"Normal" Feelings in "Abnormal" Worlds: On the Political Uses of Emotion in Science Fiction Manga

Li, C.K.

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

Leiden University Repository

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/33236 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Li, Carl Ka-hei
Title: "Normal" feelings in "abnormal" worlds : on the political uses of emotion in science fiction manga
Issue Date: 2015-06-30

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"Science fiction manga," or Japanese science fiction comics, can be easily taken for granted. Since at least the 1970s, an image of Japan has emerged as an exotic and near-futuristic environment that positions it as a kind of science fictional space, if only in the imagination. Although this conception of Japan has waxed and waned repeatedly over the years, it has fueled in art, fiction, and media a wide variety of explorations into "political imagination," what can be described as the ability for people to imagine systems and ways of thinking beyond the ones that they currently experience. Manga, which has a partly justified reputation as a form of comics filled with elements such as giant robots, (post-)apocalyptic worlds, alien encounters, and fantastic devices, is likewise often associated with science fiction. Yet, in the very term "science fiction manga" lie two different conceptions of how media can best encourage people to think politically and to envision something beyond their current condition.

As viewed by some scholars, science fiction is a type of narrative that often eschews concepts such as "character psychology" and "character emotions." According to Darko Suvin, this is because science fiction is about the exploration of alternative worlds. "It is an escape from constrictive old norms into a different and alternative timestream, a device for historical estrangement, and an at least initial readiness for new norms of reality...."[1] For Gary K. Wolfe it allows for the exploration of rational thought. "What science fiction does that is uniquely suited to a technological society is to explore the mythical aspects of reason itself, specifically of scientific reasoning."[2] In terms of its political significance, Suvin describes SF as a fiction of "cognitive estrangement" whereby readers are inspired by the logical differences between their own worlds and that of the

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

1. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 84.
2. Gary K. Wolfe, *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1979), 5.

narrative to change their own circumstances.[3] Manga, on the other hand, is a form of artistic expression known for its strong visual and narrative emphases on characters' emotions and internal worlds. According to Sharon Kinsella, the pages of manga "literally teem with characters, whose aspirations, frustrations, and adventures form the substance of manga series."[4] While the political significance of this has not been explored as extensively as the portrayal of alternative worlds in science fiction, the possibility for emotions in manga to function politically is evident. Thomas Lamarre, for example, points out how a manga artist can embrace the expressive qualities of the art form for the purpose of political criticism, such as when *Barefoot Gen*, a semi-autobiographical account of a Hiroshima survivor, utilizes the dramatic qualities of manga to convey its criticism of war and nuclear weapons.[5]

Of course, none of these broader statements can ever truly encompass everything that is "science fiction" or everything that is "manga," and it is not my intent to set up a dichotomy between science fiction as "rational" and manga as "emotional" in terms of their political expression. In fact, one of the purposes of this dissertation is to show how these two qualities can connect with each other. However, these two types of "political media" are generally not discussed together, which makes it all too easy to argue in favor of either approach, or alternatively to say that, while both are valid for encouraging political imagination, they should nevertheless remain apart lest they compromise each other. What I seek instead is to find out how science fiction manga can potentially encourage new ways of looking at science fiction as a political fiction through the hybridization of techniques and approaches from both science fiction and manga in general. SF manga stands not only etymologically at a crossroads but also in practice because a large majority of SF manga greatly emphasizes emotion in some respect. This possibility thus motivates the central question of this dissertation: how does the depiction of emotion affect the political ideas conveyed in science fiction manga?

The reason I have phrased this question so as to focus on the emotional aspect

• • • • • • • • • • • • • •

3. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 4.

4. Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 6-7.

5. Thomas Lamarre, "Manga Bomb: Between the Lines of Barefoot Gen," in *Comics Worlds and the World of Comics: Towards Scholarship on a Global Scale*, ed. Jaqueline Berndt, Global Manga Studies, (Kyoto: International Manga Research Center, Kyoto Seika University, 2010), 264, accessed February 24, 2014, http://imrc.jp/2010/09/26/20100924Comics%20Worlds%20and%20the%20World%20of%20Comics.pdf.

is because of the long-standing debate over whether or not political thought is somehow inherently (or ideally) cognitive and rational (as Neta C. Crawford sums up well, "Aristotle saw emotion as something that could be manipulated by rhetoric and that would also affect the reception of arguments[…]. René Descartes… viewed emotions as both biological and cognitive, with emotion following perception"[6]). At its core, this debate is less about the validity of reason and more concerned with whether emotions can be "political." Additionally, another dimension to exploring science fiction manga is that it is a form of art, and thus requires an understanding of how manga as a "visual narrative" communicates information (including emotion) using images within its "comics" structure, where elements such as panel and page composition contribute to its presentation. Thus, couched within the main question are three additional points of inquiry. First, can character emotions themselves be science fictional? Second, what political ideas can be found in science fiction manga? Third, can the visual qualities of manga offer something unique to the exploration of political imagination in science fiction?

The use of the term emotion in this dissertation generally refers to "character emotion," which is defined here as the depiction of character thoughts, feelings, and expressions that are, or at least appear to be, derived from so-called "irrationality." Within the context of science fiction, these feelings may be emphasized just as much if not more than the overt need or desire to engage in scientific and observational inquiries within the world of the narrative.

This definition may appear to be excessively broad. In the social and affective sciences, there is much debate as to how emotions should be categorized, at what point a feeling is "affect" rather than "emotion," which emotions are high-order, low-order, simple or complex. However, it is important to note that the focus of this dissertation is on "fictional" emotions, those expressed by characters within constructed worlds and narratives, and they do not necessarily fall into real or scientific understandings of how emotions function in actual human beings. Moreover, the idea that emotions need to be relevant to science fiction generally refers to the degree to which they are tied to narrative development. For this reason, the focus is less on how much character emotions reflect real-

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

6. Neta C. Crawford, "The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships." *International Security* 24, no. 2 (2000): 125-126, accessed June 10, 2013, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/international_security/v024/24.4.crawford.pdf.

ity and more on how they function within SF manga narratives, where "stories about characters" and "stories about worlds" blur together.

Of course, even without that more scientific basis, in a more layman's sense there are differences between concepts such as "love," "sentiment," and "passion." However, manga often leaves the specifics of emotions ambiguous to a certain degree, leaving them open to interpretation. Different emotions, while being portrayed in various ways, work from the same visual language, and are not considered to be operating on inherently different levels. Depictions of what could be called "affect" often transition into "emotion" seamlessly, and the exact natures of these feelings expressed, unless accompanied by text, are often intentionally somewhat nebulous in terms of their precise meaning within the narrative worlds of manga.

Emotion in general also becomes a visual means to express ideas such as sense of humanity, trauma, viscerality, and psychology, and manga often presents these simultaneously. It is the fact that the visual immediacy of manga can communicate so many different aspects of its characters that gives its language strength and versatility. For this reason as well, this research does not try to observe which types of specific character emotions tend to lead to which outcomes across SF manga in the manner of universal cause-effect relationships. Rather, this dissertation looks at how characters' feelings are utilized to make them significant actors within their science fictional worlds. Particular attention is paid to how the force of emotion is used to reflect the science fictional environment, to explore or elaborate a characters' identity, to affect the outcome or resolution of the main conflicts of a narrative, and how all of these qualities interact with and affect their alternative environments.

I have an avid interest in manga, and over the past 15 years have read Japanese comics extensively for personal enjoyment, intellectual stimulation, and creative exploration, in genres including but not limited to science fiction. In bringing this perspective to my research, I have found manga as an area of scholarly interest to be quite diverse, with studies that approach the subject from a variety of interesting angles. However, I have also noticed that there is an underlying tendency to jump to manga's defense as if its legitimacy could be taken away at a moment's notice. Whether it is using manga as a reflection or defiance of culture, connecting it to older forms of Japanese art, championing the *otaku* [hardcore fan] and various fandoms as examples of creativity, or engaging in a deep textual reading of a particular work, a pursuit of "validity"

can frequently be found beneath the surface. To be fair, this has largely been in response to the fact that manga has historically been viewed inside and outside of Japan as the domain of children, as pornography, or as something simply morally and artistically bankrupt, and this defensiveness has also lessened as the study of manga has matured. Even so, it continues to persist, appearing in a footnote here or a chapter there, trying to convince readers of the inherent importance of manga.

My intent is to move away from this guarded position, such that I treat the notion of manga's significance as something of a non-question. Of course manga has value, and it does not even have to derive from being particularly special or unique (though that is not to deny the possibility of uniqueness in manga). Instead, I work from the idea that, on some basic level, manga communicates ideas, while also acknowledging that, as a form of mass or popular art, manga will at times support the status quo (though this is not necessarily a problem either). Given that my research is on science fiction, the fact that SF is thought of as a source of radical new ideas means that valuing in any way the "status quo" may at first appear self-defeating, and even symptomatic of "mass culture" as a facsimile of creativity and imagination as per Theodor Adorno.[7] However, this would assume that works of fiction and their ideas cannot be contradictory in what they espouse, and that there is no benefit to simultaneously reinforcing certain ideas while defying others. As shown by Henry Jenkins, this "contradiction" can be used to challenge dominant ideas from within,[8] something that will become increasingly evident over the course of my study on science fiction manga.

The main chapters in this dissertation can be divided into two overall categories. Chapters 2 through 4 are "theory and method." In Chapter 2, I pursue the idea that "cognitive estrangement" as originally defined by Suvin can be expanded to include emotion by taking into account an alternative approach to science fiction as reflecting the present through the use of character psychology and development. I also lay out my reasons for looking at science fiction manga as a source of emotions, which are that manga carries a certain inherent level of

• • • • • • • • • • • • • •

7. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2004), 85.

8. Henry Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 107-111.

emotion with its visual form, that it has a long history of using emotion to convey ideas, and that the history of Japanese science fiction is tied to manga. I expand upon this work in Chapter 3, where I argue that cognitive estrangement, rather than remaining a rigid and static concept, has grown alongside the widening of SF as a narrative category. In exploring this growth, I show that character emotions can be involved not only in terms of making readers feel "estranged" but also by engaging with the "cognitive processes" of the science fictional world.

In order to study how emotions impact the novum, what Suvin calls the "scientific novelty"[9] of science fiction, and by extension the potential for SF manga to convey political ideas through cognitive estrangement, I establish a method for looking at manga as a visual narrative in Chapter 4. Using the work of scholars including Natsume Fusanosuke, Itō Gō, and Thierry Groensteen, I argue that, contrary to the idea that manga's style is predicated upon either the balance between "image and text" or extensive use of "cinematic angles," the best way to study the depiction of emotion in manga is to look at the two-dimensional relationships between groups of panels and the "flowing" sense of visual and narrative progression they create.

Chapters 5 through 7 are focused on "analysis," and in these chapters I engage specific works of science fiction manga in depth to study how emotions are used to alter and express political ideas. The works I look at are *7 Billion Needles* (Tadano Nobuaki, 2008-2010), *Zettai Karen Children* (Shīna Takashi, 2005-present), and *Coppelion* (Inoue Tomonori, 2008-present). In selecting these manga I utilized four criteria.

First, and perhaps somewhat obviously, they have to be works where emotion is in some way clearly prominent in the visual narrative. This is by far the broadest requirement, and as stated above encompasses a majority of science fiction manga.

Second, the titles I focus on have to be firmly considered "manga" in that they are published in Japan by professional manga publishers originally in Japanese. I am aware of the fact that, due to the international proliferation of manga, artists throughout the world have increasingly adapted manga's aesthetics in part or in whole into their works and have thus challenged the conception of manga as being purely "Japanese." Similarly, manga publishers have looked to artists outside of Japan to find unorthodox styles of creating manga, such as in

9. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 63.

the "International Manga Award" competition[10] and the "Morning International Comic Competition."[11] While the evolution of the meaning of "manga" as it has traveled across oceans would be an interesting topic to study, it is well beyond the scope of this dissertation, and I have deliberately chosen works that would undoubtedly be considered manga by any standard.

Third, I limit my selection to manga that has been published in Japan since 2004. This is so that I can explore political ideas that have emerged out of SF manga likely in response to more current issues in Japan, including *hikikomori* [chronic shut-ins], declining birth rates, and concerns over nuclear energy that have moved increasingly away from the Second World War and are now centered around the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant disaster on March 11, 2011. Another reason for this choice is that it allows me to focus my attention away from "classic" works of science fiction manga, the ideas and significance of which are often well established, as well as famous creators, such as Tezuka Osamu and Ōtomo Katsuhiro, who have already been written about extensively. That being said, older works of SF manga are referenced throughout this dissertation in order to support a variety of arguments and to provide a social and historical perspective.

Fourth, along similar lines, I mostly avoid what is arguably the most prominent form of SF manga, "mecha," the subgenre that concerns futuristic machinery such as cyborgs, giant robots, and spaceships. This is of course not to claim that such works lack true "science fictionality" or that they cannot inspire political imagination. However, as a way of avoiding thinking about science fiction mainly in terms of "exploration of technology," I have instead chosen titles that veer closer to the idea of "social science fiction," or works where the science fictional sense of historicity and process are also about the social interactions of living beings. Like with classic SF manga, however, this dissertation still uses some mecha titles in support of certain points. The major "exception" to the four rules above is that I refer quite extensively in Chapter 3 (and to a lesser extent elsewhere) to the manga *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Sadamoto Yoshiyuki, 1995-2013), a significant work in the "mecha" subgenre that began around 25 years ago. However, *Evangelion* is not counted among the primary analysis-focused

• • • • • • • • • • • • • •

10. *International Manga Award*, accessed May 12, 2014, http://www.manga-award.jp.

11. *Morning International Comic Competition*, accessed March 18, 2015, http://origin.morningman-ga.com/micc/.

chapters of this dissertation, and is instead used as supporting evidence for my theoretical basis for studying emotion and SF manga.

The works I will analyze in depth, *7 Billion Needles*, *Zettai Karen Children*, and *Coppelion* fulfill all four of these criteria. Each manga has been recently published, and in the case of *Zettai Karen Children* and *Coppelion* are, at the time of this writing, still serialized in Japanese manga publications. In terms of their science fictional premises, *7 Billion Needles* is based in alien encounter, *Zettai Karen Children* features a future society divided into psychics and non-psychics, and *Coppelion* involves radiation-immune genetically engineered clones in a post-meltdown Tokyo.[12] Other aspects these works have in common is that they all center on female characters, are created by men, and target male audiences at least in terms of their official designations. However, these particular features are not a part of my selection criteria either explicitly or implicitly. While I believe there would be an interesting study to be done concerning female characters in science fiction manga by male creators for a male demographic, this dissertation is more concerned with the expression of emotion within the works themselves and does not focus on those elements. Before moving forward, however, I will address a few key points when it comes to the use of female characters in the SF manga used in this dissertation that may be important to keep in mind.

First, when it comes to how these female characters (and perhaps the characters of these SF manga in general) operate within the dynamics of sex and gender in the tradition of Japanese media, they are often potential loci of interaction between ideas of "male" and "female," processed through Japan's history with sexism and feminism. Often these characters will use expressions of undefined emotion or sentimentality, much like the writings of Yoshiya Nobuko in the early 20th century, where stories for girls would contain lines such as "..." and "!"[13] Readers of manga will likely notice that this frequently occurs in Japanese comics as well, and that such examples of unspoken "dialogue" appear in manga targeted at all genders and ages. However, whether the use of such overt expressions of emotion inherits the underlying feminist spirit found in Yoshiya's

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

12. While giant robots do eventually make appearances in *Coppelion*, they remain as tertiary elements in terms of the manga's science fictional setting.

13. Hiromi Tsuchimiya Dollase, "Early Twentieth Century Japanese Girls' Magazine Stories: Examining Shōjo Voice in *Hanamonogatari* (Flower Tales)," *Journal of Popular Culture* 36, no. 4 (2003): 731, accessed March 15, 2015, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1540-5931.00043/pdf.

works[14] or is an appropriation that ignores that spirit is a complex subject. For example, when it comes to *moe*[15] anime and manga, they might reflect a desire for male audiences to have a greater level of empathic or even personal identification with the plights of female characters, while at the same time relegating those same female characters to simple abstractions whose primary qualities are weakness and helplessness. In this dissertation, I do not make value judgments over how the female characters are utilized within this dynamic, but do acknowledge that its presence permeates the SF manga that are explored.

Second, in reference to Lamarre's study of female characters and their functions in the films of Miyazaki Hayao (himself both a manga and anime creator), while many of the female characters explored in the following chapters often have abilities that border on the magical and lend themselves towards distance and communication[16] (especially in *Zettai Karen Children,* which features central characters with psychic abilities), just as many engage often directly and physically with their worlds. Another aspect that Lamarre looks at, the shōjo body as a "crisis of the post-action image,"[17] that is to say the blurring of the modern singular truths and postmodern subjective perspectives, is also present in varying degrees in all of the works, though the extent to which this is dependent on the characters being necessarily female is debatable.

7 Billion Needles, *Zettai Karen Children*, and *Coppelion* all heavily utilize emotion, which in turn prompts my exploration of how these works integrate the presence of emotion into science fiction as a genre of exploration and political ideas. In Chapter 5, I compare *7 Billion Needles* to *Needle*, the SF prose novel that the manga is based on. Premised around the symbiosis between humans and aliens, I look at how the exploration of a novum from a medium other than manga can potentially be altered by the visual emphasis on emotion within manga. Chapter 6 concerns *Zettai Karen Children* and its portrayal of the social tensions between regular humans and psychics through the eyes of three young

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

14. Tsuchimiya Dollase, "Japanese Girls' Magazine Stories," 740.

15. A term roughly meaning an affective or emotional response to cute characters, specifically female anime and manga characters who possess some sort of weakness either physical or psychological, the exact definition of *moe* is a point of contention. For more information on the various views on *moe* that exist, see: Patrick W. Galbraith, *The Moe Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014).

16. Thomas Lamarre, "Only a Girl Can Save Us Now," in *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

17. Lamarre, "A Face on the Train, in *The Anime Machine*.

psychic girls. In it, I study how a sense of science fictional estrangement can emerge from the "everyday" emotions of the characters themselves. In Chapter 7, I take a slightly modified approach to *Coppelion* by focusing not on finding political ideas through emotion but on analyzing changes in how emotions are utilized differently over the course of its publication to convey its core concept and political position in varying ways. A manga that uses the environment of a post-meltdown Tokyo to launch an ever-present criticism of nuclear power, I explore how changes in both where and how emotions are emphasized in *Coppelion* alters the specific dimensions of its political criticism.

Overall, this dissertation has two basic goals. First, I intend to show how emotions can be integral to SF narratives and can add to the political and cognitive qualities of science fiction. Second, by demonstrating through visual analysis how emotion is portrayed in SF manga, I aim to explore how the concept of emotion itself can be complex and varied in ways that allow it to be treated and explored "science fictionally." From this, I hope to contribute to how we understand and approach the creative and political potential of not only science fiction or manga but also media in general.