
Bernabe, Marc. *Japanese in Mangaland 3: Intermediate Level*

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In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Japanese language courses continue to be popular in North America, but for different reasons than one would expect. Back in the early 1990s, when many American colleges and universities, partly out of fear and partly out of self-preservation, giddy from surfing on the first waves of globalization, created programs in Japanese, the expectation was that students would be interested in learning Japanese because Japan was an economic powerhouse and knowing Japanese would be a vital skill in an ever more competitive job market. Well, that perception sure changed! Before anyone could say “ohayoo-gozaimasu” (“good morning”), the Japanese economic “bubble” burst, and American students, especially business students, whose interest in the language was more pragmatic than anything else, were discovering that Japanese, in fact, was a difficult language to learn (aren’t they all, if you really want to learn a language well enough to be able to use it effortlessly and naturally?) and retreated to the relative safety of “bus law” and “stats.” By contrast, students today increasingly come to the Japanese language by way of popular culture, in particular *manga* and *anime*, and enroll in a Japanese language course to learn about their favorite comic characters more than anything else; and then gradually, as if by accident, they discover another, deeper level of Japanese culture. The growth of Japanese in the U.S. has been accompanied by the publication of many new and sometimes quite innovative texts and programs, among them the text under review here. Also, in the 2006-2007 academic year, the Advanced Placement test program implemented a test in Japanese for the first time.

Japanese in Mangaland 3 is the third and final volume in this series.¹ The author, professional translator and interpreter Marc Bernabe, a native of Barcelona, Spain, and a graduate of Kyoto University, set out to create a self-instructional text using *manga* to teach linguistic and cultural topics. Many American students today discover Japanese through *manga* and animation, which have made Japanese popular culture a worldwide phenomenon and inspired followers everywhere in a variety of media. Witness the huge success of the Hollywood film *Kill Bill*, which pays homage to Japanese pop art in clever but not always so subtle ways. The term *manga* literally means “spontaneous and meaningless drawings” (8) and is used in Japan to refer to comic books and cartoon strips. In the rest of the world, however, it is synonymous with Japanese comic books, which, believe it or not, make up a whopping 38.2% of all the books

¹ I refer readers to my two previously published reviews of volumes 1 and 2 in *The NECTFL Review* (nos. 57 and 59).

and magazines published annually in Japan. Moreover, *manga* are not only for children, as some Westerners might think. There are *manga* for just about everyone, from teenagers to businessmen and housewives. And *manga* come in a variety of styles. The heroes of *manga* are not all slender people with huge and shiny eyes, and all *manga* do not OD on violent fantasies and science fiction.

In point of fact, this text does not rely heavily on *manga*. I should hasten to add that — for copyright reasons no doubt — it has been difficult to reproduce real Japanese *manga*. A number of artists have worked as consultants to create the *manga* panels that illustrate the book, so anyone hoping to find authentic *manga* will be disappointed. However, the *manga* reproduced here are realistic in the sense that they are faithful to the general atmosphere of a *manga*, even though they might not be the real thing. I am not a big connoisseur of *manga* myself, but the *manga* in this text look “real” enough to me.

The third volume picks up where volume 2 ended, continuing the numeration of the chapters, and covers the following topics:

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Just as in the preceding two volumes, the chapters are divided between grammar (15 lessons) and conversation (4 lessons). As the term “grammar” suggests, the grammar lessons deal mainly with grammatical points, providing explanations in English, along with sample sentences, clarifying tables outlining patterns, and exercises.

As the author points out by way of introduction (4), students who have not digested volumes 1 and 2 would do well to at least have them handy, since volume 3 contains numerous cross-references and no *romaji*. This is the real thing: a young Japanese reading *manga* would presumably be confronted with the same type of scenario, where not only *kanji* but also colloquialisms and regional dialects are standard fare (though, in all honesty, I must admit that I found a fair number of honorific forms as well). A hard-working foreign student should be able to attain at least the intermediate level by the end of this volume and have a solid base to build on. The conversational lessons, by contrast, try to help students know what to say and do (cultural notes are included as well) once they are in Japan. The author would not want you to feel awkward in a hotel or restaurant, now would he?

The three appendices provide answers to the exercises, a grammar index (a most useful compilation of “all the grammatical expressions studied throughout the 60 lessons of Japanese in the *Mangaland* series’ three books” (5), and a vocabulary list containing almost 2000 words, which, in the author’s estimation, should be sufficient to pass the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (an internationally recognized test jointly administered by Japan Educational Exchanges and Services and Japan Foundation throughout the world every year in early December). As Bernabe explains: “This test has become standard to assess Japanese knowledge of non-native speakers, and it consists of four levels, the most difficult being level 1 and the easiest being level 4. We have created *Japanese in Mangaland* so it contains all the grammatical patterns, *kanji* and vocabulary required to pass levels 4 (elementary) and 3 (basic)” [6]. In my estimation, students who learn the material contained in these three volumes will have attained approximately the intermediate, i.e., fourth-semester level; however, it is far from certain that they will pass the Proficiency Test. Many topics, e.g., regional dialects (from Kyoto or Osaka), do not figure prominently in the Proficiency Test and, furthermore, the Japanese language that students are exposed to throughout the three volumes of this series is definitely too colloquial to be of much use while preparing for the Proficiency Test.

I like the compact format of the book, however, as well as the inclusion of popular culture. Many, if not most, of my students discover Japanese in the first place through popular culture like *manga* and *anime*, so why not give them something they might like? Still, I wonder how college-age students will react to pages jam-packed with grammatical explanations, which is what they will find at the beginning of each chapter at least. Their preference, if one is to judge by mainstream publishers in the U.S., is for a more user-friendly format with less information on each page and more classroom activities, not only pattern practice exercises but also interactive group activities. There is very little of that in this series, and the student spoiled by the lavish textbooks available on the American market today will feel frustrated: it is difficult enough for anyone to learn

Japanese without having to deal with the additional obstacle of an unwieldy text. Instead of trying harder to accommodate beginning students, however the author acts as if it's no big deal and adds another note to an already overcrowded page. Even though *manga* create a “cozy” feel and gradually seduce readers by drawing them into a fantasy universe, which for all practical purposes is very Japanese, my gut feeling is that this text best serves mature students working independently, as a supplement to a more traditional and user-friendly text teaching the basics.

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