

The attractions of intercultural exchange: Manga market and manga reception in Germany

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Abstract

Although Germany during the 19th century had a great tradition of own picture stories and comics it is since the end of WW II a comics importing country. Less than 10% of the contemporary comic production is of German origin. In earlier periods dominated by Italian, French, Belgian and North American comics, up from the middle of last decennium Manga and Manwha became step by step the favourites of the youngsters. In the present the generation that came in touch with the first manga in German language is grown up and is longing for their own “grown up”-stories.

Manga has lead to a big transformation of the comics market and a revolutionary distinction of the readership. The separation of adult and youth (literary) culture is deeper than ever. For the first time girls have - encouraged by shojo manga - taken the leadership within the young comic fans. The transmission of Japanese or Korean subjects, motifs, aesthetic forms merged with western patterns in manga stories can be seen as a principal reason for the success of manga in Germany and other European countries.

The vast majority of manga that has been published in German language to date was originated in the 80 and 90 decades. This means that neither the classic repertoire of modern Japanese comics developed around the fifties by Tezuka Osamu nor the newest versions of Japanese production play a significant role in the present German language market. For example Tezukas “Tetsuwan Atomu” (jap. 1951) or Ikeda Riyokos “The Roses of Versailles” series (jap. 1972) created about fifty and thirty years ago remain as part of the Japanese comics genesis and are considered as works of great relevance. They continue to be part of the flow in the main current of comics, are directed sometimes to a very specific market with nostalgic interests, nevertheless remain clear apart from the well known bestsellers.

By accident the very first manga appearing in Germany in 1982 was a shortened version of Hadashi no Gen by Nakazawa Keiji. This historical documentation of World War II was published within the political book series roro-aktuell - authors of other books from this series were for example Bertrand Russell, Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Mao Ze Dong. After that it took long time until the manga boom came up.

Conditions of popularity in a middle-european environment

Japanese comics needed to be developed and merchandised in a way that allowed them the creation of a strong market in foreign regions like Europe where a well known interest and potential can be found. This degree of evolution had been reached by the eighties. At that time the influence of European and North-American currents upon design, edition and development of the Japanese comic genres had also reached a certain state and had got mixed with authentic Japanese art. When importing and translating Japanese comics publishers in Europe use to concentrate on such manga series that have already reached great popularity in Japan. Therefore we can see a gap of several years between the first appearance in Japan and the introduction to the European market, that has nothing to do with the time that is needed for translation. Normally the publishers abroad do not risk to introduce a brandnew manga to their readers (Dolle-Weinkauff, 100).

It is until the end of the 90ies that the German manga import was heavily focused on the North- American market and - in lower proportions - on other European markets. A great part of the translations was made from Anglo-American English and also from French and Italian. Above all had the German editors decided to impose on the American media format, some sort of comic book, including the abandonment of Japanese reading customs and reverse printing techniques of the original editions. It is no coincidence that the Japanese comics publications became highly relevant in Germany once the American guidelines were loosen and more original translations from Japanese where introduced including the migration from comic book to pocket book format. According to the comments of Ralf Vollbrecht – concerned with the situation around 1997 – who was - next to Jaqueline Berndt (1995)- one of the first in my country to study the basics of the influence and development of manga (Vollbrecht 2001), one can presume that the North-American market is much more conservative when accepting foreign products and cultures as the German is. This is to be confirmed by the comments that Anne Allison made in the Timothy Craig 2000 publication of the anthology Japan Pop!. Regarding the success of the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers , one of the most successful series produced in Japan, to be broadcasted in U.S. television. It was clearly stated that this was achieved due to the adaptation of the program to assumed and specific demands of the U.S. television audience (Allison 2000).

In any case the removal of North American models represented to the German editors of manga a big step into the opening of programs suitable to the extensive reception of foreign culture topics in content and form. In addition and as a consequence this change meant to be a great receipt for success. “Don’t copy the Americans!” - this is how one of the leading German editors resumed the perception in an interview that revealed the insight of the editor’s strategy since the beginning of the 90ies (Dierks 2002).

Media, publishers and market apportions

In Germany manga and manwha are mainly published as anthologies in pocket book format. The publication of monthly magazines as series that have so much relevance in the country of origin, represent a very small but not unimportant exception in Germany. Merely available are the monthly magazine directed to young girls Daisuki (Carlsen Verlag) and the magazine containing both Shonen as

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Shojo manga known as Manga Twister (Egmont Manga und Anime). Both are published since 2003. Regarding magazines focused to young boys, Banzai! a very successful magazine in Germany that was until end of 2005 available in the market, had to be retired because of the revocation of rights owned by the Japanese licensor Shueisha. Above all manga in Germany appear as pocket book publications and this implicated a greater diffusion within conventional bookshops, which were not so much engaged in the comics market before manga came up.

At the moment there are 4 main editors which own the market for Japanese comics in German language:

- Carlsen Verlag from Hamburg, since 1997 publishing Toriyama's Dragon Ball, fact that was considered as a great breakthrough. The house publishes today around 15 to 20 new volumes per month for readers between 8 and 18 years old. Among these publications, the ones directed to the younger readers predominate: Carlsen Verlag, which also owns the rights for Harry Potter, considers itself as a publisher of children's and youth literature.

- Similar is the case of Egmont Ehapa, who is in charge of the Disney productions publication. Nevertheless one branch of the editorial known as Egmont Manga und Anime, has a monthly production ranging two dozens of manga focused on adolescents and young adult readers. A part of this production is marked with the label "adult" which includes publications such as Monster from Urasawa Naoki, Great Teacher Onizuka from Fujisawa Tôru and Seraphic Feather from Utatane Hiroyuki. Furthermore, with the publication of Sailor Moon during the end of the 90ies Egmont had considerably contributed to the raise of the German manga cult.

- Panini, the Italian editorial, has established since the manga boom during the late 1990's around 10 monthly publications throughout its manga branch known as Planet Manga. These publications are focused on adolescents and young adults. Panini holds also in Germany the coverage for the American comics from DC and Marvel Superheroes.

- Founded in 2004 as a subsidiary of an American company, Tokyopop Verlag, who publishes also around 20 monthly publications in Germany, experienced in a very short time a dynamic ascension. Exceeding the standards of its competitors, Tokyopop arranged a wider offer of products like publications for girls of all ages and media products including films, DVD's, light novels, computer games and toys.

The sales figures in the last decade speak for themselves: the amount reached in 1997 as the turnover for the manga sales in Germany was around 3 million euro. While most of the book market remained static or even shrank, the manga sales figures with growth rates of 7%, multiplied itself by a factor of 20 reaching in 2005 the amount of 66 million euro. Bestsellers like the classical Dragon Ball and more recent publications like Detective Conan from Aoyama Gosho were responsible for several millions in sales. In order to be able to understand what this means it is important to mention that the big German editorials already consider a 5000 title sale as a commercial success.

Why manga is attractive to a young German public

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When asking readers why they like manga, some of them would say “I love this sort of pure fantasy” and others would reveal, that manga offers true and realistic stories to them. This paradox is to be found frequently because there are lots of readers who only like fantasy stories and others who tend to prefer more realistic ones. When inquired about their preferences, most of them express their different tastes, identifying these with the whole genre. Worth mentioning is that most of the fantastic manga stories being published in Germany take place either around a realistic background or as part of a realistic situation to be solved by fantastic or fairy characters. So is the case of stories like Video-Girl Ai from Katsura Mazakazu or of Real Bout Highschool from Inoue Sora which although involve several fantastic elements but tend to be not always considered as fantasy stories.

This is because the usual problematic to be represented in manga stories between and inside generations and sexes, in school or when realising the rise of the own sexuality, can be easily associated to the everyday life and personal experience of the reader. Even extraordinary science fiction stories, as for example the very successful Neon Genesis Evangelion, are dealing above all with family situations within a modern society which because of the nature of the story are to take place in a background filled with futuristic technique.

The general success of manga publications in Germany is to be explained through the highly precise and sharp youth life representations that Japanese comics are usually able to achieve in a specific form - neither common comics nor the common children’s and youth literature are able to supply the young readers with comparable attractions.

On the other hand there is a strong inclination shown by most of the manga readers toward a couple of exotic elements belonging indeed or by general assumption to Japanese, Korean or Chinese culture. For a long time imported and translated literature addressed to young readers, (comics included), were usually adapted to the circumstances involving the target culture. Names of heroes were modified, places of action were to be named after local regions or cities and foreign customs were replaced by the ones belonging to the intended country. Educators, librarians and editors believed in the necessity of cultural adaptation with regard to stories from a different cultural context., they even thought that it was a condition of success in reading promotion. Later on, and after the commercial success of manga in western countries, it was to be seen, that the young readers had made their own choice becoming completely curious about “foreign” and “strange” elements commonly offered by more original manga publications. In contrast to a very specific part of the old generation, intercultural exchange is for young people a determinant characteristic in an increasingly globalized world.

Furthermore it is evident that anime and manga are peculiarly suitable to demarcate youth culture from the adult sphere. Based in the generational constellation and the still existing lack of comprehension shown by adults toward this type of media, young people try to create here a zone of their own experience. Starting by a reverse printing technique, followed by a radical different drawing style and bizarre contents to be found often in thousand-page series all the way to the creation of attached sub-cultural phenomena like internet forums, Cosplay, Dojinshi and the culinary secrets of far-east cuisine, arises itself a practical and symbolic new room for interaction where youth and young adults are able to behave freely without the rules and competence of older generations.

Especially concerned with this fact are the young girls. As readers of classical literary media

the girls - not only in Germany - are already considered much more active. In the era of manga they developed also greater affinity to comics. Ten years ago female readers represented only a small part of the comic reader community which since then has grown in such a manner that today girls can be described as the leaders. In the past comic editors did not address so much to girls. With exception of some horse-stories there lacked any kind of girl-aimed publication. Girls were seen and managed by the publishing houses as merely co-readers of Asterix and Mickey Mouse..

With the boom of manga stories, most specific with Sailor Moon, Card Captor Sakura, Wedding Peach and others started a mighty development – parallel to the existing girls books but as a completely different sort.

It includes a wide spectrum of different sub-genres aimed for girls like Magical Girl stories and Love Stories, Horror and Shonen Ai. In my opinion these stories represent today as much as fifty percent of the titles within the comics market. Highly relevant for the importance of manga for young female readers is the fact that girls have developed from readers to creators: they can be seen not only as fascinated receptors but also as the most important part of a young mangaka movement. Within two dozens of very young German manga authors who create Japanese style stories and succeed with their publications, are only to be found the works of two young male-authors.

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