

SLAM DUNK, SPORTS MANGA, AND JAPANESE CULTURE

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1 The *Slam Dunk* Phenomenon

Slam Dunk is a popular Japanese high school basketball manga that was written and drawn by Takehiko Inoue from the end of 1990 to the middle of 1996. Despite the absence of fully professional Japanese basketball, *Slam Dunk* grew into a thriving mass culture industry. Although the manga (translated into Chinese) is widely read in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and its animated version (subtitled in English by fans) is popular with

United States university *anime* clubs, the *Slam Dunk* phenomenon remains most culturally significant in Japan. Because the popularity of *Slam Dunk* began to surge by 1993, peaked in 1996, and remains potent in 2003, exploring the reasons for its large and devoted following reveals much about contemporary Japanese culture.

The central character of *Slam Dunk* is Hanamichi Sakuragi, a redheaded and fiery juvenile delinquent who joins the Shohoku High School basketball team because of his crush on Haruko, the younger sister of the team captain. The story depicts Sakuragi's growth from a violent, self-centered ruffian ignorant about basketball into a team player almost able to control his huge passions and raw talent in order to help the hitherto losing team in its quest for the Japanese high school championship. Key points in Sakuragi's development occur when he decides to stay on the team despite having to do boring drills, when he shaves off his rooster crest of hair after causing his team to lose a game, when he learns to shoot a jump-shot, and when because he has come to love basketball he continues playing in an important playoff game despite injuring his back. The growth of Sakuragi and his team's quest occur during four months in the narrative world that took Inoue over six years of real world time and 5,778 pages to tell. Inoue introduces appealing characters along the way, among them the plump, Buddha-like coach Anzai who becomes a father-figure for Sakuragi, the bad-boy Mitsui who saves himself by returning to basketball, and Sakuragi's rival on the team, Rukawa, the ever-cool Michael Jordanesque star player who is the object of Haruko's affection. The story climaxes with a forty-minute, 1300-page epic playoff game against the reigning national champion Sannoh High School. The underdog

Shohoku squad stage a miraculous comeback to pull within a single point when Rukawa rises to shoot and instead with one second left passes the ball to Sakuragi, who then sinks the game-winning shot. Inoue, who had had enough of deadline-driven basketball manga work and felt that he could never top the climactic Shohoku-Sannoh game, then abruptly terminated the series by revealing that Shohoku loses in the next round and intimating that his characters will continue to grow. This summary of *Slam Dunk* fails to capture its savory characters, intense excitement, authentic basketball, and fresh play with the stale conventions of the sports manga genre.

While Inoue was still creating *Slam Dunk*, his primary audience of junior high and high school boys extended to include younger boys and adult salarymen and a large number of their female counterparts. In 1995 when I gave a *Slam Dunk* survey to 211 Kagoshima University students, I was amazed to learn that 89% of the men and 69% of the women regularly read the manga. Even now, seven years after Inoue stopped working on the manga, all of my male and female Fukuoka University students are familiar with *Slam Dunk*, and many of them remember it fondly, continue to re-read it, and enjoy discussing its characters. Although Inoue went on to create *Buzzer Beater* (1997), a science fiction basketball story, and is currently working on *Vagabond* (1999-present) an immensely popular adaptation of a biographical samurai epic, *Slam Dunk* remains the best-loved of his manga. Ever since he stopped *Slam Dunk*, readers have been asking him to resume it, and he is considering doing so.

Slam Dunk appeared in black and white, roughly twenty-page installments in the weekly manga anthology magazine *Shonen Jump*,

which in the mid-1990s sold about 6,500,000 copies per week (statistics are courtesy of the *Shuppan Kagaku Kenkyūjo* [The Publishing Research Institute]). Aimed at junior and senior high school boys but also read by many older and younger males as well as by many females, *Shonen Jump* is the top-selling weekly manga magazine in Japan, and among its varied group of about twenty serialized stories from different genres *Slam Dunk* was the most popular in its heyday. Because of its popularity, *Slam Dunk's* weekly chapters were gathered into thirty-one *tankōbon* (paperback volumes) of about 185 pages that appeared every other month. The first twenty-two *tankōbon* had sold 65,000,000 copies by 1995, all thirty-one are still in print and on the shelves of every Japanese bookstore that carries manga (and most do) along with deluxe editions with new cover art, and the first one went through its fiftieth printing in 2000. The high *tankōbon* sales led to a *Slam Dunk* cartoon shown for several years in the 1990s on prime time Saturday night television that gained a high viewer rating of 17%-18%, with about 8,000,000 Japanese households tuning in. Three feature-length animated movies were produced, stills from which were used to make glossy color manga. Countless *Slam Dunk* spin-off products--including clothes, school and sports supplies, clocks, calendars, candy, posters, drinking glasses, lip-gloss, shampoo, novelizations, toys, and games--inundated the market.

Slam Dunk even spawned a legion of unofficial manga wherein talented fan artists indulged their own fantasies for the characters. For example, in *Dunk 3* (1994), a "Slam Dunk Anthology," Sakuragi, Rukawa, and the star player from a rival team engage in homoerotic encounters after practice. Made with high production values and sold in many bookstores, these fan

manga demonstrate the degree to which the *Slam Dunk* characters established lives of their own in the lives of their readers. The toleration of such fan manga points to a difference between the worlds of Japanese manga and American comics. It is inconceivable that DC, for instance, would permit fans to create and sell their own comics featuring Superman, Batman, and Robin in a ménage-a-trois. Japanese creators like Inoue and their publishers, on the other hand, avoid pursuing copyright infringement suits because fan manga are perceived to measure and even to increase the popularity of the original product rather than harm it.

2 Why *Slam Dunk* Is Popular in Japan

The popularity of *Slam Dunk* is intertwined with the recent and ever-increasing popularity of the National Basketball Association in Japan. In the early 1990s NHK, Japan's national television network, began broadcasting two satellite channels, one of which regularly shows NBA games beamed from America. As of 1995 nearly seven million Japanese households had bought cheap satellite dishes and subscribed to the channels. This technology (as well as the more recent proliferation of cable channels) has helped to increase the popularity of basketball, signs of which are everywhere in Japan. In 1995, domestic flights on Japan Airlines showed twenty minutes of highlights from the final game of the 1995 NBA championship finals. The most popular spectator event at the 1995 Universiad Games held in Fukuoka, Japan, was basketball. A prime time television commercial for hair tonic changed in August of 1995 from featuring a soccer player to showing a basketball player execute a slam dunk before throwing a pass with a green tonic ball that returns to him and

splashes into his stylish hair. And from 2000 the NBA has opened its regular season with games played in Japan.

As Frederik L. Schodt describes in *Manga! Manga!* (1983), manga is a varied medium with different genres for all ages, genders, and tastes. Japanese interested in basketball naturally gravitated towards *Slam Dunk*, whose popularity in turn increased interest in basketball. According to a 1995 article in the *Daily Yomiuri* newspaper, "Basketball has become popular partly because professional U.S. basketball is gaining ground in Japan and also because of the comic strip *Slam Dunk*, which ... is a big hit among students" ("Middle"). This introduction of a hot, new sport via a hot, new manga may have far-reaching social effects, as when in the early 1980s *Shonen Jump* began publishing Yohichi Takahashi's soccer manga *Captain Tsubasa*, and millions of Japanese kids fueled a soccer boom which led to the founding of the J-League, the first professional Japanese soccer league. *Slam Dunk* has also changed Japanese sports culture. A Tokyo Junior High School Sports Federation survey in 1995 of 180,000 students from 415 Tokyo schools revealed that *Slam Dunk* spurred boys and girls combined to replace soccer and baseball with basketball as their favorite sport. And the star player from the real-world 1994 Japanese national high school basketball championship team emulated the hairstyle, armband placement, and attitude of Rukawa, the star player from the manga. Basketball has become trendy in Japan, and part of the attraction of *Slam Dunk* is that it captures the fresh, fashionable, and American ambiance of the sport. The NBA influence pervades the manga, from the constant use of American basketball jargon like "slam dunk," to the depiction of the characters, many of whom wear Air Jordan Nike basketball shoes and look or play like such

real NBA stars as Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Shaquille O'Neal.

As Peter Tasker writes, "One side of modern Japan" is "the dynamic mix of influences and ideas. Few cultures have been as porous, as thirstily absorbent of the foreign and the new" (13). The key is that when Japan absorbs popular culture phenomena like Dungeons and Dragons, rap music, and basketball from abroad, it modifies them to suit and stimulate Japanese culture. Thus in Japan American basketball feels Japanese in many ways. Informal "pick-up" basketball games, for example, are organized via *jan-ken* (paper-scissors-rock) contests between pairs of players of equal ability and size, which results in equally matched teams. Children or adults regularly use *jan-ken* in myriad contexts to make decisions based on luck or fate, enabling people to downplay or hide individual abilities or desires. In America, conversely, pick-up basketball games are usually organized by the order in which players successfully shoot free throws, which results in teams determined by assertiveness and basketball ability and one-sided games. *Slam Dunk*--like Japanese culture as a whole--has taken the pleasure, drama, and action of the American game, borrowed the seductive styles of the NBA's biggest stars, and placed all these in a familiar, safe, and fashionable Japanese context. Shohoku's basketball coach Anzai, having attained enlightenment, never loses his cool and always wears a traditional Japanese *yukata* in his traditional Japanese house (Fig. 1) with his traditional Japanese garden and his traditional *kimono*-clad Japanese wife. When students listed their favorite characters in my survey, they frequently explained their choices in terms of style, and one person wrote, "*Slam Dunk* is a fashion sports manga." Inoue shrewdly fuels this desire for the new fashion-sport by having his characters flaunt

cool attitudes and stylish hair-dos and clothes currently popular among Japanese young people on television dramas and in real life (Fig. 2).

Indeed, Japanese popular culture depicts American artifacts as safe only in Japan. Because of the perceived authenticity and vigor of American culture, along with the sensational mass media coverage of drug abuse, crime, and the murders of Japanese students there, Japanese popular culture depicts America as a fascinating, decadent, dangerous place for innocent Japanese reminiscent of how nineteenth-century American novels like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860) and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) presented Europe for Americans. In *Slam Dunk*, for example, coach Anzai opposes Rukawa's desire to go to America to improve his basketball skills because in the past he coached a player who went to America for the same reason, a player who, alone in the "basketball country," lost his Japanese grounding and under the influence of drugs killed himself in a car accident.

Along with their enthusiasm for basketball, the most common reason cited by students for the survey question "Why do you like *Slam Dunk*?" is that it is more realistic and humorous than other sports manga. Inoue's authentic depiction of exciting basketball action pulls the reader into the world of *Slam Dunk*. Inoue played basketball in high school, has absorbed the look and feel of NBA basketball, and conveys his grasp of the sport through his masterful application of the many pictorial and narrative techniques available to Japanese manga creators. He uses a variety of dynamic camera angles to heighten excitement (Fig. 3). To increase the emotional impact and excitement of his story, he arranges panels of different sizes and shapes in different layouts (Fig. 4). In moments of high

drama, he switches between detailed backgrounds to empty backgrounds to focus attention on the characters (Fig. 5) or to backgrounds streaked with motion lines to create a powerful feeling of speed and energy, either when characters move at high speed (Fig. 3) or when they remain stationary while witnessing an important event (Fig. 4). He draws small motion lines around character outlines to convey quick movement (Fig. 3). He also affectingly manipulates time by, for example, drawing series of close-up shots of various characters reacting to a single important event, each panel occurring at the same moment (Fig. 4). In one game a player attempts a crucial three-point shot, and while the ball is in mid-air a series of panels show the anticipation-filled faces of various players, coaches, and fans simultaneously watching the ball. This stops time in the narrative world while the reader anxiously scans the panels. Just after the ball begins to enter the hoop in the last panel of the sequence, the chapter ends, and in the next chapter while the ball is still in mid-air Inoue writes a twenty-page flashback covering three years, finally releasing the reader from suspense and re-starting time in the story and revealing the outcome of the shot with several other panels of simultaneous character reactions.

Inoue's photographic and expressionistic realism, his clear and dynamic rendering of basketball, and his manipulation of time create an irresistible basketball hyper-reality that makes his readers feel they are watching live basketball games as they turn the pages of *Slam Dunk*. Other manga depict their sports less authentically, so that their readers feel manga reality instead of sports reality. Takahashi's soccer story *Captain Tsubasa* (1982-present), the other dominant *Shonen Jump* sports manga, exemplifies the typical unrealistic art of the sports genre. The

Captain Tsubasa characters possess inhumanly elongated legs and enlarged eyes far removed from the compact bodies and almond eyes of most Japanese soccer players. In Takahashi's manga never-sweating players perform maneuvers and body contortions impossible for human beings. Despite using many of the same artistic techniques as Inoue, Takahashi's soccer artwork fails to convey an authentic soccer experience. *Slam Dunk* does use a selective, heroic realism that emphasizes appealing human qualities and ignores less favorable ones. According to their survey answers, students like *Slam Dunk* because the art is clean and beautiful as well as realistic. Although the characters sweat profusely during games, none has acne or body hair and most are clean, beautiful, handsome, and healthy. Nevertheless, they are physically human. Their heights, weights, proportions, and eyes correspond to those of real-life Japanese high school players. Few Japanese high school players can jump high enough to slam dunk as dramatically as several characters sometimes do, and the level of the best *Slam Dunk* players often resembles that of NBA players, but all their feats are humanly possible, and most are possible for Japanese athletes. In their survey answers male and female students said that because the *Slam Dunk* basketball action is realistic they enjoy imitating it.

Another key aspect of Inoue's realism is that *Slam Dunk* occurs in an authentic Japanese high school world. Readers experience familiar things like school front gates, boring teachers, classroom naps, red marks on homework, scary bad boys, and one-sided love affairs. At one point Sakuragi and several teammates must study all night to pass make-up exams to avoid being kicked off the team. This high school setting, although pushed to the background during basketball games lasting for

several hundred pages, places the games in an easily understandable context. Japanese readers would not want a high school story that realistically depicts horrible *shiken jigoku*, the "examination hell" of difficult high school and university entrance exams that determine the professional futures of young Japanese (Brown 23), or the prevalent vicious bullying, or the all too common suicides that result from these. Inoue therefore treats high school situations with selective realism. The senior players do not worry about impending college entrance exams, and no characters attend *juku*, cram schools attended in the evening by the vast majority of Japanese students (Brown 23). Japanese students read *Slam Dunk* because the selectively realistic setting grounds them in the school world in which they spend so much time and energy, and then liberates them from classes and entrance exam worries to become stylish students who play wonderful basketball.

In addition to its realism, *Slam Dunk* is unique among sports manga by being an engaging fusion of the heroic sports and exaggerated comedy genres of Japanese manga. Whereas most Japanese sports manga have one serious, heroic, prodigiously skilled protagonist and a bland supporting cast, *Slam Dunk* depicts many spicy, individuated characters and in Sakuragi an atypical protagonist, for one of his most important roles is comedy relief. Although he fancies himself a basketball genius, he is a mistake-prone novice, a comical tangle of explosive desires and feelings. The triangular relationship between Sakuragi, his beloved Haruko, and his rival on the basketball team, Rukawa, provokes most of his funny actions. Whenever Sakuragi is with Haruko he blushes and grins fatuously (Fig. 2). Because Haruko has a crush on Rukawa, a true basketball genius, Sakuragi

envies him (Fig. 1). The heated rivalry between the pair drives the comedy that prevents *Slam Dunk* from becoming a dull, heroic team togetherness story. In the most suspenseful games Sakuragi suffers hilarious paroxysms of jealous rage whenever Rukawa makes a skillful shot, and Rukawa calls Sakuragi a *doaho* (big fool) whenever the beginner makes a mistake. Red-haired, manic-depressive, talkative, raw Sakuragi and black-haired, impassive, laconic, skilled Rukawa are such appealing comedic foils that when my students listed their three favorite characters, Sakuragi received most mentions (ninety-six), with Rukawa a close second (eighty-eight), and the next character a distant third (forty-six).

Sakuragi and Rukawa are successful humorous foils because they represent conflicting stereotypical Japanese and Western personality types. Rukawa is the ideal Japanese male hero: black-haired, silent, handsome, skilled, spirited, and apparently unemotional. Sakuragi, a former *yankii* (or Yankee, the Japanese term for juvenile delinquents with flamboyant dyed hair), embodies typical American traits as perceived by the Japanese: "a little rough, unpredictable, and immature in their frankness and ready display of emotions" (Reischauer 138). That students chose such different characters as their first and second favorites reveals an interesting ambivalence in Japanese culture. Sakuragi and Rukawa mirror the current clash in Japanese society between, as Edwin O. Reischauer puts it, "personal self-expression and social conformity" (159). Significantly, according to their survey answers male students find Sakuragi more appealing than Rukawa, whereas female students prefer Rukawa. One reason for this discrepancy is that male Japanese have fewer opportunities to express their emotions when sober than female Japanese do. Sakuragi's

self-centered emotional immaturity must create a nostalgic feeling in Japanese readers (especially male ones) for "the Garden of Eden-like state of early childhood" before "the age of six" after which they were "handed over to the care of school teachers and other outside agents of education" in whose hands "the chains of social conformity ... progressively tightened" (Buruma 23). Japanese readers simultaneously admire and criticize Rukawa and Sakuragi and their cultural stereotypes. By having Sakuragi make the winning basket on an assist from Rukawa in the Shohoku-Sannoh game, Inoue ultimately unites the two stereotypes.

Most pre-*Slam Dunk* Japanese sports manga reverently display noble, humorless, and single-minded heroes who are nearly inhuman in their fantastic athletic abilities and their suppression of emotions. Inoue, however, constantly pokes fun at his basketball heroes by revealing their human, often immature and petty emotions: embarrassment, jealousy, pride, anger, sadness, love, hate, and joy. Rapid shifts from heroic athletic endeavor to comical passion, often from one panel to the next, cause the reader to admire the characters one moment and to laugh at and empathize with them the next. In *Understanding Comics* (1993) Scott McCloud persuasively argues that "the more cartoony a face is ... the more people it could be said to describe" (31) and that "The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled ... we don't just observe the cartoon, we become it" (36). Appropriately, Inoue's art changes radically from the ground style of heroic realism (which uses selectively realistic detail, proportion, and modeling to depict characters performing brave athletic feats), to a style of cartoonish comedy (which uses exaggerated facial expressions, simple lines, and no modeling to show characters displaying

naked emotions). Sakuragi, who wears his heart on his basketball jersey, is drawn cartoonishly most often, when feeling angry (Fig. 1), happy (Fig. 2), smug (Fig. 5), and so on. But all the players, even the most dispassionate and heroic, have their feelings cartoonishly exposed. After an epic game that eliminates one team, for example, the huge rival team captains embrace, and Inoue suddenly switches to cartoonish art, drawing the players like weeping gorillas. Inoue's strategic shifts in artistic style from realistic to cartoonish for moments of intense and comical emotion have been influential. Dating from the first years of *Slam Dunk* similar shifts in manga of numerous genres have become ubiquitous. No other sports manga, however, before or after Inoue's, employs such drastic shifts in artistic style for comedic humanizing. Most do not change styles at all. *Slam Dunk* provides Japanese readers with the vicarious experience of loudly expressing emotions, which unless one is drunk is difficult to do in a society that prizes impassive or cheerful endurance and that discourages overt emotional displays (Reischauer 138).

Inoue also infuses a refreshing playfulness into his manga by self-reflexively satirizing the sports genre, *Slam Dunk*, and even himself. When, for example, Sakuragi imagines his poor skills to be excellent, his "self-image" is drawn with the thick line of super-human, macho sports manga like Ikki Kajiwara and Noboru Kawasaki's baseball classic *Kyōjin no Hoshi* (1966-1971). This traditional line, coupled with the reader's awareness that Sakuragi's real ability fails to match his imagined skill, underscores both the realism of *Slam Dunk* and the lack of realism of its genre. Additionally, to explain the rules and tactics of basketball for readers new to the sport, Inoue occasionally inserts himself into the manga

as Dr. T (for Takehiko), a cartoonishly rendered character who looks incapable of playing basketball, let alone of knowing anything about it. Dr. T (an incongruous allusion to the former great NBA player Dr. J) also occasionally appears after chapters to comment ironically on their contents, as when, hiding behind a cartoonish Sakuragi, he explains, "he's easy to draw this way." At one point Dr. T, wearing a t-shirt that says "manga creator," even comes to watch an important Shohoku game, and the few spectators who recognize him assert that they do not want his signature (Fig. 6). Dr. T's appearances in the story create a humorous self-reflexivity absent from other Japanese sports manga.

3 The Samurai-Sportsman-Salaryman Ethos

In general the art forms of Japanese popular culture, from movies and television shows to pop music and manga, strive to be *omoshiroi* (interesting in a fun way) and to avoid overtly political themes. Themes about, say, Japan's aggression in World War II or the plight of the *burakumin* caste of untouchables are avoided in Japanese popular culture. As Karel Van Wolferen says, "Japanese mass culture is tailor-made to sustain the orderly world of the salaryman. It stands out for the dearth of anything that might tax the political imagination" (230). Even when television dramas depict social problems like bullying and sexual harassment, they tend to do so sensationally or superficially rather than meaningfully or complexly. Perhaps the desire for light entertainment stems from how difficult and stressful life can be, particularly during the examination hell of adolescence and the career-oriented self-sacrifice of adulthood. *Slam Dunk* may seem to be just such an *omoshiroi*, apolitical work. Although self-destructive

juvenile delinquents appear early in his story, Inoue does not explore the social conditions that might produce such behavior. Nevertheless, the way in which *Slam Dunk* is *omoshiroi* carries a certain political effect, because the Japanese social system suppresses the emotions, rudeness, and ego that Inoue humorously and sympathetically depicts in his narrative world and because he subverts the heroic sports manga conventions that support that same system.

In "Protest and Rebellion: Fantasy Themes in Japanese Comics" (1991), Kenneth Alan Adams and Lester Hill, Jr. refer to Japanese sports manga as "stories about leisure activities" popular because Japanese men are denied them when they enter the adult world of work (123). Organized sports in Japanese schools, professional leagues, and manga, however, are more than leisure activities. When Japanese call someone a *supōtsuman* (sportsman) they imply that he is good at sports and more importantly is earnest and self-disciplined. Tasker writes, "Traditional Japanese sports have little connection with relaxation or fun. They derive from personal combat, and are pursued in order to 'forge' the body and spirit, a philosophy which usually carries over into modern sporting contests" (30). In *The Chrysanthemum and the Bat* (1977) Robert Whiting describes how Japanese baseball players follow a "*Samurai Code of Conduct*" with "roots in *Bushido*, a warrior's way of behavior dating from the 13th century" (37), behavior that "has helped shape the everyday world of education, business, politics, and, of course, baseball" (38). According to the code, "The player must be a total team member" (38), "undergo hard training" (44), "demonstrate fighting spirit" (49), and "recognize and respect the team pecking order" (58). Schodt similarly explains that in Japan "Sports ... incorporate

the best of the old *bushido* tradition:" *shūnen* (tenacity), *otoko-rashisa* (manliness), *gaman* (endurance), *konjō* (guts), and conformity to the team hierarchy (80-81). This vision of Japanese sports resembles Karel Van Wolferen's account of salaryman life:

In its "fighting spirit," its compulsory togetherness, its consciousness of rank within the company and more especially its proprietary treatment of the employee as a "family" member, in a way that clearly hinders his development as an individual, "salaryman life" is clearly reminiscent of the military tradition. (238)

Not coincidentally Japanese companies prefer to hire former members of high school and university sports teams, because they perceive them as already having begun to learn the attitudes and *keigo* (polite language) of the hierarchical corporate machine.

Schodt demonstrates that sports manga are "an acceptable surrogate for war comics" in a country that has few, due to the prohibition of war in the constitution (81). And in many ways sports manga are primers for how Japanese boys should behave in society when they grow up to be good samurai-salarymen. Sports manga provide role models who with guts, courage, and endurance and without significant outside interests or loves heroically sacrifice their private desires, individuality, and bodies to obey their seniors and to help their teams win. In the climactic game of the ultimate "sports-guts" manga, *Kyojin no Hoshi*, the hero tries so hard to pitch his team to victory that he destroys his arm. The theme song of the animated television version demands, "Until you fulfill your vows as a man/ You must sweat blood and ignore your tears." This hard and heroic ethos ostensibly shared by Japanese sportsmen, salarymen, and samurai is

but one of two schools of Japanese popular culture heroes.

Typical characteristics of the *koha* [hard school of heroes] are *stoicizumu* (stoicism), meaning a fondness for hardship and a horror of sex, and purity coupled with a fierce temper. The *nanpa* [soft school of heroes] is of course the direct opposite of all this: its members lack spirit, hate fights and like girls. Unlike the *koha* heroes, the soft school is rarely celebrated in popular culture. The ideal school is the hard school. (Buruma 143)

The *koha* hero dominates the sports manga genre.

Slam Dunk may appear to be just such a *koha* sportsman-samurai-salaryman socialization manga. A Japanese colleague to whom I loaned a *Slam Dunk* volume said, "It's a typical sports manga, teaching boys to try hard for their future companies." Indeed, characters exhort each other to "show your guts!" and to "win the war!" and refer to games as "battles" and tell each other to "practice until you die." Characters play so hard that sometimes they collapse or injure themselves, as in the Shohoku-Sannoh game when Sakuragi hurts his back but continues playing anyway. Moreover, *Slam Dunk* depicts basketball as vital to healthy, productive life in society. Without basketball, Sakuragi and two of his teammates would continue down violent paths to alienation and self-destruction. At one point Sakuragi has a flashback to a junior high school day when he beat up four high school toughs. Upon returning home he found his father unconscious and was prevented from fetching a doctor by the four guys he beat up and four other ruffians recruited to teach him a lesson. Since his father never makes another appearance in *Slam Dunk*, we presume that he has died partly as a result of Sakuragi's violence. The basketball world is

society, and the team is a family group, with coach Anzai the father. After causing his team to lose a big game, Sakuragi cuts off his rooster crest of bad-boy hair worn by characters in the genre of violent high school manga and comes to basketball practice with a crew-cut like that of a Buddhist monk, high school baseball player, or soldier.

However, by often satirizing the heroic sports genre and ethos, by reminding its readers via self-reflexive touches that it is after all only a manga, by injecting zany humor into the serious genre, by portraying Sakuragi's love for Haruko and jealousy of Rukawa as constant no matter how important the team and game may be, *Slam Dunk* demonstrates that guts, self-denial, and perseverance are admirable but must be humanized by fun, humor, and emotions. Sakuragi, in fact, pushes his body to its limits not to demonstrate his manliness or school spirit (he cares nothing for Shohoku as an entity), but rather to express his love for basketball and for Haruko, his muse. Moreover, Sakuragi combines characteristics from both the *koha* and *nanpa* schools of popular culture heroes, the endurance, fighting spirit, and violence of the former and the impatience, laughter, and love of girls of the latter. Traditionally, as Whiting says, "Emotional types have no place on a Japanese team" (66) and players "must follow the rule of sameness" (56), but Inoue makes clear that the emotional nature of Sakuragi and the vibrant individual personalities of the players meshed into a team help Shohoku win games. Sakuragi cuts his hair, but it remains bright red and even recalls the dyed hair of Dennis "the Menace" Rodman, the NBA's premier on-the-edge emotional individualist whose style of play Inoue gives to Sakuragi. Even Rukawa, who seems the epitome of the *koha* hero in that neither love nor girls enter his cool mind,

partakes of the *nanpa* school, for he possesses a strong, albeit dry, sense of humor. And Rukawa, like Sakuragi, colorfully expresses his strong ego when he plays basketball.

In addition to openly expressing his emotions, Sakuragi's character appealingly subverts the sportsman-samurai-salaryman ethos because of his strong ego and resulting comical rudeness to authority figures to whom most Japanese must show respect. Reischauer explains that "Hierarchy ... remains fundamental and pervasive throughout Japanese society, giving it its shape and character. Japan is divided up into numberless groups, each organized into multiple layers of status" (154). Vertical *kōhai-senpai* (junior-senior) hierarchies govern Japanese relationships in all spheres of society. When a person joins a school, a sports team, or a company, *kōhai-senpai* ties bind him or her for life with others who came before or come after; once a *kōhai* or *senpai*, always a *kōhai* or *senpai*. For the most part Reischauer favorably views the Japanese hierarchical social orientation. He asserts "that it breeds fewer of the tensions and resentments that are caused in the West by differences in status" (158). And for Reischauer the "sense of belonging" to the harmonious group outweighs the occasional "restiveness against superiors" (158). Even Reischauer, however, admits, "Beneath the surface of harmonious conformity have always seethed great pressures" (170). To my Western eyes many aspects of the *kōhai-senpai* system are irritatingly undemocratic. For example, the junior members of sports teams must address their seniors with *keigo* (polite language) and often cannot play their first year, being relegated to doing basic drills and cleaning the gym and sports equipment. My university students often recount the galling aspects of the *kōhai-senpai* system, as when their

seniors force them to sing embarrassing songs at *karaoke* parties, or to continue drinking liquor at school festivals after they have had enough, or to buy soft drinks and snacks for them. The constant subservience of a Japanese person towards *senpai* and other authority figures like bosses, teachers, and doctors often causes a smoldering resentment that is rarely expressed, never to the authority figures largely responsible for the feeling. Hence Sakuragi, who calls his revered basketball coach *oyaji* (pops) instead of *sensei* (teacher) or *kantoku* (coach) and his team-captain *gori* (gorilla) instead of *senpai* (senior), and who loudly complains when any of his *senpai* give him orders, is a fun character through whom to experience rebellious irreverence toward the hierarchical system. It must be exhilarating in moments of high drama for readers to see Sakuragi flap his coach's ample double chin or poke his team-captain in the ass.

Adams and Hill correctly argue that the powerful shock Japanese males experience when they are thrust from the spoiled boy-god status of early childhood into the restricted world of social conformity has created a vast array of manga that indulge in the protest and rebellion denied young men in real life. This partly explains the popularity of *Slam Dunk* and Sakuragi. But apart from a brief and misleading mention of sports as leisure, Adams and Hill focus on "oral themes, anal themes, and Oedipal themes" in manga (124). In fact, Adams and Hill may give the incorrect impression that the bulk of Japanese manga like *Shonen Jump* read by boys and men are primarily comprised of grotesque gags featuring orgiastic bouts of eating, prodigious piles of excrement, gigantic genital displays, and large-breasted demon women. But such manga were only ever a small part of the huge anthology magazines, were never popular

enough to merit their own *tankōbon* and television cartoons, and have been mostly absent from *Shonen Jump* since I arrived in Japan in September of 1993. The most popular manga like *Slam Dunk* lack such imagery. Instead, the rebellion of *Slam Dunk* consists of rude behavior towards authority figures and open expression of emotions and ego. In the sports manga genre this is a striking rebellion indeed.

In this context a few words about Inoue's choice of names for his protagonist are in order. Sakuragi, cherry tree, alludes generally to the Japanese sense of the beauty and transience of life and specifically to the imagery attached to young Japanese soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the nation in World War II. Cherry trees feature prominently in the commemorative art and the surrounding grounds of the Chiran museum dedicated to *kamikaze* pilots and the Yasukuni Shrine deifying Japanese soldiers who died in war (Cross). The implication is that like cherry blossoms, the lives of the soldiers were brief, their deaths beautiful. That Sakuragi is an egotistical, emotional, and buffoonish high school basketball player modeled after Dennis Rodman reveals the audacious nature of Inoue's choice. Sakuragi's given name Hanamichi is also rich with meaning. In *kabuki* theaters the *hanamichi* (flower-road) is the long, elevated walkway leading from the dressing room at the rear to the stage at the front. When actors walk down the *hanamichi* all eyes focus on them. With its colorfully costumed and made-up actors striking dramatic poses and declaiming almost incomprehensibly, *kabuki* has a gaudy, emotional, traditional, and serious image. The *hanamichi* enhances this image and is thus a perfect given name for Sakuragi, partaking of the gaudy and emotional aspects of *kabuki* and winking at the traditional and serious

ones. Inoue's naming of Hanamichi Sakuragi joins the *koha* and *nanpa* schools of popular culture heroes by alluding to the manly warrior tradition and to the effeminate dramatic one (male actors play female *kabuki* roles). More importantly, the naming invokes the nationalistic and highbrow strains of Japanese culture, satirizes them, and heightens Sakuragi's Japanese context as it melds with his American one.

4 Flying

The endearing features of Sakuragi's personality for students are his raw emotionalism and individualism. Several students wrote in their *Slam Dunk* survey answers that they have friends who act like Sakuragi. But in his expression of emotions and rudeness to seniors, Sakuragi is not a role model many Japanese readers will exactly follow. Sakuragi may provide readers only temporary imaginative liberation from the social constraints preventing them from openly expressing emotions and saying what they feel to authority figures. According to Ian Buruma in *A Japanese Mirror: Heroes and Villains of Japanese Culture* (1984), "Play [drinking and indulging in the fantasies of popular culture art forms like manga] often functions as a ritualized breaking of taboos, which are sacrosanct in daily life" (222). From this perspective Sakuragi is a negative example to follow pleurably in the manga and to avoid carefully in real life. When he calls his coach "pops," bellows "I'm a GENIUS basketball player," throws a temper tantrum, or visibly pines for Haruko, readers laugh, aware that in real life they cannot show such disrespect or raw emotion. Japanese popular culture, especially on television variety shows, teems with people like Sakuragi: gaudily clothed and dyed human cartoons who brazenly express their emotions and stand out from the crowd and who as a result

let their audiences use them as fun, safe avatars. To use Buruma's metaphor, such avatars and their fantasy worlds are unattainable "mirror" images of the viewers' "real" world (225).

Finally, however, Sakuragi is more than a vehicle for temporary escape from conformity and obedience to authority, more than a temporary indulgence in "play," more than a temporary return to "the Garden of Eden-like state of early childhood" (Buruma 23). The fact that Sakuragi exists in all his comical, raw, egoistic, emotional glory in the *koha* sports-guts manga tradition and is the most popular character in one of the most popular series reveals that Japan is gradually changing. As Tasker writes,

A succession of surveys carried out by government agencies and the mass media has registered a major change in the work attitudes of young salarymen ... [They] are keen to develop friendships and interests in the outside world ... These developments ... are more than just alterations in working conditions. They have profound implications for the whole of Japanese society and culture. The terms of the basic trade-off between the individual and the economic unit are starting to shift toward the Western model. (96)

The affirmation of individuality in *Slam Dunk* represents a significant change in the traditional sports manga genre that in turn reflects and helps to shape the current trend in post-economic bubble Japanese society whereby young people increasingly want to fulfill their own desires and to maintain healthy, happy lives of their own even while pursuing active careers.

This growing fascination with individuality appears in other Japanese

mass culture artifacts. The June 1995 NHK nightly television drama *Nagoya Okane Monogatari* (*Nagoya Money Story*) depicted a heroine struggling to make her own *ramen* (noodle) shop rather than working for a huge *ramen* corporation. In the prime time Sunday night television show *Tokuho Okoku* (*Special Report Kingdom*), camera teams ranged all over Japan looking for "scoops," ordinary people who do bizarre things, such as a woman who shops topless but for designs painted on her torso and a man who makes flutes out of drinking straws. And it is impossible to overestimate the impact in Japan of "Nomomania," the fascination with Major League Baseball pitcher Hideo Nomo, who rejected the command of his Japanese team's manager to "pitch until you die" and in 1995 left his Japanese team to follow his own happiness and career in American baseball. The Japanese mass media's feverish coverage of Nomo's rookie MLB season inspired many ordinary Japanese (in addition to fellow baseball players like Ichiro Suzuki and Hideki Matsui) to passionately pursue their often unconventional dreams. One flaw in Buruma's otherwise sound argument is that he seems to view Japanese society as static and its popular culture as "play" that neither reflects nor motivates social or individual change.

In *The Japanese: Portrait of a Nation* (1987) Tasker describes the traditional Japanese education system:

The all-consuming purpose of Japanese education is the same in *juku* [cram schools], state, and private schools--the passing of examinations... The humanist tradition of teaching people how to think is completely alien to the Japanese. Whether intended or not, the effect of the system they have devised is the exact opposite: to programme

people to distinguish and obey command signals. (84).

Many Japanese keenly feel their country's current recession caused by the bursting of the bubble economy of the early 1990s and believe that if their country is to thrive in the ever-changing information-based world community, they must change their social system, from primary schools to corporations, away from an excessive reliance on conformity and rote memorization and towards an encouragement of personal expression of different ideas, feelings, and actions. This is reflected in the recent attempts by the *Monbusho* (Ministry of Education) to introduce changes into the Japanese education system, including a greater emphasis on communication and social skills. Koki Hagino writes, "For democracy to flourish, people need a strong sense of individual worth and personal freedom ... a sense of individual purpose" (82), and that for Japan "to come to grips with the tremendous changes coming in the future ... new ways of thinking are essential. In Japan also there must be farsighted, creative thinkers ready to meet the challenges of the future" (84-85). It may be over-stating the case to say that Sakuragi is such a farsighted and creative thinker; after all, he is only a fictional high school basketball player. And yet he is creative on Inoue's basketball-court, and his popularity and that of *Slam Dunk* is surely a sign of a changing Japan that recognizes that to reverse its current recession and rise in juvenile crime, it will need both old-fashioned perseverance and new individualism.

In an introductory homework assignment my university students write about what animal they would like to be and why. In Japan, where most people live in crowded cities, in hierarchical relationships, and in a group-oriented social system, it is not surprising that the vast majority of

students say they would be birds. The reasons they give usually resemble, "I can be free to fly anywhere." One of the attractive things about basketball for Japanese readers is that it is associated with Americans, who are thought to express and communicate their true selves freely. And basketball is a sport especially suited to creativity, self-expression, and flight.

When it's played the way it's supposed to be played, basketball happens in the air, the pure air; flying, floating, elevated above the floor, levitating the way oppressed peoples of this earth imagine themselves in their dreams, as I do in my lifelong fantasies of escape and power, finally, at last, once and for all, free. (Wideman 1)

When you leap into the air with the ball, temporarily escaping gravity, your body's action expresses your inner self. A manga like *Slam Dunk*, in which students escape the classroom to run on the court and sometimes to fly, is seductive to Japanese readers. During a key game in the story a player soars to the basket for a slam dunk, and the speech balloon says, "Furii da!" ("He's free!" Fig. 4). In warm-ups before the Shohoku-Sannoh game, after both teams have left the court, Sakuragi runs down the *hanamichi* and leaps from the free-throw line to attempt an impossible slam dunk (Fig. 7). A disbelieving player shouts, "Tonda!?" ("He jumped!?!") *Tonda* is also how the past tense of the verb to fly is spoken, and the pun and question mark imply that Sakuragi may be flying. No matter that Sakuragi has once again overestimated his ability, misses the dunk, and falls foolishly flat on his back. For a moment he has flown, and that moment of flight is so different from that of the doomed young *kamikaze* pilots invoked by his name. Sakuragi's temporary flight, an attempt to

encourage his teammates, to intimidate the opposing team, and to show off his "genius" basketball ability to the audience, is an exhilarating and life-affirming act of self-expression.

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6 Figures (manga read from right to left, top to bottom)



Fig. 1. Sakuragi enraged after Rukawa shows him up in practice: "I hate that bastard!" In the top left panel Rukawa and coach Anzai talk in Anzai's traditional home. Inoue, Takehiko. *Slam Dunk*. Vol. 22. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1994. 40.



Fig. 2. Sakuragi on a "date" with his beloved Haruko to buy new basketball shoes. Inoue, Takehiko. *Slam Dunk*. Vol. 22. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1994. 178.

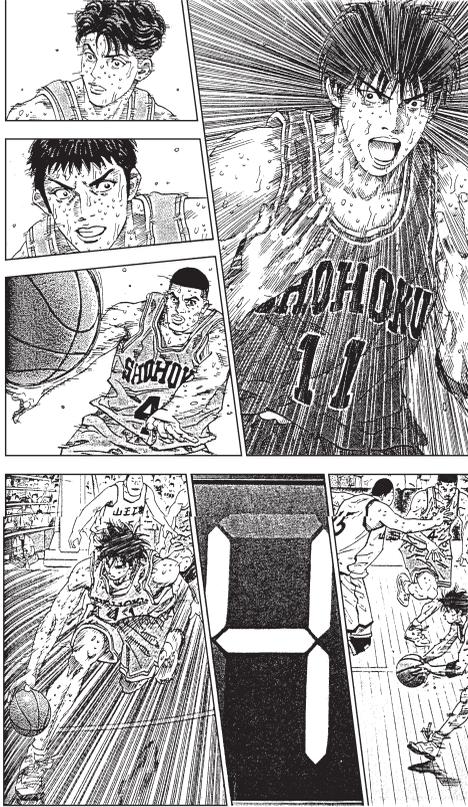


Fig. 3. Rukawa demanding the ball, receiving a pass, and speeding up the court with four seconds left. Inoue, Takehiko. *Slam Dunk*. Vol. 31. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1996. 132.



Fig. 4. A rival team's best player soaring toward a slam dunk: "He's free!" Inoue, Takehiko. *Slam Dunk*. Vol. 20. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1994. 110.



Fig. 5. Sakuragi feeling smug after being praised for a slam dunk attempt. Inoue, Takehiko. *Slam Dunk*. Vol. 18. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1994. 116



Fig. 6. Dr. T (Takehiko Inoue) spotted by fans before attending a big game (bottom panels). Inoue, Takehiko. *Slam Dunk*. Vol. 17. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1994. 109.



Fig. 7. Sakuragi attempting an awesome dunk before a big game: "He jumped!?"
Inoue, Takehiko. *Slam Dunk*. Vol. 25. Tokyo: Shueisha, 1995. 95.