

Manga Review

Yūji Kaku, *Jigokuraku / Hell's Paradise*

Translated from Japanese into German by Yuko Keller,
13 volumes, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020–2021

Manga are a special form of comics covering a much wider range of genres and themes than, for example, the DC or Marvel superhero comics. From books written for toddlers to morally and intellectually challenging works for adults, anything is possible.

The recently concluded manga *Jigokuraku / Hell's Paradise* was written and drawn by Yūji Kaku between 2018 and 2021. It is of special interest for scholars in theology and the study of religion as an example of a manga that on the one hand deals with morally and socially demanding issues and on the other hand advances and develops various religious motifs. The first chapter was published in 2018 in the magazine *Shōnen Jump*, and the work was completed in 2021. It comprises a total of 127 chapters, which have been collected into 13 volumes.¹

The cold-blooded and pitiless Shinobi assassin Gabimaru the Hollow, who lives in the Edo period, finds himself betrayed and imprisoned while on a mission for his village. He awaits his execution, but Sagiri, an executioner of the Yamada Asaemon clan, which specializes in executions and the testing of swords (*tameshigiri*), realises that Gabimaru is still attached to life out of love for his wife. The executioner makes him an offer he cannot refuse: to go on one last mission and find an immortality potion on an idyllic yet extremely dangerous island that will enable the Shogun to live forever. For this mission, a group of exceptionally capable death row inmates, each guarded by a clan member of the Yamada Asaemon, will travel to the island and look for the elixir of life.

1 In this review, I will reference the German edition; the manga has also been published in other languages, including English.

The manga can be divided into four major parts based on plot development: the first part (chapters 1 to 16) focuses on the recruitment of Gabimaru, the introduction of the other criminals, the process of selecting the prisoners to join the mission, and the arrival of the protagonists at the island.

In the second part (chapters 17 to 59), the group around Sagiri and Gabimaru find out that the island is ruled by seven immortal beings, called “The Lord Tensen”, who possess an elixir of life called “Tan”, which is gained from the life energy of humans. For this purpose, human beings are transformed into flowers by the Lord Tensen. The protagonists head to the centre of the island, the home of The Lord Tensen (Hōrai), encountering some of the immortal beings along the way. Gabimaru’s group of survivors learn of another mysterious power called “Tao”, which is used by The Lord Tensen to achieve superhuman powers. Tao can be mastered by anyone through the principles of Yin and Yang. The survivors focus on their personal development to also be able to use Tao.

In the third storyline (chapters 60 to 110), all survivors join forces to invade the Hōrai realm, steal the elixir of life, and escape from the island together. One of The Lord Tensen, Rien, prepares to leave for Japan, as she wants to turn all humans into Tan in order to retrieve the soul of her deceased husband. Before the survivors can escape from the island, a second scouting party arrives on the island and threatens them.

In the fourth and last part (chapters 111 to 127), after defeating the other members of The Lord Tensen, the group around Sagiri and Gabimaru experience their final encounter with Rien. Sagiri and Gabimaru, who have meanwhile mastered the use of Tao, face off against Rien, but she remains invulnerable through her total control and mastery of Tao. However, in a conversation with Gabimaru and Sagiri, she manages to accept death as a part of life and agrees to her own mortality. Eventually, Sagiri, Gabimaru, and their group return to Japan with the elixir of life, but collectively they decide to go into hiding and start a new life, except for two executioners and one supporting character, who receives the Shogun’s pardon. When they give the rescued elixir of life to the Shogun, it turns out that the price for eternal life is to be transformed into a tree.

Kaku’s work is very impressive, both aesthetically, in the detailed development of its characters, its treatment of complex existential questions, and its references to religious traditions, all of which are inspiring for studies in theology and the study of religion. The dark and expressive visual style creates an atmosphere of horror. The contrast of gentle floral motifs, such

as hibiscus blossoms, and death creates tension between beauty and doom (fig. 1).

This manga manages to reach a wide audience despite, or perhaps because of, its treatment of challenging topics such as immortality, questions of gender, and the personal benefits of a relationship with a divine being.

The manga is especially remarkable for its treatment of religions and religious worldviews, of which – as in other mangas – it combines several. On an iconographic level, for example Buddha statues can be found on the island; some of the monsters use prayer beads and preach the principle of non-violence (fig. 2).

However, the focus is on the principles of Daoism, such as the theory of the five elements or the principle of Yin and Yang. The protagonists themselves become seekers of enlightenment. Typically, religious principles are modified to fit into the manga's plot, whose principal function is entertainment.

Two other important themes of this manga are gender issues and corporeality. The question of bodily experience is particularly concentrated in the figures of The Lord Tensen who can change their gender. Through them, the topics of immortality, divinity, and spirituality are represented. The massive regenerative power and long lifespan of The Lord Tensen lead to their being worshipped as gods by the now extinct population of the island. The Lord Tensen instilled their own belief in the afterlife into the original islanders in order to keep them calm and to harvest their life energy for Tan (fig. 3).

People were slowly dying out due to their belief in The Lord Tensen, their faith not being life-sustaining but actually destructive. Thus, the manga raises questions about the meaning of divinity and faith as well as critical questions about the role and function of religious beliefs. What is it about a religion that is considered life-sustaining and life-enriching? And when do religions become destructive? How can one have an intimate relationship with (a) God? Interestingly, many of the main characters turn out to be also in a relationship with a divine being in one way or another. They draw their strength from prayer or other forms of religious piety. Gabimaru's wife, for example, keeps urging him to pray (fig. 4), and Sagiri wears prayer bells on her uniform, which ring for the souls of the departed.

Religions and theologically or socially relevant topics are not only an important part of the manga's plot and visual style itself, but also refer to relevant aspects of the cultural context in which the work was produced. Many people like to read manga with religious undertones, so the market

Fig. 1: A failed explorer returns in a boat. Yūji Kaku, *Hell's Paradise*, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020, vol. 1, chap. 1, p. 58.



Fig. 2: Some of the monsters with prayer beads. Yūji Kaku, *Hell's Paradise*, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020, vol. 2, chap. 7, p. 12.



Fig. 3: A supporting character captured to create Tan. Yūji Kaku, *Hell's Paradise*, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020, vol. 3, chap. 19, p. 45.



Fig. 4: Gabimaru's wife urges him to pray to God. Yūji Kaku, *Hell's Paradise*, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020, vol. 1, chap. 1, p. 17.

naturally adapts according to these needs. But this adaptation process is not unidirectional: through their enormous dissemination manga, and comics in general, can also become aids for religious and moral discernment.

Even though mangas were established in a particular cultural context, they can no longer be understood as “exclusively Japanese”, due to their global distribution. In his work, Yūji Kaku masterfully deals with current social developments and issues that have significance far beyond the borders of Japan. Even more importantly, he deals with burning theological questions of human existence. Personally, I was very impressed by his work and would strongly recommend reading this powerful and thought-provoking manga.