

# Buddha Manga: Visual, Cultural and Comical Perspectives

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## Abstract:

This paper explores Osamu Tezuka's artistic style, highlighting how his humanistic and moral values are deeply woven into his manga series. It delves into the use of comic elements as a means to navigate sensitive societal and cultural themes with nuance and accessibility with respect to *Buddha* manga series (originally published 1972-83). Additionally, the paper examines the significance of imaginative literature and its independent creative space, emphasizing the uniquely human role of language and communication. By analyzing the interplay between sound and visual storytelling, it illustrates how this synergy shapes narrative impact. Drawing from examples in Tezuka's *Buddha*, the study also reflects on the constant interaction and communication within the broader ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Manga, Culture, Buddha, Comics, Visual Literature.

The essence of value lies in the vast spectrum of positive meanings. All living beings actively shape their surroundings, making it impossible to fully grasp the concept of culture without considering its ecological dimension. A comprehensive theory of culture must acknowledge the role of environmental interactions, just as life itself differs from non-life in the same way that sign-making and meaning creation differ from mere matter. Human culture is a unique form of life, defined by intricate sign processes within the semiosphere—the space of symbolic relations, language capacity, and meta-descriptions. Culture is never isolated; it always exists within an ecosystem, reliant on both linguistic and non-linguistic sign systems. As Kalevi Kull argues, the traditional nature/culture divide is flawed, as culture is simply a subset of broader sign relations within the semiosphere, contrasting not with nature itself but with the non-relational, non-living aspects of existence.

Culture can thus be understood as everything shaped by language, while the ecosystem, as the semiosphere, encompasses all meaning-making processes. Human semiotic systems function within larger ecological frameworks that incorporate both semiotic and non-semiotic elements. Literature, as an integral part of culture, reflects and reinforces this continuous search for meaning and value. Cultures that strive for strength, boundlessness, and completeness often move toward detachment from non-cultural systems. However, this separation from the broader network of sign relations that sustain the ecosystem can ultimately prove detrimental to culture itself. Fragility, limitation, and incompleteness are essential conditions for human semiotic systems to coexist sustainably with the ecological world. Literature, as a reflection of this dynamic, embodies these nuances—and manga, once confined by geographical origins, has now become an integral part of global pop culture.

Osamu Tezuka, often revered as the "God of Manga," was an interdisciplinary artist in the purest sense. His distinctive style was not defined by fixed thematic or pictorial traits but rather by its fluidity, intertextuality, and continuous evolution. His work is infused with references spanning multiple art forms—comics, theater, music, literature, dance, rakugo (comic storytelling), and film. This experimental approach led to the creation of manga with intricate plots, multiple subplots, innovative narratives, dynamic characters, and a cinematic sense of motion. It was this fusion of artistic ingenuity that culminated in the *Buddha* manga series.

As Natsu Onoda describes in *God of Comics: Osamu Tezuka and the Creation of Post-World War II Manga* (2009), Tezuka was a master of quotation, much like the novelist Umberto Eco. He frequently borrowed images, phrases, and sequences from various media, filling his work with a dense intertextuality—some references easily recognizable, others more obscure. He even referenced his own works, offering readers a "bonus" experience by linking different stories, even when no direct narrative connection existed (Onoda, 17). Tezuka's works are rich with intertextuality, incorporating countless references, quotations, borrowed imagery, and adapted techniques as narrative entry points. In *Buddha* Vol. 6: *Ananda*, for instance, he alludes to a Chinese tale about greed and desire, illustrating how unchecked ambition ultimately leads to ruin.

Onoda Power observes that Tezuka frequently embedded recurring visual jokes and familiar characters throughout his works, creating the illusion of a unified narrative universe. By recognizing the same character in different "roles" across multiple manga, readers begin to form a connection with them, even imagining an "offstage identity" beyond the specific story (18). One of the most iconic recurring figures is *Hyôtantsugi*, also known as the Pig Gourd, which appears in many of Tezuka's works, including the *Buddha* series.

The Pig Gourd emerges unpredictably, often sprouting like mushrooms beyond the panel borders. Neither entirely plant nor animal, it serves as a playful meta-element in Tezuka's art, often appearing when he feels awkward or self-conscious, disrupting the dramatic flow of a scene. In manga, the borders between panels define the space of the *monogatari* (story), and Tezuka would cleverly place Pig Gourd along these boundaries, visually marking the liminal space between the narrative world and the external reality of its creation.

As Natsume Fusanosuke explains in *Pig Gourd: The Meaning of Tezuka Playing Around with Form* (2023), this recurring figure embodies Tezuka's self-awareness as a creator. "If Pig Gourd represents awkwardness from outside the storyline, then it must reflect an 'authorial self-consciousness' on Tezuka's part. The use of such a character in manga must have originated with Tezuka" (655). This technique underscores his ability to blur the line between fiction and authorship, reinforcing the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of his storytelling. Tezuka's reflections in *I Am a Manga Artist (Boku Wa Mangaka)*, (1979) provide a rare insight into his artistic philosophy, particularly in relation to his whimsical and often misunderstood Pig Gourd character. He acknowledges that manga, at its core, is born from a playful, doodling spirit—an instinctive act of creativity that retains an element of spontaneity and fun. However, he laments that by the late 1970s, this raw, unpolished aspect had largely disappeared from children's manga, which had become increasingly structured and refined. For Tezuka, Pig Gourd was more than just a recurring gag or a visual quirk; it was a personal anchor to the essence of manga as a free-spirited and experimental medium. Even within the serious and emotionally charged narratives of *Buddha* or his other works, Pig Gourd served as a conscious disruption, breaking the intensity and allowing moments of self-awareness and humor. It was his way of maintaining a balance between depth and playfulness, reminding

both himself and his readers that manga, no matter how profound, should never lose its sense of joy and irreverence.

However, his sadness at receiving feedback from younger readers—who found Pig Gourd distracting or unnecessary—suggests a growing shift in audience expectations. While Tezuka embraced the fluidity of storytelling and the breaking of traditional narrative conventions, newer generations were increasingly drawn to immersive, uninterrupted storytelling. This response highlights a tension between Tezuka’s experimental, intertextual style and the evolving preferences of manga readers. Despite this, Tezuka remained steadfast in his belief that manga should retain its spirit of uninhibited creativity. Pig Gourd, in many ways, symbolized his refusal to fully conform to rigid storytelling norms. It represented his desire to preserve the childlike joy of drawing, even in stories with profound themes of war, death, and morality. His nostalgia for a more freewheeling approach to manga reflects his lifelong dedication to the art form—not just as a means of storytelling but as a deeply personal and expressive craft that should always retain a spark of playful, unrestrained imagination.

In *Buddha* Vol. 8: *Jetavana*, Tezuka seamlessly integrates comedy with profound themes, exemplified in the scene where Buddha and his disciples arrive at a blacksmith’s hut. There, the blacksmith’s wife prepares mushrooms for them—only these mushrooms are miniature *Hyôtantsugi*, hanging from the ceiling. When Buddha inquires about them, Chunda responds, “That’s a patch-gourd, sir, a sort of mushroom. This area’s famous for ‘em, sir, but if yer not keen on manga, y’might not care for ‘em, sir” (344). In a twist that blends humor with tragedy, Buddha’s eventual death is triggered by eating these mushrooms. Through *Hyôtantsugi*, Tezuka introduces a serious event with a lighthearted touch, reinforcing the interplay between comic elements and weighty themes.

The presence of *Hyôtantsugi* in key moments of *Buddha* suggests more than just a gag—it embodies the creative freedom Tezuka experienced in manga as an art form. This small, seemingly inconsequential character becomes a visual metaphor for the limitless possibilities within manga. Characters transform into *Hyôtantsugi* when they feel strong emotions—anger, excitement, embarrassment—only to revert in the next panel. In moments of heightened emotion, *Hyôtantsugi* bursts out of the panel itself, and when absurdity takes over, it rains Pig Gourds. Tezuka repeatedly utilizes this character at pivotal moments in *Buddha*. In Vol. 4: *The Forest of Uruvela*, Siddhartha transforms into *Hyôtantsugi* when he experiences nothingness. In Vol. 8: *Jetavana*, Devdatta, frustrated after failing to poison Buddha, momentarily turns into one. When Buddha is framed for murder in the same volume, the *Hyôtantsugi* speak in a woman’s voice, mocking the situation. In Vol. 5: *Deer Park*, an audience watching the Yatala vs. Tatta fight is depicted entirely as *Hyôtantsugi*. In Vol. 1: *Kapilavastu*, Chapra, a lower-caste character, is branded with a caste stamp symbolized by *Hyôtantsugi*, reinforcing the dehumanization of social hierarchy.

By infusing heavy themes—caste discrimination, injustice, death, and emotional turmoil—with *Hyôtantsugi*’s comic absurdity, Tezuka balances depth with accessibility. His approach prevents the narrative from overwhelming the reader while maintaining its societal critique. Manga, in this way, serves as both an escape and a reflection of reality.

Susanne Phillips, in *Characters, Themes, and Narrative Patterns in the Manga of Osamu Tezuka* (2008), notes that while *Hyôtantsugi* is often used for humor, it also represents a character’s inner psychological struggle. Both Phillips and Natsume Fusanosuke agree that, despite its cartoonish appearance, the Pig Gourd reveals Tezuka’s layered storytelling. Natsume further argues that Tezuka embraced both playfulness and high artistic ambition, oscillating between the two in his work.

J. Holt and T. Fukuda expand on this, describing *Hyôtantsugi* as a marker of Tezuka's genius and his deep understanding of manga's creative potential. They observe that Tezuka used *Hyôtantsugi* as a tool to experiment with panel layouts, playing with the concept of "open space" (*ma* or *aida*) and the rigidity of panel borders (*keisen*). They assert that while *Hyôtantsugi*'s appearances may seem random, the moments where it emerges are often crucial to the story's development: "One might be hard-pressed to extrapolate much meaning from its eruptions onto the page, but the scenes in which it appears are often quite pivotal in Tezuka's stories" (659).

Ultimately, *Hyôtantsugi* is more than just a recurring joke—it is a testament to Tezuka's ability to blend humor, philosophy, and artistic innovation, creating a manga world where the boundaries between playfulness and profundity are constantly redefined.

Osamu Tezuka was a true interdisciplinary artist, drawing from a vast array of cultural influences rather than creating in isolation. His work is filled with intertextual references, quotations, and allusions that resonated deeply with his readers, constructing a complex and immersive universe.

In *Buddha* Vol. 8: *Jetavana*, during a sermon, Buddha reflects on human nature, saying, "I tried to preach to the Shakya, but in the end, they foolishly chose to waste their lives in war, which led to their own destruction. Humans are animals blessed with remarkable intelligence and an understanding of right and wrong. Yet, there will always be those who ignore wisdom and commit acts of astonishing stupidity. I wonder if humans will have made any progress after 1,000, even 2,000 years" (235). Tezuka visually reinforces this message with a powerful illustration—an image reminiscent of the infamous mushroom clouds from the atomic bombings of World War II. Through this, he not only condemns war but also acknowledges its inevitability, linking past and present conflicts.

N.O. Power, in *God of Comics* (2009), describes Tezuka as both an "evolutionary" and a "revolutionary" artist. His creative breakthroughs were rooted in his extensive knowledge of comics, spanning different eras and cultures. Recognizing the prewar comics that influenced Tezuka helps us distinguish where convention ends and innovation begins.

Tezuka frequently stated that his wartime experiences were a primary motivation for his storytelling, which is why themes of war and its aftermath appear throughout his works. This is evident in *Buddha*, where he dramatically portrays the cycles and consequences of war. The ongoing hostility between the Shakya tribe and the Kosala kingdom forms a major conflict within the series. Despite Buddha's efforts to prevent bloodshed, his own homeland is eventually destroyed. One of the most poignant moments is the death of Tatta, who, despite being deeply influenced by Buddha's teachings, ultimately succumbs to vengeance and perishes in battle.

Prince Virudhaka, once willing to let go of his resentment toward the Shakya, later finds himself compelled to retaliate due to political circumstances. As the ruler of Kosala, he sees no alternative but to suppress the rebellion. Aware of the inevitability of his actions, he asks Buddha not to hate him. In turn, Buddha understands the harsh realities of leadership and war. Tezuka ensures that no character remains untouched by the ravages of war—whether it be Buddha, Tatta, Virudhaka, Chapra, Ananda, Yashodhara, Rahula, Dhepa, or Migaila. Each experiences loss and suffering, illustrating that war spares no one, regardless of which side they stand on.

Kajii Jun, in *Take Your Gun and Pen: Notes on Wartime Comics* (1999), highlights how Tezuka's works appeal to postwar readers through a blend of humanism and humor. Unlike many artists of his time, Tezuka was never forced to create wartime propaganda comics under government surveillance, allowing him the creative freedom to embed strong anti-war messages directly into his narratives (38). Themes of peace and

humanism remain at the core of his storytelling. Spanning nearly 3,000 pages, *Buddha* employs cinematic storytelling techniques to explore themes of anger, grief, revenge, enlightenment, impermanence, and coexistence. Tezuka's artwork emphasizes the interdependence of humans and nature, portraying them as inseparable within the larger web of life. As both an artist and a storyteller, he not only brought ancient Indian civilization to life but also infused modern relevance into the narrative. For instance, in *Vol. 3: Devadatta*, Tezuka subtly addresses the modern issue of unemployment. When Tatta disbands his bandit group, his former comrades protest, demanding compensation—an eerie parallel to contemporary mass layoffs where employees find themselves abruptly dismissed without warning. Tezuka also employs panel-breaking techniques, similar to breaking the fourth wall in cinema. At times, he even draws himself into the manga, playfully reminding readers of the medium's inherent flexibility.

His signature use of humor intersects closely with his “star system,” a recurring cast of characters reappearing across different works. This system allows for inside jokes, such as the transformation of characters into *Hyôtantsugi*, a gag that lightens emotionally intense moments. His humor isn't just visual but also verbal, often using linguistic playfulness. These comedic elements serve as moments of relief while simultaneously heightening the reader's awareness of the comic form itself.

Although Tezuka initially opposed the *gekiga* movement—known for its realistic art and mature themes—its growing popularity inevitably influenced his style. The *Buddha* series reflects this evolution, featuring cinematic compositions, detailed settings, and mature storytelling. Unlike mainstream manga of the time, which was often aimed at children, *Buddha* caters to adult audiences, tackling profound existential and social issues.

Tezuka's *Buddha* serves as both a historical and artistic milestone in the evolution of manga. It seamlessly blends realism with comic gags, cinematic framing, and historical depth, making it accessible to a broad audience, regardless of age. Tezuka's storytelling is deeply rooted in humanist and moralist perspectives, yet his narratives do not shy away from exploring the complexities of human nature—the allure of darkness alongside the virtues of goodness. This duality is evident throughout *Buddha*, where characters such as Ananda, Nardatta, Prince Virudhaka, and Prince Ajatashatru embody the moral and ethical struggles that define Tezuka's broader worldview. Beyond its characters, *Buddha* also emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between humans and nature. While natural landscapes are integral to the historical setting, Tezuka's cinematic approach elevates them beyond mere backdrops, presenting nature as an active force intertwined with human existence. The idea that kindness and compassion should be intrinsic to our character is a recurring theme in the series.

One important example occurs in *Vol. 5: Deer Park*, where Buddha selflessly donates his blood to Dhepa, despite the latter's past misdeeds. This act of mercy mirrors Tezuka's own background as a trained physician, reflecting his belief in the sanctity of life and the duty to heal, regardless of past transgressions. Additionally, the same volume explores the “illnesses of the five senses,” illustrating how unchecked desires and attachments contribute to human suffering—an idea central to Buddhist philosophy. Despite its moral depth, *Buddha* is far from a preachy work. Tezuka masterfully balances its philosophical and ethical dimensions with humor and entertainment, ensuring the story remains engaging. He acknowledges the inherent contradictions in human nature—even Buddha himself, despite achieving enlightenment, harbors a fear of death. This nuanced portrayal reinforces Tezuka's vision of storytelling: an exploration of human imperfection rather than a rigid moral lesson.

Tezuka's *Buddha* is a culmination of his philosophical, religious, and evolutionary ideas, deeply rooted in both personal experiences and broader historical influences. Two pivotal moments in his life—the B-29

firebombing raids on Osaka in 1945, where he witnessed bodies floating in the Yodogawa River, and the death of a patient during his time as a medical practitioner, who's serene, Buddha-like smile stayed with him—shaped his perspective on life and death. However, reducing his vast body of work to just these events would fail to capture the depth of his genius.

Tezuka's creativity was shaped by a variety of influences, including Japan's 20th-century discourse on biology, life, and religion. His critical stance on unchecked technological advancement, evident in many of his works, aligns with the ideas of biologist Oka Asajirō, who emphasized the interconnectedness of all life. In *Buddha*, this theme manifests in the idea that life at both the macroscopic and microscopic levels reflects the universe's order, and all beings are interdependent.

Despite often writing for children, Tezuka infused his works with profound themes of hope and responsibility. Even when his stories did not have conventionally happy endings, they always carried an underlying sense of optimism. His depiction of human evolution in *Buddha* extends beyond a materialistic or random process—it becomes a moral and spiritual journey. This aligns with his references to the atomic bombings, which underscore the weight of human choices: technological progress can either lead to prosperity when used responsibly or destruction when wielded recklessly.

In last volume, Tezuka quotes:

“483 B.C... that's the year Gautam Buddha is said to have died. More than 2000 years later, Buddhism has spread across the world, touching the hearts of people in China, Japan, various other parts of Asia, as well as Europe and America. That's because it teaches “How people ought to live”: the foundation of love for one's fellows.” (360-361) He concludes by quoting “Buddha will always be following the outcome of that teaching, from somewhere in nature's grand blossom.” (362)

Through *Buddha*, Tezuka masterfully navigates these dualities, presenting both the potential and perils of human intelligence. He illustrates how every individual—regardless of societal standing—has a role to play, with an emphasis on fulfilling one's duties without fixation on the consequences. This resonates with Buddhist teachings on selfless action and underscores Tezuka's broader vision of human responsibility within an interconnected world. Through *Buddha*, Tezuka masterfully weaves historical storytelling with contemporary relevance, blending humor, philosophy, and visual artistry into an unforgettable narrative. His work stands as both a reflection of the past and a commentary on the present, ensuring its impact endures across generations.

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