

Bringing Home the Sushi

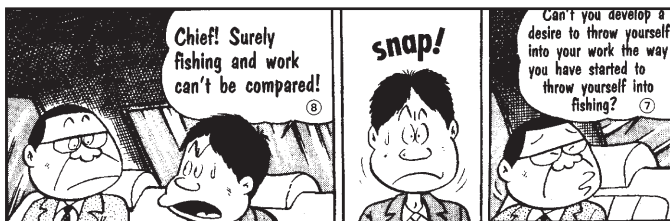
An Inside Look at Japanese Business through Japanese Comics

Laura K. Silverman, ed.

ATLANTA: MANGAJIN, INC., 1995
209 PAGES

The most unfortunate aspect of *Bringing Home the Sushi* is the title. The book is a tight collection of materials from an important genre in contemporary Japan: business *manga*, or comic magazines with stories oriented around the workplace. But the title expresses much less. It implies the kind of trite simplicity that is pervasive in the popular image of Japan today: “Oh, they eat sushi instead of bacon! I get it!” Recognizing the need to work against such easy stereotypes as I design my courses on modern Japan, I approached *Bringing Home the Sushi* with the wary eye of one too often promised a one-easy-lesson “inside look” at the real Japan.

A review of the contents served to assuage many such fears. The editor’s clear sense of direction in assembling nine excerpts from popular Japanese comic books has resulted in a readable and informative collection. It will allow students to confront, rather than fall into, stereotypes about work and business in contemporary Japan. Readers will also gain a good sense for the diversity of styles that characterize the industry. The lively translations replicate the fast, read-it-on-the-train pace that is such an important part of the genre. The short introductions provide decent background explanations that will help *manga*-uninitiated readers understand the stories and get the jokes.



From “One Cup” Fisherman (Pg. 50).

Given the growing influence of Japanese pop culture in the U.S., it is perhaps no longer necessary to note that *manga* are a more important aspect of the Japanese cultural milieu than the word “comic” implies to an American audience. *Bringing Home the Sushi*’s introduction points out that *manga* comprise about one-fourth of the Japanese publishing market. Those who have lived or traveled in Japan and been assaulted by the ubiquitous stacks of colorful, thick *manga* at every train station or coffee house will not need the statistic to recognize the power these elaborate comics have over the contemporary Japanese imagination.

Indeed, the genre is so large it is divided into many subfields, one of which is “business comics.” Such strips center on the daily grind



of the office, finding humor in a secretary’s inability to divide the afternoon snack equitably amongst her coworkers, or dramatic tension in the closing of a big business deal. In some cases they are also meant to supply advice to fledgling *sarariiman*. In “I’m #1” from *Bringing Home the Sushi*, a young salesman learns how properly to butter up an important client without rushing the sales pitch.

Precisely because of their near-universal appeal in Japan, *manga* deserve close consideration as course materials. The relatively rich story lines and detailed artwork can provide students better insight into daily Japanese life and culture than might be expected by those whose only exposure to comics is the funnies section of an American newspaper.

An especially useful aspect of this collection is its ability to convey a sense for the look and feel of the workplace. An example comes with a selection from *Diary of a Fishing Freak*, the popular series about bumbling salesman Hamasaki Densuke. The story tells of Hamasaki’s guileless attempts to entertain an important client in the company of his boss. But I did not find the plot so interesting as the landscape, as the adventure follows Hamasaki through a typical Tokyo business day: from home to office, where the desks are in neat rows that show the office pecking order at a glance; to the glitzy Ginza hostess bar, where young women fill the drinks and stroke the egos of the business elite; to the seedy *yakitori* restaurant where, having seemingly blown the business deal, Hamasaki and his boss commiserate over one last drink before the long train ride to the suburbs.

For its ability to convey these landscapes in an accessible and enjoyable format, *Bringing Home the Sushi* deserves serious consideration for use in classes focused on contemporary Japanese culture. As with all comics, those collected here rely on slapstick humor, obvious visual gags, and larger-than-life stereotyping. Students will need to be reminded that these are, after all, comics, and the subtitle’s ostentatious promise of “an inside look at Japanese business” cannot be taken seriously. This book would work well alongside a more serious discussion of Japan’s business culture, such as Anne Allison’s *Nightwork* (University of Chicago Press, 1994). While *Nightwork* would provide students a thoughtful interpretation of the values Japanese associate with work, *Bringing Home the Sushi* could offer a set of visual reinforcements that would be hard to match. ■

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