi Murakami, the Andy Warhol of Japan, look as if they could have walked right out of Manga. In fact, Murakami doesn't see any disconnect between Manga and the woodblock prints or *ukiyo-e* that were popular in 18th- and 19th-century Japan. Contemporary Japanese artists can embrace cartoon forms Murakami explains, due to their understanding "of the cultural specificity of the form."

The word "Manga" itself seems to have originated with drawings made by the great Japanese artist, Hokusai Katsushika and published in serial form in Japan through the mid-19th century. Manga at that time meant "humorous pictures" of everyday life. Shoji Manga now more frequently depicts love in a wonderful, foreign setting among postcard perfect Caucasians and represents pure escape. (Lady Oscar's pencil-fine features do lead you to suspect she might have visited the same plastic surgeon as Michael Jackson.)

"Everything was devastated in Japan after World War II," Toku says. "Europe and America became ideal worlds for girls. Everyone there looked so beautiful. Shoji Manga had beautiful western images of blond hair, and big blue eyes."

So Shoji Manga pushes cuteness to heights rarely imagined outside of a children's beauty pageant. That's precisely its appeal.

Card Captor Sakura by Clamp, a contemporary collective of four Manga makers — the megastars of so-called amateur Mangaka — comes at cute from every angle imaginable. Clouds are sugary pink. The settings are a post-modernist play school. And Card Captor Sakura herself — a third-grader who saves the world every so often — has eyes that are rounder, bigger and glisten brighter than almost any in Shoji Manga.

In North America, the already small market given over to comics for girls — the adventures of the fashion-conscious Katy Keene, say — began to shrink noticeably in the '70s, when feminism put girl comic action heroine Mary Marvel out of business. But in Japan after *Rose of Versailles*, Shoji Manga went on a gender-bending binge with Manga girls dressing as boys and the boys dressing as girls all in the pursuit of the purest of pure love.

"Boys love" Manga — gay male love stories written for younger women — proved to be huge in the '90s, providing a cover for young women to work out fantasies deemed acceptable for Japanese males only. It also proved to be the source of sharp-minded parody of the pornographic variety.

Decades will have to pass before we'll be allowed to see a little boy-on-

boy action with Archie and Jughead in the *Archie* comics. But then, old style North American comics have always felt tight; uptight morally as well as tightly written and drawn, often in a hyper-realistic way.

The amorphousness of Shoji Manga — where the panels barely contain the action and narratives can dissolve in thin air — are in synch with characters whose sexuality seem as uncertain to themselves as it is to us.

It makes you think again about Godzilla.

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