

The Understanding Reception of Reincarnation in Contemporary Japan As Seen in the Manga *Boku no chikyū o mamotte* (Please Save My Earth)”

By MIYAI Rika
Saitama Institute of Technology

1. INTRODUCTION

Some may find it astonishing when they learn that today, in the age of information perfected by science, some people still believe in a previous life (Jp.*zense*) and reincarnation¹ (Jp.*rinne tentho*). The fact is, though, we find a comparatively high percentage of young people who do so. According to a survey made by The Japanese Association for the Study of Religion and Society (“*Shukyo to shakai*” *gakkai*) more than half of university students believe in a previous life and reincarnation, or are likely to believe so. The youth’s perception of reincarnation differs, however, from the traditional views. In this paper I shall examine today’s way of understanding *reincarnation* and *previous life*, in particular the perception of the young generation, by looking at Manga (Japanese Comic books).

2. CHANGES IN TODAY’S PERCEPTION OF REINCARNATION AS SEEN IN MANGA

2.1 CONCEPTION OF THE ISSUE

In the Manga *Boku no chikyū o mamotte* (Please Save My Earth, below *Boku*) by Hiwatari Saki I suggest we can identify three kinds of attitudes to the ideas *previous life* and *reincarnation*.

Boku was serialized in the magazine *Hana to yume* between January 1987 and April 1994 and published in book form in 21 volumes.² It was a widely read girls’ comic and drew much attention at that time because it became entangled in a social issue. It was seen as socially problematic that young people, young girls in particular, believed in *previous life*, so the author wrote a “Statement of Fiction” which drew much attention (see details in 2.3 below). In the latter part of the tale, it is spelled out that one should not be captured by a *previous life* but treasure one’s life

¹ Reincarnation: the original word is *samsara*, a Buddhist technical term, which in other words, means rebirth as a result of karma. *Samsara* is generally translated as transmigration.

² Hiwatari Saki, *Boku no chikyū o mamotte*, 21 volumes, Hakusensha, June 1987 – August 1994.

here and now. That is conversant with today's youth, I think, pointing to a self-affirmative tendency. Let us proceed in due order below.

2.2 PREVIOUS EXISTENCE AS A REINFORCEMENT OF ONE'S PRESENT SELF – FIRST KIND

The late 1970's saw a new genre of books in Japan called *seishin sekai* (Spiritual World), and during the 1980's this *spiritual world*-genre attracted much attention. It was propelled by translations of American New Age literature by authors such as Shirley MacLean and subjects like channeling. The *spiritual world*-genre is basically affirmative of reincarnation aimed as it is at (re-)possessing one's original self and self-change.³ At New-Age seminars on self-cultivation one would find workshops on "Know your previous life" and one kind of counseling was called "Previous life Therapy".⁴ In the late 1980's, so-called occultism magazines featured ways of seeking friends who shared a previous life.⁵ Even among people with little interest in the spiritual world-genre, "seeking myself" became a keyword. "Previous existence" too became a buzzword. So we observe that young people, and girls in particular, took an interest in *previous life* and *reincarnation*, and believed in these phenomena when, in 1987, Boku began relating the tale of a high school student who meets friends from a *previous life*.

Boku's heroine is Sakaguchi Arisu, a high school girl whose *previous life* name is Mokuren [woman]. She has just changed school but soon learns that two of her new classmates lived together in a *previous life*. They are boys and their names are Ogura Jinpachi (*previous life* name Gyokuran [man]) and Nishikiori Issei (*previous life* name Enju [woman]). She also realizes that she herself lived in that life. The three classmates send the following reader's letter to the *Strange magazine Boo* in a search for friends still missing.

³ On the tendencies and characteristics of the *Spiritual World*-genre see Shimazono Susumu, *Seishin sekai noyukue – Gendai sekai to shin reisei undō*, Tōkyōdō shuppan, 1996. Shimazono argues for the concept of *shin reisei undo* (new spiritual movements).

⁴ In ordinary counseling one seeks the cause of relational problems in the client's childhood experiences. By contrast, Previous Life Therapy will seek the cause in a previous life. See Brian L. Weiss *Many Lives, Many Masters*, Japanese translation by Yamakawa Koya and Akiko, PHP Kenkyusho, PHP bunko 1997; in paperback published in 1999.

⁵ Here *so-called occultism* magazines refer to *Mu Magazine* (published by Gakushu kenkyusha) and *Twilight Zone* (published by KK World Photo Press). In his analysis of *Mu Magazine*, Takeoka Toshiki has noted that letters from readers on *teach me a way to know my previous life* first appeared in 1982, and that around 1985–86 there was an increase in books with an interest in *previous life*. In 1984 the first book published in the *Find yourself* sub-genre, *Seeking those who know I was someone* and it increased after 1985. (From 1987–88 there was a boom of people who would assist in realizing "the warrior in you, who is really you" and search for friends.) From May 1988 the *Twilight Zone* ran still more letters that mined previous lives and searched for people (what I call *searching friends who shared a previous life*), cf. Takeoka's "*Aum shinrikyo jiken*" *kanzen kaidoku* chapter 8 'Okaruto to aum shinrikyo', Tokyo: Bensey shuppan, 1999.

Hiiragi, Shukaido, Shion, Shusuran, if you are around, please get in touch. Here are Gyokuran, Mokuren and Enju.

(*Boku* vol. 2, p. 93)

Their method for seeking friends from a *previous life*, i.e. by placing a letter in a so-called occult magazine (*Boo* here is obviously a parody on the real magazine *Mu*), as well as the text's form was very popular in the late 1980s.

When the three succeed in meeting with their friends from their *previous life* — except Shukaido and Shion — they propose a toast “To our unconventional alumni meeting” (*Boku* vol.2, p. 129). And Arisu recalls “I have yearned for being Mokuren ... if only I could be Mokuren ... I wanted to join with Ogura and his friends ...” For Arisu, who has just transferred to her new school and still does not have any intimate friends, to recognize coexistence in a *previous life* is one method for making friends, just as if they had been school friends from an early age. For those who are often without orientation and indecisive, the *previous life* is, no matter how shallow, a tool for making new friends. It is beyond doubt exciting for these high school students to recall a *previous life* when they had far more power and influence.

For the characters in the comic book, and even more so for girls in reality who seek friends from a *previous life*, the *previous life* is a means to enhance personal relationships in the present. From this we may induce that at present their personal relationships are few and rather weak. Using girls who believe in a *previous life* as source material, Niyama Tetsu has concluded that these kinds of girls know for themselves that the *previous life* stories are the products of imagination and a necessary and essential part of their communication.⁶

Because they do not feel confident about their relations to close friends and boyfriends they apparently need to construct stories about how “we have been intimate friends since a *previous life*”.⁷ It is probably their lack of a sense of value in their present existence that makes them believe they had power in a *previous life*, like the characters in the comic books, and have been soldiers to save the world. We may say that the quest for one's own *raison d'être* in a previous life is one round in the *search for myself*.

I believe that the interest in *reincarnation*, rather than having its roots in the philosophical question “why am I here now,” is rooted in the need for a tool to enhance fragile identities and weak relations. The previous life sought for is such a tool.

⁶ Niyama Tetsu, *Jinrui kyusai no senshitati wa chokopafe ga osuki!* (Zense sho] o to iu ikai – genba hen), *Imadold no kamisama*, Takarajima special issue no. 114 (July 1990). JICC Shuppan kyoku, p.164.

⁷ Brian L. Weiss defines soul mate as ‘spirits that share experiences in repeated reincarnations and grow up together. Not lovers alone but also close friends and parent-children can be soul mates’. Weiss 1999, pp. 131–133.

2.3 STATEMENT OF FICTION BY THE AUTHOR (HIWATARI)

In the latter half of the 1980's the phenomenon of young girls who believed in *previous life* was treated as a social problem. Among other cases, one case from the summer of 1989 where three girls committed suicide in order to see their *previous life* created a great stir. Apparently also attention was caught that some of the readers of *Boku no chikyu o mamotte* believed in *previous life*. As a consequence the author wrote an unprecedented *Statement of Fiction* in volume 8, December 1989.

The content of *Boku no chikyu o mamotte* is pure fiction, solely the product of this crack-head from cover to cover. It is in no way a dramatization of any real event whatsoever. The tale can only evolve because it is fiction!! (..) I have received rather many letters revealing slightly dangerous ideas that are inspired by the tales of the special world of *Boku no chikyu o mamotte*. The senders think it may actually be possible to experience that world. Since Jinpachi and Arisu began their search for friends who shared memories of their *previous life*, letters of that kind have been skyrocketing. Some even write "Perhaps I am one of the characters in *Boku no chikyu o mamotte*, Could be I am a friend of you (the author) from a *previous life*. (*Boku* vol. 8, 'Wazuka no tawagoto' (the author's comment), no. 5 (p.59) and 6 (P. 73))

Volume 9 (May 1990) had reactions from the readers showing both sides regarding the Statement of Fiction. "As I had imagined, my statement caused a shock especially among readers in their teens," the author wrote (*Boku* vol. 9 'Wazuka no tawagoto' no. 2 (p.23)).

From those readers' letters we get a concrete understanding of the girl's situation when they believe in *previous life*. It indicates the author was shocked to learn of girls who sincerely believe in *previous life*. If this awareness was the cause or not we cannot know, but we can observe a change in the comic book's characters' attitude to the *previous life* that coincided with the publication of the *Statement of Fiction*.

2.4 ACQUISITION OF A NEW PRESENT SELF- THE SECOND KIND

After the publication of the *Statement of fiction*, the emphasis in *Boku* was shifted from *previous life* to the *present self*.

The persons in the story first superficially want to know their *previous life*, but gradually they become aware that that the *previous life* did not necessarily have a happy ending. Additionally, they suffer from their *previous life* memories, and as their *previous life* seizes them, it causes situations that interfere with their present life. This makes them skeptical about remembering their *previous life*, and they discuss how one can value the present life while being aware of one's *previous life*. The heroine Arisu has this monologue.

You'd be much better off without any of those *previous life* memories. If Rin [Kobayashi Rin, a primary school kid, who's *previous life* name is Shion] didn't have them he wouldn't suffer his bad dreams, and his mother, she would not have to cry. If I actually had had enlightenment as Mokuren, I wouldn't be the one I have been so far. In that case what would happen to my awareness of my family? And how about memories I have had up until now, what would become of them? I truly treasure my family and love them dearly, but Mokuren, she too must have had a family, right? Then I would suddenly have two families. Wonder what happened to Rin? If I had enlightenment [as Mokuren], perhaps my awareness and consciousness belong more to Mokuren than to Sakaguchi Arisu? If so, where is Sakaguchi Arisu heading? I'm afraid. I don't want to lose myself. I haven't had much experience. I've been quite indifferent, but anyway it is not Mokuren who shaped my personality and my way of living until now. "Sakaguchi Arisu" did it. (...) That's it! Everybody is suffering, aren't they? So even if we have memories of our *previous life* that isn't an asset. If the present is okay, that's okay, isn't it? Is it so bad? Won't it do? (*Boku* vol. 8, pp. 67-72)⁸

The characters suffer under their memories of *previous life* and try consciously to part with them. However, they have one row after another over their different approaches to *previous life*. They get loving support from grown-ups who were not expected to have any connection to their *previous life*, and so eventually they do not forget or deny their *previous life*. Instead they are reborn. In other words, they end up aiming for a future by building their present selves based on their *previous life*. The tale ends with the words of Kobayashi Rin (previous life name Shion), who was most deeply captivated by his *previous life*.

As I grow older, I really feel my hands are so tiny that it hurts. I felt much more like an adult than the adults around me, because I had Shion's memories. I thought "I've become a child!" The moment I noticed it, I said to myself- so, this is rebirth. (*Boku* vol. 21, p. 174)

Rebirth means to acknowledge the powerlessness of one's present self *as it is*, and assume the attitude that one will build a future on that fact. This theme is phrased frankly and directly in *Boku*, "Let's seek true enlightenment of the Earth and the future, grasping them as they are" (vol. 21, pp. 143-145). When the *previous life* has finally been recalled, one should grasp one's new self, i.e. accept the hard fact to accept oneself, admit one's powerlessness, and go on living from there into the future. Unlike the first kind, where *previous life* is simple a tool to be used by the present self, in this second kind, *previous life* is a memory one takes as an opportunity to structure a new self.

⁸ Strictly speaking these lines were not written after the publication of the *Statement of fiction*, but it indicates that the author, when drawing the sequence, had grasped the danger of people getting caught up in *previous life*.

I do not think it was the author's intention, but the concept of rebirth in *Boku* matches the modern view of *rebirth* we find in New Age derived philosophies and in *new new religions* of Japan. This view on *rebirth* holds that we are born into this world in order to get rid of the *karma* from our previous life and that through rebirth the spirit advances upwards.⁹ Furthermore, the self one catches afresh and is reborn as is oneself *just as one is*. Expressions like *just as one is* or *as it is* are not only favorites frequently used in New Age, they also belong to the conventional vocabulary in counseling. As I will explain shortly, it may have come with the tendency of self-affirmation.

Here I want to draw the attention to the fact that the characters in *Boku* only end up affirming their present self (*as it is*) after having been through a process that included many events and thoughts. In this, as we will see below, it differs from the modern self-affirmative approach that does not include any process.

2.5 THE MODERN TREND OF SELF AFFIRMATION – THIRD KIND “POST-*BAKU NO CHIKYUO MAMOTTE*”

Tenshi kinryoku (Angels Sanctuary) by Yuki Kaori from the latter half of the 1990's is another Manga with a similar story about high school teens tossed by their *previous life*.¹⁰ However, the characters are hardly plagued by their *previous life* memories or any mission left from their *previous life*. There is almost no struggle, rather it is an affirmation of the present self *I am I*. Let us look at expressions like “I will return” or “I will be back” to my present self. In the final chapter (*Tenshi kinryoku* vol. 20, no page numbers except for the first pages) the hero says, “... can't Sara [the hero's younger sister (MR)] at least return to earth?” “... I'll certainly follow later!!... to a place where I ought to return.” When he loses his power in a *previous life* he says, “So I'll just have to live like an ordinary man,” “Doesn't matter ... I'm just going back to start.” The hero clearly does not see rebirth in the sense of catching a new self the way the characters in *Boku no chikyu o mamotte* did. In *Tenshi kinryoku* he knows of his *previous life*, but this does not affect him or change his present self, and he consciously does not want to be affected.

Like the hero in *Tenshi kinryoku*, most students today who think that *previous life* and *reincarnation* are realities also think that though they had a *previous life*, their present self and life is most important. They

⁹ The concept of *rebirth* in New Age's and *new new religions* view is based on my 'Doctrinal philosophy derived from New Age' presented at the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions on 14 March 1997. The title then was “Modern Religions and Ultimate Doctrines”. For a succinct explanation of the view of *transmigration* in *new new religions*, see Kumata Kazuo, 'Rinne tensho' in Nihon Bukkyo Kenkyukai ed. *Nihon no bukkyo* vol. 6, Hozokan 1996, pp. 35-39.

¹⁰ Serialized in the monthly magazine *Hana toyume* between 1994 no. 15 and 2000 no. 22. Published in book form 20 volumes in *Hana toyume comics* between February 1995 and February 2001 by Hakusensha.

do not see any need for knowing the *previous life*. I think this is closely related to the trend to seek self-affirmation.

This tendency to seek self-affirmation is conspicuous in many other comic books aside from *Tenshi kinryoku* and the trend is not limited to world of Manga. We find it in the flood of diaries and essays on the Internet, and in the *self-expression* in home-made songs performed by street musicians, etc. We should not assume, however, that everyone has really found himself or herself. Behind the strong claims of "I am affirming myself" is hiding a very weak self that needs to exclude any strange element that might shake its self-estimation. It craves an excess of self-expression because it can only acknowledge and affirm itself if it is acknowledged by others. Based on the educational and social values of today that attach much importance to the individual and knowledge, there is a need for establishing a self. I think many attempt to affirm themselves by excluding any other elements including other persons, and skip the difficult process of grasping oneself in connection with others.

Taking the above into consideration, the tendency to acknowledge *previous life* as a fact, but at the same time wanting to preserve one's present existence untainted by *previous life* is most likely a result of fear of having one's fragile self exposed and shaken, so one refuses to know of a *previous life*. In the sense that it reflects self-uncertainty, the third stage is like the first, but its hetero-phobic tendency makes the third stage an extreme one.

3. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TODAY'S VIEW OF REBIRTH

In the preceding section I discussed today's view on *rebirth* as it is detectable in Manga. In this section I will discuss the characteristics of that view by comparing it with the traditional view.

As mentioned above, with respect to the modern view we find in comic books three kinds of views: to the first kind *previous life* is a means to enhance one's present self. The second kind thinks that by knowing the *previous life* one can grasp a new self (be reborn). The third kind recognizes *previous life* as a fact or a possibility but thinks it is unrelated to one's present self.

The most fundamental common characteristic of all three ways of perception is that they ultimately understand *rebirth* with their present life self as criterion. In other words, on one hand one is not oriented towards what is outside one's present self, on the other hand one understands *rebirth (previous lives)* to exist for the sake of one's present self. Focusing on these two points, I want to investigate the differences from the traditional view on *rebirth by karma*.

First, concerning the non-orientation towards what is outside of one's self. In the philosophy of ancient India from which the idea of *samsara* originated, *samsara (reincarnation)* means the chain of suffering. That is why one aspires for liberation from the chain of

suffering i.e. *rebirth*. In the modern understanding, however, *rebirth* is not suffering, and there is no wish for being freed from *reincarnation*, rather the main point is how should one live in the present.¹¹

This preoccupation of the modern view of *rebirth* on how one should live in the present deprives it of concern for the *future life/next life* to come. The future depicted in the comic books I am dealing with here is solely the day after tomorrow and the following day in the present life. It does not extent into the world after the next rebirth. Traditionally, it is said, the Chinese and Japanese view on *rebirth by karma* has been that after the present world one would be born into either hell (Jp. *Jigoku*) or the ultimate bliss (Jp. *Gokuraku*). The concepts of hell and ultimate bliss come together with the teaching on karmic retribution (Jp. *Inga Oho*). That is, based on the philosophy of karmic retribution – whereby one is born into one of the six states of existence of hell, hungry ghosts, beasts, asuras, humans, or gods as a consequence of good or evil acts – one will be born in hell if one did evil things, or in the land of ultimate bliss if one did well.¹² It became the foundation of a moral that aimed at encouraging good deeds and stopping bad acts. The modern view on *rebirth*, with its lack of concern for the *next life*, is independent of any ideas of reward for the good and punishment of the bad.

Next, let us look at how *rebirth (previous lives)* is viewed as a means for the present. As I have detailed in section 2.2 (First Kind) one is seeking in a *previous life* for an explanation of one's present existence. This view may be seen as particular to the self-centered present, but in fact we also find it in the traditional view on *rebirth by karma*, at least in Japan's traditional thinking. In the theory of karmic retribution we find a philosophy and a moral of self-responsibility, and unhappiness in the

¹¹ Among comic books, the classic on *reincarnation* is Tezuka Osamu's *Hi no tori* (Phoenix). It portrays transmigrating humans who suffer. The work is widely known and has been made into a movie etc, but I do not include it in my present analysis among other reasons because its attitude towards humans is unclear.

¹² The theory of karmic retribution was one of the most significant reasons for the original acceptance of Buddhism in China. From of old, the Chinese had the philosophy that doing good brings blessings and doing evil causes calamities [“The Way of Heaven is to bless the good and to punish the bad” (The Shao King IV bk. III, Chapter II, no. 3. In James Legge, tr. *The Chinese Classics, III The Shao King or The Book of Historical Documents*. Hong Kong University Press 1960, p. 186)], but in reality it does not always happen. The theory of karmic retribution was accepted as an explanation for the contradictions in reality, and it was regarded as the central philosophy in Buddhism. In other words, the theory of *rebirth by karma* was accepted as an ethic that could explain the present with its seemingly injustice, where one can be unhappy even if one does good, because one did bad things in the *previous life* (see Mori Mikisaburo, *Chugoku shisoshi* [History of Chinese Philosophy] Vol. 2. Daisan bunmeisha 1978, pp. 282–287). The Buddhist theory of karmic retribution was introduced in Japan as the Chinese understood it, and it became widely known via popular tales such as those we find in *Nihon ryoiki* and *Konjaku monogatari*. As the theory of karmic retribution spread it became associated with the idea of hell.

present life – poverty, social discrimination, physical handicaps – is explained by it. Thus *rebirth by karma* (= a *previous life*) becomes a tool with which one is plagued in the present. Today, “poverty, etc.” are not used as examples, but newer kinds of suffering are related to one’s identity. Today’s youths need the *previous life* to lend value to their present self, to make up for the lack of self-estimation from which they suffer in the present. To the young people, a *previous life* is a tool that prevents suffering in the present. As demonstrated above, there are differences in the kinds of suffering, depending on whether one is receptive or not receptive to suffering. Yet to understand it that is for the sake of the present self is not an idea limited to today. Above I have compared the view on rebirth in the Manga with the traditional view.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have discussed why today’s Japanese (the youth in particular) have come to talk about *rebirth* as it can be seen in the Manga, as well as their positive attitude towards it. I think the attitude is founded on suffering under uncertainty regarding the origin of one’s present self. In short, we may say that the reception of a new kind of *rebirth* naturally meets the needs of modern people.