

# THE FIRST MODERN COMIC BOOK IN AMERICA

by Kenji Murase

Most of what has been published in America about the Issei experience has been in the Japanese language. A fresh, newly accessible account of the Issei experience is now available in the English translation and re-publication of Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama's autobiographical *The Four Immigrants Manga—A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924*. What makes this publication unique is that Kiyama tells his story in a sequence of 52 cartoon strips, each consisting of twelve panels, about the dreams and daily lives of four young immigrants from Japan. With its stereotypical caricatures of Chinese and African Americans, the book, written by an Issei for the Issei, is not politically correct in modern day terms. However, it is compelling in its brutal honesty in portraying the realities of early Issei immigrant life.

Originally published in 1931 as *Manga Yonin Shosei* (literally "The Four Students Comics"), the work was rediscovered by Frederik L. Schodt, translated into English, and recently (1999) republished by Stone Bridge Press. Schodt, an authority on Japanese comics, believes that the original *Manga Yonin Shosei* well may have been the first modern comic book ever published in the United States. Although comic strips, such as George McManus' *Bringing Up Father*, were enormously popular in America, Henry Kiyama was far ahead of his time in adapting the same short newspaper comic strip format into a book length integrated story or "graphic novel." Only much later did the now familiar magazine-style "comic books" evolve.

## Bumbling through history

In essence, *The Four Immigrants Manga* is about four students who come to San Francisco for work, study, and enlightenment and end up bumbling their way through many of the major events of the early 20th century. Episodes tell of their misadventures as participants of the 1906 Great Earthquake, the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition, the influenza outbreak of 1918, the first World War, Prohibition (1919) and the enactment of the Immigration Act of 1924 which halted Japanese immigration. In the opening episode of *The Four Immigrants Manga*, Kiyama and his three pals arrive by boat in San Francisco in 1904. Two of them, diagnosed with an eye disease, are held in a detention center on an island (Angel Island?) in the bay. Reunited, the four seek the help of the local Buddhist Church. The priest joins them for a meal at a Chinese restaurant where they introduce themselves by their newly acquired American names and tell of their aspirations.

Henry has come to study Western art; Fred wants to become a successful farmer to emulate Mr. Ushijima, known as "the potato king"; Frank hopes to be a rich import-export merchant; and Charlie, "tired of Japan's old ways," wants to study "the democratic system of this republic."

Each comic panel thereafter chronicles a distinctive aspect of early Issei life. A recurring theme is their eager striving for acceptance followed invariably by rejection and setback. Some sequences are tragic, most are humorous but all convey an insight into the immigrant experience. They capture the remarkable sense of good humor and satirical irony that the Issei maintained in the midst of prejudice and bigotry. Kiyama reveals that he was not only attuned to the larger societal issues of his time, but he could also translate their impact upon the daily life of new immigrants from Japan. It is equally clear that to the Issei, who were his intended audience, Kiyama's understanding of their conceptual world resonates with recognition and meaning. Moreover, his use of the comic book genre facilitates immediacy and clarity of communication for the reader.

Particularly poignant are episodes that illuminate the unique San Francisco immigrant Japanese subculture of students employed as "schoolboys" or domestic servants by wealthy white families. Ironically, Kiyama's "schoolboys" are too proud and well educated to suffer the boorish behavior of employers who are often far less educated. In their new environment, the four immigrants soon experience baffling cultural discords. For example, Henry, as a schoolboy servant, innocently carries out a task expected of a servant in Japan. He proceeds to scrub the back of his new employer while she is taking a bath. The consequences are both hilarious and disastrous. As an afterthought, Henry ruefully muses: "Wow! White folks really are white!"

## Drawn from life

Reflected in their experiences is the political climate of a time when the mayor of San Francisco, James D. Phelan, was agitating for the expulsion of Japanese immigrants and the Japanese Exclusion League was a powerful voice for organized labor. One sequence of panels illustrates the infamous "Turlock Incident" of 1921. Henry and his pals sign on to harvest squash in Turlock, located in central California. They are among 58 Japanese farm workers roused from sleep in the middle of the night by a lynch mob of armed white men, loaded onto trucks, taken out of town, and warned not to return.

Other notable sequences are as revealing as they are diverse. Henry and his friends tempt fate with indulgences in alcohol and gambling; there are scenes of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and their survival during the aftermath by digging latrines; and their disastrous stint as migrant farm workers in Stockton area orchards. They witness a parade led by the President (Theodore Roosevelt) during which Frank takes along a newspaper "in case they

make people kneel on the ground like in Japan." Fred and Frank seek a "picture bride" in a practice where the partners never meet until the bride crosses the Pacific, which leads to some dishonesty both in the pictures and in self-description, and results in predictably comic consequences. They cope with the San Francisco Board of Education's a ban on Japanese school children, Charlie's rejection for citizenship after a period of military service in World War I and the travails of marriage, family and economic survival, including succumbing to get-rich quick schemes such as speculating in rice production in Colusa. And they contemplate their prospects for the future after the Immigration Act of 1924 which effectively ends all further Japanese immigration.



number of our people overseas and never eating the Empire's precious rice."

In real life, Henry Kiyama is believed to have lived more or less continuously in San Francisco between 1904 and 1937. Although he planned to return to San Francisco and eventually make his way to Paris, he was forced to abandon his plans due to the breakdown in US-Japan relations in the prelude to World War II. Had it not been for Frederik Schodt,

Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga* would likely have been forever lost. In 1997, Schodt traced Kiyama to his origins in a remote rural village in Tottori prefecture where he met Kiyama's 73-year-old daughter and her family. They were overjoyed to learn of Schodt's desire to translate and reprint Kiyama's long forgotten work. Schodt was given access to Kiyama's artwork for the original *Manga Yonin Shosei*, his sketches and oil paintings, as well as early photographs and newspaper articles, still preserved by his family and in Yonago City Art Museum in Tottori prefecture.

Copious explanatory notes and an enlightening commentary enhance Schodt's translation of Kiyama's original *Manga Yonin Shosei*. Since its publication in 1999, *The Four Immigrants Manga* has been widely

circulated as an alternative text by Asian American studies programs nationally. Its handsome new paperback format assures a readership far beyond Henry Kiyama's intended audience when it was first published in 1931.

Source: *The Four Immigrants Manga—A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924*, by Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama. Translated, with introduction and notes, by Frederik L. Schodt. Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1999. 152 pages, \$12.95, paperback. \*

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