



The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924

Henry (Yoshitaka) Kiyama , Frederik L. Schodt

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History. Cartoons. Asian American Studies. Originally published in mixed Japanese and English in San Francisco in 1931, "The Four Immigrants Manga" is Henry Kiyama's visual chronicle of his immigrant experience in the United States. Drawn in a classic gag-strip comic-book style, this heartfelt tale -- rediscovered, translated, and introduced by manga expert Frederick L. Schodt -- is a fascinating, entertaining depiction of early Asian American struggles.

The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924 Details

Date : Published October 1st 1998 by Stone Bridge Press (first published 1931)

ISBN : 9781880656334

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Format : Paperback 152 pages

Genre : Sequential Art, Manga, Graphic Novels, Comics, History, Cultural, Japan, Biography

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From Reader Review The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924 for online ebook

Alessandra says

This is a charming autobiographical story of four young Japanese men who came to San Francisco in 1904, drawn in the 1920s. It's not the typical Japanese manga style, which hadn't evolved yet. Rather, the artist, Henry Kiyama seems to have closely studied "Bringing Up Father", and the art style closely follows that of the early George McManus.

The story was originally bilingual. This edition has translated the Japanese word balloons into printed English and left the original English hand-lettered speech balloons when the characters are speaking English. It's a fascinating look at American culture about a hundred years ago, with some pretty unflattering looks at racism and bigotry, along with earnestness and hope.

It also covers the time of the Great San Francisco Earthquake and its aftermath in a uniquely firsthand way.

Ed Erwin says

An early example of semi-autobiographical long-form comic telling the story of Japanese immigrants trying to make a living in San Francisco between 1904 and 1924. It gives a first-hand account of events such as the 1906 earthquake, a visit by president Taft, the failure of the Golden Gate Bank, the Panama Pacific International Exposition, WWI, the Spanish Flu, the start of Prohibition, the Alien Land Act, etc. It is worth reading by anyone interested in early San Francisco or the Japanese-American immigrant experience.

Written in 52 2-page spreads, it was intended to be serialized over a years worth of weekly newspapers, but that never happened. While it was exhibited in 1927 and then independently published, it was largely forgotten until rediscovered, translated and published in 1988. Part of that neglect may be due to the fact that it was written with a combination of Japanese and broken English, and would be understood only by bilingual people.

Each 12-cel story ends with a gag. The humor in these is primarily in the form of Japanese puns, which don't work in English. But more serious themes are addressed as well.

This is probably not the first "Graphic Novel". Nor the first "Gekiga". Nor even the first comic to be made into a musical play (which happened for this book in 2017 in San Jose.) And being unknown, it probably had no influence on later works. But it certainly pre-dates Blackmark and It Rhymes with Lust and A Contract with God and so will be of interest to historians of comics. For the general comic-reading public, I recommend it only if you also have an interest in San Francisco history.

Atharv G. says

3.5 Stars

As a work of fiction, this is just okay. The stories are occasionally humorous, but ultimately most are ridiculous, slap-stick, or some combination of the two.

Where this book's value really lies is in its portrait of the Japanese immigrant experience at the turn of the century in San Francisco. Over the span of a few decades, Kiyama's characters have some connection to nearly every major event that affects California's Japanese community. As a historical record, it is impressive in its attention to detail and just how particular it is to its specific community. As a work of art, it is quite innovative; it draws from both American and Japanese influences and was originally written as a bilingual text.

The characters did win me over by the end, and I found myself shaking my head at their persistent naivete but always rooting for them to succeed. This text is a valuable first-hand account of the early Japanese immigrant experience while also managing to be an entertaining read.

Zack says

Found this in a thrift store and it seemed really interesting. It's a story of the writer and 3 of his friends, and the experiences they had from 1904-1924. They were all immigrants from Japan who moved to the USA. It was published in 1931. It's a fun way to get some background knowledge of the history of Japanese immigration to SF around that time, and it's funny at times. Way better than reading a textbook. A very interesting historical document.

Jane says

YA, Graphic Novel, Japanese Experience in San Francisco from 1904-1924.

Leslie Ann says

I learned about this book from this article describing the book's adaptation as a musical. The stories do a pretty good job of conveying the dreams and prejudices experienced by Kiyama and his fellow Japanese immigrants; the various exclusion acts and bans really resonate today. I was intrigued how Kiyama depicted the Japanese immigrants as Westerners rather than with slanted eyes (unlike the Chinese in the comics), possibly to reflect their desire to distance themselves away from Asia and "modernize". I especially liked that the translator, Schodt, chose to translate the Japanese into fluent English, but kept the odd-sounding English for the European Americans - thereby forcing modern readers to read the comics as a Japanese immigrant would hear language (i.e., English sounds broken, while Japanese is fluent). Overall, Kiyama's tales for other first-generation Japanese immigrants are an invaluable resource for understanding the immigrant experience.

Andrea says

This book is a collection of manga (comics) from early 20th century San Francisco, originally written in

Japanese (with some English, too) by Kiyama, an immigrant from Japan. It follows four Japanese immigrants and their experiences (many humorous), often relating to historical events of the time, such as the 1906 earthquake, the World's Fair, World War I, etc.

The great thing about this book, is that it's history, but it's entertaining. It's like history written by people you actually could know and like, who were actually there at the time, who are good entertainers. It was a light read, but I feel like I learned a lot. Anyone interested in Japan or immigrants or history should definitely give it a try!

John says

Definitely not a book I would recommend to everyone. While an impressive work, and unique among comics generally and Japanese comics in particular, the writing and drawing can be better appreciated by people who enjoy early 20th Century comic strips like Bringing Up Father, Krazy Kat & Ignatz Mouse, Pollie and Her Pals, etc. If you do read it, I'd recommend reading the whole book as it will give you a much better context for this comic.

Pelks says

Read this book if you are interested in early 20th century Japanese-American relations, or if you are interested in the history of diary comics. Fascinating and lovingly translated.

Kylie Parker says

A sort of historical fiction, it tells the story of four Japanese immigrants and their struggles trying to make it big in San Francisco.

Marc Weidenbaum says

This year, 2011, marks the 80th anniversary of the publication of The Four Immigrants Manga, the story of Henry (born Yoshikata) Kimaya and his four young-ish fellow Japanese who come to America around 1904. Henry's dream is to pursue art, and this book -- truly ground-breaking for its time -- is a 52-chapter autobiography in which he experiences the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the start of prohibition, and a whole lot in between. The notion of an autobiographical comic, even one intended to be collected as a standalone volume, is nothing particularly special 100 years or so after Kiyama unceremoniously first stepped foot in America (he's confined for some time, as a new immigrant, and tries to convince himself that he's being looked after because Americans are so darn caring), but it was truly groundbreaking for its day. It's also pretty darn funny.

Sara Thompson says

This is a must read. I don't care who you are or what you like to read, you need to read this book.

Josephus FromPlacitas says

What a fun read. It had a homemade and deeply personal feel, yet seemed almost completely universal in its stories. The character designs worked well and I thought the street-level vision of old San Francisco was really compelling. The intimacy of the storytelling and the format also reached across time and culture barriers. Kiyama's short tales of hard times, hard luck and hard work communicated both the frustration of the experiences but mixed it with the humor, fanciful play and lightness of a strip comic. It's the kind of thing that almost makes me get all schmaltzy and say shit like, "It makes me proud to be an American."

I like certain classic comics, Popeye, Krazy Kat, Little Nemo. I'm not sure what makes me like some more than others, but this one was definitely in the "like a lot" group.

Vivian says

What a lovely find in the HKU library today! I found this to be a really interesting glimpse into Japanese American immigrants' lives in the Bay Area in the early 1900s by a Japanese artist and immigrant, Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama... right around the time that my own relatives would have arrived in California.

What I really loved were the responses to events that I've only read about in academic books and oral histories – to see such personal cartoons commenting on things like the Gentleman's Agreement and anti-Asian violence was so intimate. And being a product of its time, the author doesn't shy away from what today would be considered heavily racialized depictions of just about everyone: whites, blacks, Chinese, and even, with the main characters always referring to their great Yamato race, the Japanese themselves. It doesn't shy away from reflecting class-based views that the author and his friends might have held toward their fellow Japanese, either. It's fascinating.

I also loved the interesting insights into language that it offered, as it was originally written in both Japanese and English. In this translated version, the Japanese words have been translated into fluent English while the author's original broken English text remains for those who would be speaking English. It reflects the experience of feeling fluent in your own language and not-fluent in a foreign land, which I like. And I love how the author's chosen to write certain words, like "Go home," always in English. Perhaps most beautifully, after living through such hard times, two of the characters return to Japan, and their other two friends come to see them off. They call to each other as the ship leaves, in English, "Good bye" –

Intimacy is perhaps really the right word for this book, and it's absolutely amazing that we have the privilege today of reading it and knowing the lives of Henry and his friends.

Jenny says

The first stories in this collection failed to thrill me at first. It was rather mundane business about Japanese students trying to get work-study jobs as domestic servants. Sad and revealing--how they were treated, the segregation and the prejudice of the "keto whiteys" (BTW, what does anyone know what keto means?) F*#@ing? And the gag comic strip style is not terribly appealing to me; however, further along in the series, the stories and dialouges become more interesting. You learn about their experiences during the San Francisco Earthquake of 1904. You get to experience the students observing the arrival of new Japanese immigrants who came through Hawaii (which was then banned in 1907?!). All of this and more, the telling details of their lives. So, I'm starting to enjoy the book, and I appreciate the historical significance of this work. It is an authentic piece of American History, a primary resource, an intriguing, humorous, and touching account about four young men making their way in a new world.
