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BOOKS

Buddha, 'god of comics' go way back

Buddha
Volume One: Kapilavastu
By Osamu Tezuka
Vertical, 400 pp, \$24.95

By Tom Westin
Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

It may come as a surprise that of the many Japanese comics to be translated into English this year, one of the most anticipated is already 30 years old, telling a story more than 2,500 years old.

Buddha, by Osamu Tezuka, was originally serialized in three comic magazines from 1972, yet it can still be found on the shelves of manga shops in graphic novel form.

Tezuka, the renowned "god of comics," who had already gained success with his *Astro Boy* and *Black Jack* series, decided to try his hand at a more challenging project. The result was the story of the life of the Buddha, which he expanded with added characters and subplots to create an epic tale.

Throughout much of the first volume, the Buddha does not even make an appearance, and the attention is focussed on the young boy Chapra and his mother, who were born into the slave class. Their paths cross with that of Tatta, a younger boy who is a thief and an untouchable, when the latter steals some fabric Chapra is transporting for his master and his mother is to be sold to pay for the loss.

The two boys rescue Chapra's mother, but soon after have a run-in with the great army of Kosala, which is marching on the town of Kapilavastu, capital of the Shakya kingdom. A war of conquest, led by the Kosala General Budai, is afoot, but is called off by strange happenings near Kapilavastu—locust swarms, water pouring from a mountain in the heat of summer and a white tiger seen in the forest—all omens that something momentous is about to occur in the city.

Oblivious to all this, Chapra saves General Budai's life and becomes his adopted son. He gains fame, skill and the attention of the Vizier's daughter,

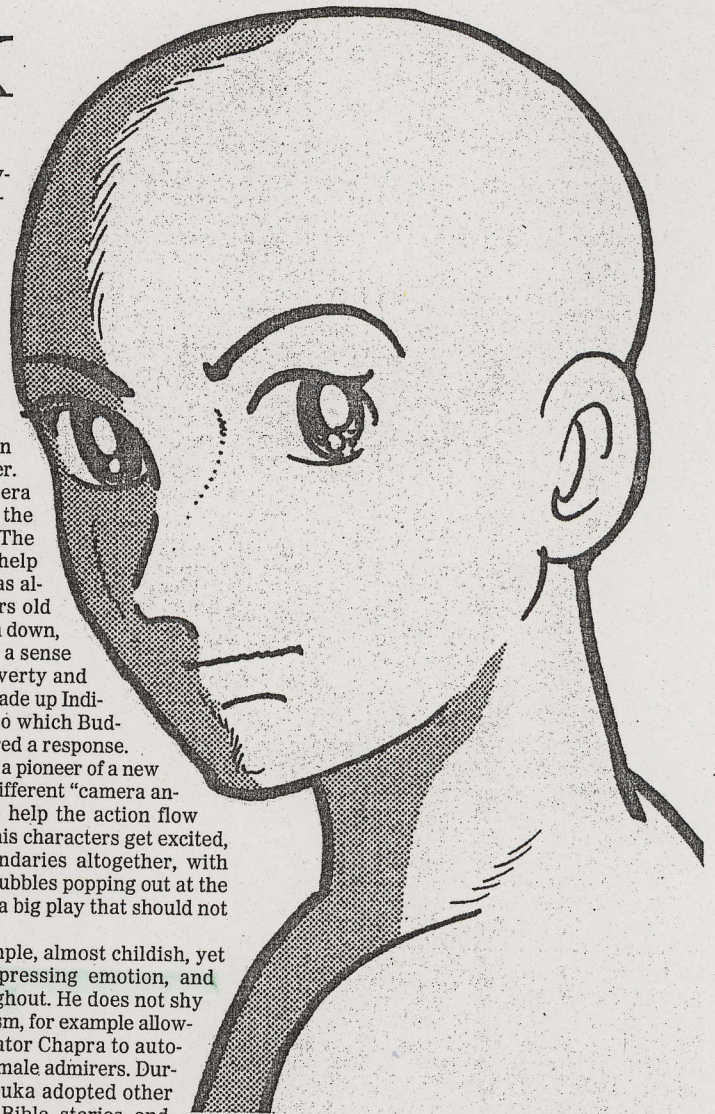
and looks to be moving up in the world—before tragedy strikes. Meanwhile, Chapra's mother and Tatta, whose family was massacred by Budai's rampaging troops, meet up with a monk who is convinced that Tatta, who can possess the bodies of animals, is the great leader of men prophesied by his master.

Thus a great soap opera is set in motion before the Buddha is even born. The latter-day additions help flesh out a story that was already hundreds of years old when it was first written down, yet also give the reader a sense of the caste system, poverty and constant warfare that made up Indian society at the time, to which Buddhism could be considered a response.

Tezuka was known as a pioneer of a new manga style, and used different "camera angles," as in a movie, to help the action flow across the page. When his characters get excited, they ignore frame boundaries altogether, with arms, heads or speech bubbles popping out at the reader, as if it is all just a big play that should not be taken too seriously.

The drawings are simple, almost childish, yet Tezuka is adept at expressing emotion, and humor is present throughout. He does not shy from creative anachronism, for example allowing the victorious gladiator Chapra to autograph palm leaves for female admirers. During his long career, Tezuka adopted other classic tales—such as Bible stories and Goethe's *Faust*—to manga and anime form, but his incessant use of comic relief, often in the form of slapstick comedy, saves them from the pitfall of self-importance.

The English translation, while generally adequate, is a little rough in places, especially in the speech of Tatta, the animal-loving outcast; the wilderness creatures are his "peeps," and Chapra's



mother his adopted "moms." Though this may be a case of "keeping it real" to the slang of the Japanese original, if the story is to last another 30 years, the flavor-of-the-moment vernacular will certainly seem dated.

Volume Two has just been released, and the final six installments of the eight volume set will be published next year.