

# *Philosophical Note*

(As I was passing by...)

## Times Change: Dr. TEZUKA Osamu and his *Dr. Black Jack*

ITO Ken\* (itoken@mb.kyoto-phu.ac.jp)

Kyoto Pharmaceutical University. Kyoto, Japan

Received: November 12, 2014

Accepted: December 28, 2014

Do you know “*Black Jack*”? Here, I am not referring to the casino banking game, but to the Japanese comics. *Black Jack* is one of the most famous Japanese comic series written and illustrated from 1973 to 1983 by TEZUKA Osamu (1928–1989; Pioneer of Japanese Cartooning) dealing with the medical adventures of the title character, *Doctor Black Jack*. Tezuka’s prolific output, pioneering techniques, and innovative redefinitions of genres earned him such titles as the “*Father of Manga*” and “*God of Comics*” in Japan. Additionally, he is often credited as the “*Godfather of Anime*” and is considered the Japanese equivalent to Walt Disney, who served as a major inspiration for Tezuka during his formative years. In addition, Tezuka assisted his junior cartoonists, and many of them subsequently became prominent cartoonists: e.g. FUJIO Fujiko (author of *Draemon*), MATSUMOTO Reiji (author of *Space Battleship Yamato*), and ISHINOMORI Shotaro (author of *Cyborg 009*), among others.

Why would such a great cartoonist as TEZUKA Osamu write a medical adventure like *Black Jack*? Because he was not only a cartoonist, but also a physician/surgeon, who graduated from the Faculty of Medicine, Osaka University, in 1951 as a medical surgeon with a doctorate in medicine. He went on to earn a Ph.D. for researching variant snail sperm cells in a study entitled “*Electron Microscope Studies on Membrane Structure of Irregular Sperm Cells*” at Nara Medical University in 1960. However, as he was very much buried in writing his comics, he never examined patients. Therefore, the main character of *Black Jack* may reflect his dream to serve as a surgeon.

A summary of *Black Jack* is as follows: the main character, *Dr. Black Jack*, was caught in a terrorist explosion in his childhood. His body suffered injuries in fourteen places, and one-third of his body skin was



©Tezuka Productions  
“*Black Jack*” created by Osamu Tezuka

burned. He was dying but due to the genius Dr. HOMMA Jotaro, he was saved from his moribund state miraculously, and fully recovered after intense rehabilitation. After recovery, he became a surgeon in order to ‘return’ the favor to Dr. Homma.

Through the years of practice, he became famous throughout the world for his outstanding surgical talent. However, the Japan Medical Association refused to consider him worthy of being accredited, as he was only a young doctor from a third-rate local medical university. As such, he could but finally went underground; he became an unlicensed medical doctor performing illegal medical procedures and treatment. He was skillful and talented, and many needed surgical interventions came begging to be surgically treated. When he operated on millionaires, he demanded exorbitant medical fees; however, when he treated the poor, needy and weak in society, he asked for nothing. *Dr. Black Jack* was like a

medical Robin Hood in Japanese comics, and also probably an avatar of Dr. TEZUKA Osamu.

Cartoonists then were despised in Japan, and their works were sometimes burned in Japanese public schools by parents who thought comic books were harmful to children. This vandalization of comic books by the Japanese public was like the burning of Chinese classics and the burying of Confucian scholars alive. In addition, a medical student from the University of Tokyo sent a letter to Tezuka condemning *Black Jack* as nonsense story not based on real medical science. Tezuka rebutted angrily, "Why can't he, a highly educated student of the University of Tokyo, understand fantasy in cartoons?" This genius may have felt frustrated and disappointed with such reactions from narrow-minded stereotypic readers, but he was never discouraged from continuing his creative activity.

After *Black Jack*, he continued to make many masterpieces, including *Hi no Tori (Phoenix)*, and *Buddha*, among others. By the time of his death in 1989, he had created over 700 comic series. These days, the conditions for writing and illustrating Japanese comic books and animation have changed significantly for good. The influence of Japanese comics and animation on people outside Japan has grown over the past two decades. In fact, Japanese comics have had an effect on many outside of Japan, and also a cultural aesthetic effect on educated readers and artists internationally. For example, the American Journal *Foreign Policy* noted in an article entitled '*Japan's Gross National Cool*' by Douglas McGray in 2001: "*Japan is reinventing superpower - again. Instead of collapsing beneath its widely reported political and economic misfortunes, Japan's global cultural influence has quietly grown. From pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and animation to cuisine, Japan looks more like a cultural superpower today than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic one. But can Japan build on its mastery of medium to project an equally powerful national message?*" In response to this new-found influence in 2010, the Japanese government advanced the ideal "*Cool Japan*", along with that of "*Gross National Cool*", as a symbol of various Japanese subculture superpower status, including comics and animation as part of an economic revitalization strategy. These facts indicate that the cultural status of modern Japanese modern comics and animation, as created by TEZUKA Osamu, has improved greatly in Japan.

As a matter of fact, many students were influenced by *Black Jack* and subsequently became medical doctors. The

story by a trainee doctor, "*Say Hello to Black Jack*", featuring Tezuka's story became a bestseller in 2002, and was later made into a movie. Furthermore, at the Museum of Osaka University, an exhibition featuring the work of TEZUKA Osamu entitled "Graduate of Osaka University – TEZUKA Osamu – a medical doctor or a cartoonist?" was held from April 28 to June 30, 2011, and the Dean of Graduate School of Medicine at Osaka University, Prof. HIRANO Toshio (the 17th president of Osaka University) lectured on TEZUKA Osamu during this exhibition.

This year, 2015, the most prestigious medical science society in Japan – The Japanese Association of Medical Sciences – is going to hold a *Black Jack* Exhibition in commemoration of the "29th General Assembly of the Japan Medical Congress 2015 Kansai" from February 28 to May 10, 2015 at the Kyoto International Manga Museum. It has taken over 40 years for medical 'Robin hood' *Dr. Black Jack* – given birth by Doctor/Cartoonist TEZUKA Osamu – to become a respected and adored hero for Japanese physicians and many others in both name and reality. Times change indeed.