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Transcultural Hybridization in Home- Grown German Manga

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Despite a history of visual storytelling and lively traditions of both children's literature and caricature for adults, the German-speaking countries did not develop a kind of comics industry until after World War II; even then, only West Germany was really in a position to do so on a capitalist basis, leaving Austria on the sidelines (for different reasons, and in its own fashion, East Germany also developed a small comics scene). In the years intervening, however, the few successful indigenous German-language comic characters have been greatly outnumbered, and very often outsold, by licensed imported material from other countries—particularly American and Franco-Belgian comics (Becker 1986: 48; Dolle-Weinkauff 2006: 2). As a result, comics were originally seen by many German-speaking critics as an inherently foreign, invading form (Springman 1995: 414; Jovanovic and Koch 1999: 107; Vasold 2004: 86, 90; Blaschitz 2008: 179–80).

These conditions created perforce a high degree of hybridity, as imported characters were localized with varying degrees of success for the German market, while local creations had little choice but to react to foreign product, whether by parodic critique, slavish imitation, or anything in between (Platthaus 2010: 4). Several generations of a small but dedicated German-speaking comics fandom grew up under these circumstances, which created something approaching what Jan Nederveen

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Pieterse has called a “translocal mélange culture” (1994: 161).

By the early 1990s, however, Germany’s small and import-dependent German comics industry had overextended itself, while at about the same time American and French comics were also suffering economic and creative crises; when, on top of that, recession hit the newly reunified German economy, there was a serious contraction of the comics scene. For several smaller publishers, the bottom simply fell out (Knigge 2004: 69–70; Malone 2010b: 324–5).

The surviving major comics publishing firms—in particular Carlsen Verlag and Egmont Ehapa Verlag, but also the Italian-owned Panini Verlag—then seized upon the rising interest in Japanese manga. When this interest took off in the late 1990s, they began aggressively licensing Japanese properties. These publishers soon made the happy discovery that manga, with its broad range of genres and styles, appealed as much to female readers as to males, thus virtually doubling their potential audience by drawing in girls and young women who had seldom read comics before, and leading to a correspondingly strong interest among the publishers in *shōjo* manga, aimed specifically at a female readership, in addition to the *shōnen* manga aimed at male readers (Böckem 2006: 9).

Up to this point, the importation of Japanese manga could be taken for simply another in the ongoing series of appropriations and localizations by which Germany has continually defined itself as a net importer, rather than as a producer and exporter, of comics culture. However, this new import quickly became more than a mere intercultural appropriation: the high level of active fan participation that is so crucial to manga culture made manga an excellent tool for recruiting consumers as potential producers. Thus Carlsen, Ehapa and newcomer Tokyopop Germany have not only been aggressive in licensing Japanese manga, but have also cultivated home-grown German artists via competitions and contests, and trained them, often at considerable expense. This is similar to the activities of a few U.S. publishers, but a distinct contrast to Germany’s comics-centric neighbour France, where the manga boom was just as much in evidence, there are probably more manga publishers—mainstream and niche combined—and the same do-it-yourself books were published; but by comparison there has been very little attempt to promote local French beginners as prospective mangaka¹. By turning to manga, in fact, the German publishers have opened participation in German comics production and consumption not only across the gender gap to young women, but also

¹ This is a reference not to *la nouvelle manga*, the movement spearheaded by Frédéric Boilet, but rather to a much less well-publicized phenomenon sometimes called *franga* or *manfra*. An example of *franga* is Reno Lemaire’s original series *Dreamland*, which has published nine volumes in Pika Edition’s *shōnen* line (Lemaire 2006).

to young artists from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds who might otherwise find little entry into public German-language culture (Malone 2010a: 233).

So far over 100 German manga have been published, and every publication apparently represents almost 100 submissions that were rejected. This wave of mangaka, overwhelmingly consisting of young women, and generally working within the conventions of shōjo manga—to the point that I have compared them elsewhere to Japan’s famous “Forty-Niners,” the *nijūyonen-gumi* (Malone 2009, internet)—are now combining imported manga aesthetics and the German language with their own ethnic backgrounds and their own individual influences and interests to create transcultural hybrid forms that reflect the increasing diversity and hybridity of culture in contemporary Germany and Austria.

Perhaps because of the lack of a strong indigenous comics tradition, a problematic “authenticity” to Japanese rather than European standards has become an important constraint within which these artists work, even in terms of the editorial process (though it is also true that the European editorial model in comics already has as much or more in common with the Japanese model as it does with the American model). Thus all of these German manga are not only published right-to-left in Japanese fashion, but they are also quite likely to be set in Japan or Asia, to have some or all main characters of Japanese or Asian origin, or at least to conform visually and generically to established stereotypes of manga styles; for example, the use of typical manga *emanata* or visual conventions for depicting emotions, such as the giant sweat drop that signals anxiety; or direct communication from artist to reader in separate side panels, which is particularly common in shōjo manga (Jüngst 2006: 253, 257; Malone 2010a: 231). In Nederveen Pieterse’s terms, this very much resembles “an assimilationist hybridity that leans over towards the centre, adopts the canon and mimics the hegemony” (1994: 172); the catch here, however, is that the canon and the hegemony are already located outside German-language culture. This otherwise dodgy but in a sense wonderfully unreachable ideal of authenticity has thus also allowed publishers and creators wiggle room to display a remarkable cultural diversity, as the following concrete examples demonstrate.

Judith Park, for instance, born in Duisburg of South Korean background, got her break by winning the 2002 *Manga Magie* contest in Cologne, going on in 2005 to win the Sondermann Prize at the Frankfurt Book Fair for her early work *Dystopia* (Park 2003). Park is one of the more prolific German mangaka, as well as one of the first to be published, and her manga are now available through licensing deals in France, Spain,

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Greece, Italy, Russia, South Korea, and the U.S. In Park's best-known work, *Y Square* and its sequel, *Y Square Plus*, there are two Japanese protagonists, one straight and one gay, but the story is set in South Korea and most of the other characters are Korean. Interestingly, there is no attempt whatsoever to make these historically quite significant ethnic differences a theme of the story; fortunately, all the characters speak perfect German, and there is conflict only over who is going to pair off with whom (Park 2004; Park 2007). This rather idyllic situation demonstrates that Park is constrained to produce imitation manga, rather than Korean-style *manhwa*, for instance, which would also read left to right in Western fashion—even though *manhwa* are also well-known and available in Germany. However, Park has produced more *manhwa*-like work for the local Korean immigrant community, and her forthcoming, though long delayed, manga volume is titled *Kimchi*, so it may be that her prominence will now enable her to bring her ethnic background into a more central position in her work.

A different relationship to Japanese culture, but within the same constraints, is exemplified in Ying Zhou Cheng's *Shanghai Passion*, the first genuine boys' love or homoerotic tale in German manga—certainly not the last, given the tremendous popularity of this subgenre. *Shanghai Passion* is set in 1930s China, where a young German attempting to make business connections with a local triad leader feels a strong fascination for his host's son. Cheng tries to reverse orientalist stereotypes by making the Westerner the passive, pursued party, the *uke*, and the Asian character the *seme*, the active one. At the same time, Cheng also includes as a side character a half-Japanese drag queen, who is forced to pass as fully Chinese to avoid anti-Japanese feelings stemming from Japan's then-recent occupation of Manchuria. This figure also symbolizes Cheng's own personal conflict as a Chinese who has grown up in Germany, "utterly without the influence of anti-Japanese education" (*vollkommen ohne Einfluss der anti-japanischen Erziehung*) who thus loves and draws manga, even manga in German, and not Chinese *manhua* (Cheng 2005; n.p.).

By contrast, Zhe Zhang, also from Shanghai and one of the minority of male mangaka in Germany, seems to experience no conflict working to the Japanese model. His fantasy series *Go Kids*, set in a magical world inside our earth where bands of seafaring adventurers hunt giant monster crabs. Like a number of his fellow German mangaka, whatever their background, Zhang sidesteps questions of cultural depiction by setting his story in a fantastic place, neither Eastern nor Western (quite literally, since it is inside the planet); aesthetically, however, the dynamically drawn *Go Kids*, with its *One Piece*-like exaggerations of perspective and its mix of magic and action,

fits comfortably within a shōnen manga style. This is really the exact opposite of Ying Zhou Cheng's narrative strategy, which deliberately sets *Shanghai Passion* in a geographically and historically specific moment in both Chinese and Japanese history in order to raise exactly such questions, and to equate questions of national identity with those of a sexual identity which proves fluid within her story. In Zhang's fantasy world, by comparison, perhaps not surprisingly, men are men and women are women—and giant monster crabs are giant monster crabs (Zhang 2007).

Perhaps the ultimate contrast in this context is provided by sisters Prin and Umi Konbu (nées Omura Chiharu and Omura Sachi respectively), who are among the few Japanese artists living in Germany. Trained in fashion design and illustration, they travel throughout Europe, offering popular courses in drawing manga. They are among the few German mangaka not published with one of the major companies, preferring to work with the smaller Eidalon Verlag, which, ironically, otherwise specializes in manga by Westerners. The Konbus' own series, *Tomoe*, is based on the story of Tomoe Gozen, a legendary 12th-century female samurai. Clearly, in the German context, the Konbus have a great deal of credibility as mangaka due to their background, particularly in terms of taking up Japanese historical themes, or jidaimono, which most German artists have avoided, deliberately or otherwise; and visually their work can be quite elegant, though it is uneven in quality (Konbu and Konbu 2004). Perhaps also because of their background, the cultural intermingling in their work seems to remain pretty much purely at the linguistic level. It is difficult to determine whether they're pitching their work at a European audience, or whether they would produce very similar work if they were publishing in Japan; however, I think it is likely that in Japan they would face a lot more competition in this particular genre, and much of would frankly be from stronger writers and artists.

Only a few German mangaka are of Asian background, however; more commonly, they are likely to be first- or second-generation immigrants from Eastern Europe, who do not bring the same cultural conflicts and baggage with them. Dorota Grabarczyk, originally from Poland, and Ukrainian Olga Andryienko met while taking dance lessons in Bonn. Discovering a common interest in manga, they began working together as DuO (a clever abbreviation of "Dorota und Olga"), developing an easily recognizable visual style—which mixes Western chic and *kawaii* cuteness—and a gift for tongue-in-cheek dialogue. Their series *Mon-Star Attack* and *Indépendent* are set not in Asia—although the protagonists of the earlier series bear the same Japanese pseudonyms as their creators, Reami (Grabarczyk's individual pen name) and Asu

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(that of Andryienko)—but rather in fantastic and savagely satirical versions of a generic, hyper-capitalist West (DuO 2004). *Indépendent*, for example, is about a fashion-obsessed Mafia boss's daughter who steals money from her dad and goes on the run with her best friend: the result is something like a remake of Ridley Scott's 1991 film *Thelma and Louise* with Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie in the lead roles (DuO 2006). Popular media themselves, including the news media, are often the target of DuO's satire, and in their early work *Mon-Star Attack* they make fun of their own pop-culture influences and draw attention to them at the same time: they stage the final climactic battle in a Museum of Defeated Super-Villains, where among the exhibits are the two-headed angel Sachiel from the Japanese anime *Shinseiki Ebuangerion* (Neon Genesis Evangelion), the black Venom costume from the American Marvel Comics series *Spider-Man*, and the sorcerer Gargamel from the Belgian bande dessinée *Les Schtroumpfs* (The Smurfs), created by Peyo (Pierre Culliford) (DuO 2004: n.p.).

Again in contrast, Christina Plaka, of Greek background, sets her long-running series about a struggling rock band in Tokyo itself, reflecting her own active interest in Japan, which has also led her formally to study Japanology. *Yonen Buzz* is currently published in France and in the U.S., besides in Germany (Plaka 2005). In fact, Plaka was the first European manga artist to be published in America. Notably, despite a good deal of effort in perfecting the Japanese look of her art, her fictitious band Plastic Chew (originally named Prussian Blue) are constrained to sing their grunge-influenced lyrics in English, since when the series began Plaka was not in a position to compose Japanese lyrics (Plaka 2003). Within the plot, this move is justified by band leader Jun's mixed Japanese-western parentage. At the same time, however, this also serves to reproduce a strategy common in both other German manga and in original Japanese works, where English is used as a marker of exotic and simultaneously cosmopolitan coolness.

A similar active interest in things Japanese ultimately led Czech-born Lenka Buschová to formally take up Japanese studies, but she had wanted to be a mangaka from the time she was 12; she won the Connichi convention's amateur manga contest in 2003, and went on to publish one volume of her comedy *Freaky Angel* (Buschová 2005). The titular angel, Hikari, is a kind of matchmaker who shows up to connect people who ought to be in love, making no distinction between heterosexual and homosexual pairings, in a manner that prefigures the eventual appropriation of outright boys' love themes, which was not long in coming in the form of Cheng's *Shanghai Passion*. Buschová's studies and work in advertising and web graphics have prevented

an official second volume of *Freaky Angel* from appearing (although it is at least partially available online in *dōjinshi* form; Buschová 2009, internet); this is a shame, because she combines a sly sense of humour—Hikari’s targets generally do not want her help that much—with a sharp depiction of Japanese *milieu* and a clarity of line that recalls Alfons Mucha as much as manga. One real strength of many German mangaka, including Buschová, is the fact that they so often supply very witty scripts, with a real love of playing with language—specifically, the German language, though many of them are bi- or multilingual. In fact, in most cases the very same wit can be found on the artists’ individual web pages, as proof that this is not merely a question of their editors polishing their work.

To conclude with a small selection of home-grown mangaka who are not the product of recent immigration: Alexandra Völker combines an interest in fashion and design comparable to that of DuO with a more filigreed, almost Gothic Lolita style in her two interrelated longer works *Catwalk* and *Paris*. Like many Japanese mangaka, Völker creates a parallel universe with strong connections to our own, though her characters’ hometown, Xela City, is also not unlike Superman’s Metropolis or Batman’s Gotham City: imaginary though it may be, there are convenient air connections to both Paris and Tokyo (“Xela,” of course, is simply the artist’s name, “Alex”, spelled backwards). *Catwalk* depicts the world of *haute couture* as a true *mélange* of ethnicities and gender-bending, with characters of mixed background and an equally androgynous heroine and love interest; in fact, a first-time reader might initially assume that the manga’s romance is *yuri*, or lesbian, because the male lead is as pretty and as heavily made up as the heroine, and spends so much time in kilts. Völker’s intricate visual style, with its trademark huge, doe-like eyes—they are probably among the biggest eyes in German manga—is assured and unmistakable (Völker 2006).

A rather more unusual style, at least initially, is that of Detta Zimmermann, whose three-volume *Isce!* has overtones of both Takahashi Rumiko’s *Inu Yasha* and Arakawa Hiromu’s *Hagane no renkinjutsushi* (Fullmetal Alchemist), with a spunky young heroine and an erratic hero with mysterious magical powers. Like Zhe Zhang, Zimmermann creates a complete fantasy world, though hers is more like a Miyazaki Hayao-style medieval Europe. However, in this early work she renders her scenes in a refreshingly sketchy, sometimes almost angular style that bears little resemblance to the stereotypes most Westerners have of manga. Since then, however, in her webcomics (none of which seem to be available online at present) and her later manga *Tarito Fairytale*, she’s worked towards a rounder, smoother style that is very professional

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looking and quite cute, but not as individual (Zimmermann 2008). One of the delights of *Iscel* is the band of street urchins who become the heroine's protectors and helpers, and who signal their outsider status by speaking in broad Viennese Austrian dialect while everyone around them speaks standard German (for example, Zimmermann 2006: 14–16).

One of Germany's largest and oldest post-war immigrant groups is its Turkish-descended population, and one of its youngest published mangaka is Reyhan Yildirim, who actually had to finish school before she could start her career. Her story *Tylsim* intertwines European and Turkish visual and narrative motifs into a lively fantasy world where the teenage Auru (from Latin *aurum*) and his dragon spirit Kita (a reversal of Turkish *atik*, "nimble") rescue the young witch Djady (from Turkish *cadi*, "witch") to battle the villain Karabasan, whose name is Turkish for "nightmare" despite his deceptive *bishōnen* good looks. The title *Tylsim* itself also comes from an ancient Turkish word for a magical stone (Yildirim 2008: n.p.). This combination of elements gives the story a visual and narrative flavour less like Western European fairy-tale fantasy than an Eastern folk adventure in the style of Ilya Muromets, and interestingly, the rights were sold to bring *Tylsim* out in Russia as well, under the Fabrika komiksov (Comics Factory) imprint (Yildirim 2009).

Finally, Anike Hage, who won the Leipzig Manga Talent contest in 2004, is one of the few German mangaka now working full-time as an artist and writer. Hage, unusually among this group, foregoes any Japanese, pseudo-Japanese or fantastic elements; her work remains identifiably western, though a hybrid of European and American elements, while still following the basic formal conventions of manga. *Gothic Sports* is set at a high school where the Goth kids and other "outsiders" form a soccer team to rival the school's official team. *Gothic Sports*, also published in France and the U.S., is marked by its strong premise, well-crafted characters, and Hage's clean, spare drawing style, which redefines the term *ligne claire* (Hage 2006). The fifth and final volume of *Gothic Sports* has finally been published; and Hage has recently gone on to produce a graphic novel adaptation of Gudrun Pausewang's novel for young readers, *Die Wolke* (The cloud) (Hage 2010).

Jan Nederveen Pieterse writes, "if we accept that cultures have been hybrid all along, hybridisation is in effect a tautology: contemporary accelerated globalisation means the hybridisation of hybrid cultures." This statement is certainly applicable to the German manga scene; Germany and Austria are already multicultural, globalized, hybrid. German manga merely put this hybridity on display in a uniquely forthright

manner. As Nederveen Pieterse further writes, however: “Hybridity unsettles the introverted concept of culture which underlies romantic nationalism, racism, ethnicism, religious revivalism, civilisational chauvinism, and cultural essentialism” (1994: 180). Many might think that this statement, too, has a particular resonance for German-language culture, and it does, but not only in stereotypical, predictable ways.

In 2000, when Christina Plaka first submitted work to Carlsen Verlag, she was told there were no opportunities. Not because she was a woman, not even because she was 17, but rather because neither publishers nor readers were interested in comics by German artists (Böckem 2006: 10). A decade later, Plaka is published and publishing, and Germans are reading her and her compatriots. Comics journalist and publisher Martin Jurgeit once even claimed that the future of German comics is manga: “These artists, with their sales and the chord they’ve struck among readers, have the best economic conditions that the coming generation of comics in Germany have ever had” (Pannor 2008, internet). The manga boom now appears to be ebbing—in the last few years, the percentage of the German comics market dedicated to manga has dropped from 75% to 60% (Pasamonik 2010, internet)—but a crucial change has nonetheless taken place. German manga may have helped break down barriers between people of different backgrounds, genders and identities, but they have also broken down an important barrier to recognizing that German speakers, no matter what their ethnic background, are as capable of producing good comics, at a global level of quality, as they are of consuming them. It is for this reason that these works well deserve to be called both “German” and “manga”.

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