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VERTICAL

Getting
Hip new line of
modern literature
from Japan is
'un-put-downable'

By Annie Nakao
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Establishing a cultural beachhead in the wilds of American publishing necessitates bold action and nerves of steel. Enter Vertical Inc., an upstart New York publisher that hopes to introduce millions of American readers — notoriously resistant to foreign translations — to Japanese pop fiction.

"Our books are simply un-put-downable," Vertical's editorial director, Ioannis Mentzas, claimed with cheerful confidence over the phone.

A packet of Vertical books, their eye-catching Chip Kidd covers exuding the essence of cool, recently arrived in the mail. There was "Ring," by Koji Suzuki, the Stephen King of Japan, whose technoid thriller became a DreamWorks horror hit; the latest issues of "Buddha," an eight-volume epic on the life and times of Siddhartha by Osamu Tezuka, the late godfather of Japanese manga, or comics; "Outlet," a noirish dissection of spirituality and sex by Randy Taguchi, Japan's "queen of the zine"; "Strangers," a thinking man's ghost story; and books one and two of the glittering "Guin Saga," the Harry Potter series of Japan.

No snow country or fragile court beauties here. Vertical's translated offerings are as different from the classical works of the "Big Three" literary giants of modern Japanese literature — Yasunari Kawabata, Yukio Mishima and Junichiro Tanizaki — as they are from the tomes on martial arts, geishas and flower arranging usually associated with Japan.

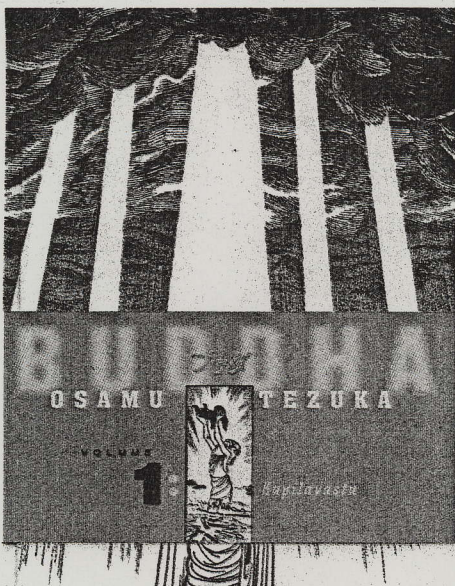
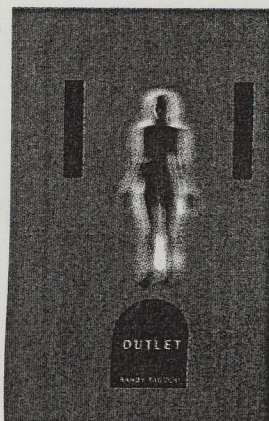
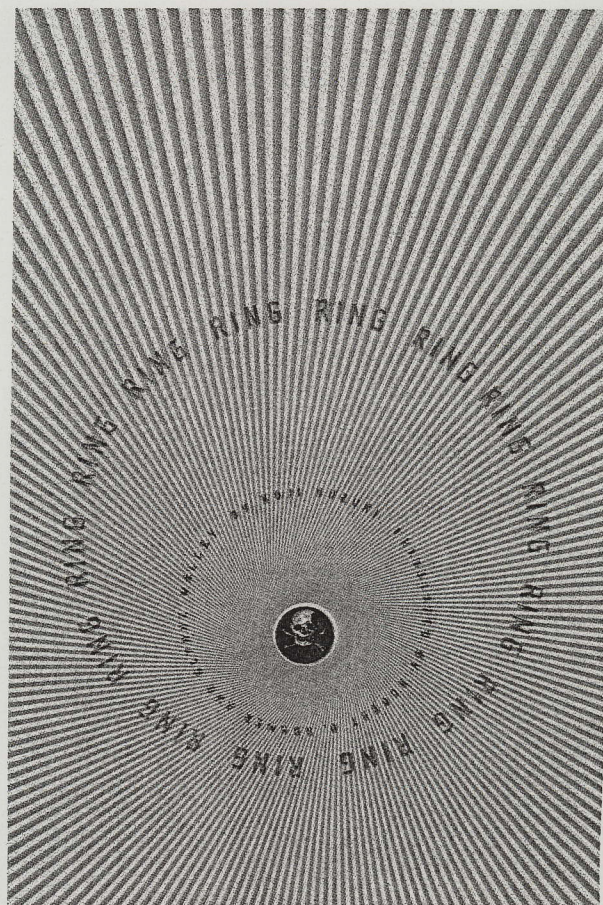
"We're trying to bring in stuff that doesn't fit the party line of what Americans think Japan's culture is like," said Micah Burch, Vertical's marketing director.

Maybe somebody hasn't told the young, ambitious folks at Vertical that America's sagging publishing industry is being held up mostly by surging sales in chick-lit books.

On the other hand, Vertical's timing couldn't be more perfect. Japan's global cultural influence — lately referred to as Japan's "gross national cool" — has been making inroads into pockets of the zeitgeist, and Vertical's books may just be the latest export to splash down.

"There is this hipster popular-culture fascination with Japan, especially in urban areas like San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles," says Rachel Fudge, senior editor of the Oakland magazine Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture.

With eye-catching covers and page-turning plots, the new line of books from Vertical rides the wave of Japan's "gross national cool."



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Capturing the enigma of Japanese American internment

No fragile beauties in this Japan

▶ VERTICAL
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"Books, comics (manga) and animation are really popular," said Fudge, who's become a fan after reading two Vertical novels, "Twinkle Twinkle" and "Outlet."

"There's also an almost kitschy Japanese style of clothing. A lot of fashion style zines capitalize on the look and on that super flat art style with its cartoony graphics."

Weaving right into this Japan pop or "J-pop" wave is Sofia Coppola's Oscar-winning "Lost in Translation," which, despite its overreliance on tired jokes about the Japanese, elicited "raves, raves, raves" from critics, in part because of the visual excitement she brought to capturing Tokyo youth culture. "The movie really got off easy on that level," Fudge noted. "Still, it was such a hit," she said. "People loved seeing that outsider view of Japan."

Ironically, the bursting of Japan's economic bubble in the 1990s sparked innovation in the arts that fueled Japan's "mighty engine of national cool," wrote Douglas McGraw, who coined the term in a 2002 article in Foreign Policy magazine.

Perhaps the biggest exports of this pop cultural cool have been manga, those ubiquitous comics that have become a national pastime in Japan, along with anime. U.S. manga sales exploded last year, reaching \$100 million. And publishers of manga series and its cousin, the graphic novels, including VIZ, LLC in San Francisco, are churning out more and more titles.

Japan's literary scene has also been transformed by contemporary Japanese writers like Banana Yoshimoto and Haruki Murakami, who weave tales around such wide-ranging subjects as food-obsessed orphans and mutant sheep.

"I remember buying some really old classical literature in Tokyo recently," said Steve Roddy, associate professor of modern and classical languages at the University of San Francisco. "The clerk said, 'Oh, you read this stuff?' Almost no one is paying any attention to those kinds of materials



Top: Koji Suzuki, author of "Ring." Bottom: Randy Taguchi, who wrote "Outlet." Left: The "Buddha" series, by Osamu Tezuka.

can ride along."

Vertical's uncommon profile has attracted attention. Its staff of five, nearly all 31 or younger, work in a small Park Avenue South office; another employee is in Tokyo.

"Sometimes, I'm the marketing director, sometimes the janitor," said Burch, a classmate of Mentzas'. Mentzas, 31, who studied comparative literature at Princeton and has a master's degree in English from Columbia University, is the son of a Greek father and Japanese mother. Burch, 30, a former tax lawyer, studied Japanese at Princeton and was a Fulbright scholar in Japan.

Both were recruited by Hiroki Sakai, who at 41 is the senior member of the group. Sakai, a former book editor at Nikkei, the Japanese Wall Street Journal, had always wondered why interesting Japanese novels never made it to the United States or Europe. He moved to the States in 1999 and two years later founded Vertical, whose name subtly refers to the way Japanese characters are read and written.

The firm is American but has substantial funding from Japan, including \$600,000 from the larger trading firm Itochu Corp. and other funding from Nikkei, Sakai's former employer.

Vertical has so far published 10 titles. Seventeen more are being released in 2004. To date, the company has kept to its stated method of picking Japanese best-sellers interesting enough that even non-Japanophiles would read them, and having them translated by a stable of youngish, native English-speaking translators.

"The books we pick have to have done really well in Japan," said Anne Makiko Ishii, Vertical's 24-year-old Japanese American publicist. "Second, they have to be able to make it in the American market. That is, if we can't get a fluid translation or if it's too specific to Japan, we drop it. Third, these books can't be exotic or about geishas."

For its distinctive packaging, Vertical went right to the top: Kidd, the book designer of choice in the publishing world.

"They've just been a dream to

work with," Kidd said. "The books are terrific, coupled with the fact that I get so much freedom — I've had the opportunity to visually invent a new hardcover publisher from scratch. It's any book designer's dream project."

Kidd's covers are hard to miss, from the geometric design of "Ring" to the elegant look of the "Buddha" series.

Kidd has been to Japan twice, where, he said, he "fell in love with the design of everything. It's visually and sensorially overwhelming, without that sense of menace you can get in other teeming urban environments. You don't ever feel threatened by the differentness of it. It's truly amazing."

Vertical hopes that same whiff of Japan cool can help sell its books. So far, the biggest sellers have been "Ring" — probably because of the recent U.S. cinematic remake of the Japanese film "Ringu," based on Suzuki's eerie tale of a murderous videotape — and "Buddha," a high-quality hardcover that's attracted not just manga fans.

"I just love the 'Buddha' book," said Phil Catalfo, senior editor of the Yoga Journal. "It's a really marvelous combination of pop culture, art and this amazingly powerful and moving story of Buddha. If anything, it's more relevant today than it was 2,500 years ago."

Vertical regards "Buddha" as a more "classical," serious manga — manga with "true literary value."

The series has attracted many manga fans, which Mentzas says was not unexpected.

"We feel the success of video games, animation and more recently, manga, has perhaps made a younger generation of Americans more comfortable with the Japanese culture, Japanese things, Japanese names," he said. "I feel they're familiar and comfortable with a foreign culture, in this case, Japanese, in a way that their parents' generation isn't. If parents want to know why their kids are so hooked on Japanese pop culture, the best way to find out is to read Vertical books."

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