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Moving Manga: *Integration* and *Bypassing* as Strategies in the Cases of France and Sweden

Keywords: *manga, world literature, comics, circulation, periphery, strategies*

Introduction

This explorative study focuses on how cultural spaces outside Japan position themselves in the international manga field, through the adoption of different strategies. Attention is drawn to the strategies peripheral spaces tend to develop in order to take part in global transactions and negotiations of power positions in a specific cultural field. The theoretical framework draws on sociological studies connected to world literature, which provide the tools for the identification of two main strategies characterized as *integration* and *bypassing*. The former category leads to recognition by the central space – represented here by Japan – and the latter to constructions of autonomous manga fields locally situated in spaces outside Japan – represented here by France and Sweden.

Transnational manga in a cross-cultured global space

With the aim to understand Sweden's position in the manga field, it is necessary to take a bird's-eye view and observe overall forces at play. According to Japanologist Jaqueline Berndt (2016), the global interest for and use of manga has turned it into a notion in transformation, constantly transgressing its original signification. Manga is a worldwide phenomenon, and the conception of manga depends on the cultural spaces where it is used and applied. This condition makes manga a fruitful example in parity with another global and cultural trend, namely "world literature." As the comparative literature scholar Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (2013) has shown, world literature, just as today's manga, is constituted by works reflecting different local geographical and cultural spaces. At a general level, these works are bound to a bicultural gaze and narrative voice, since biculturality seems to create favorable premises for making a work circu-

late globally. In addition to references to a local space, the world literature author is obliged to master global, that is, Western/Northern cultural references and even to be able to create an Occidental outlook with the purpose to win over readers primarily situated in the West/North where world literature is circulating and constructed (Brouillette, 2016; Lindberg, 2018). Thus, world literature functions as a category of literature that preserves its local origins while integrating global, mostly Western aesthetic dimensions, just as the best-selling and award-winning Japanese author Haruki Murakami has managed to do (Lindberg, 2018).

A transposition of this bicultural dynamic to the global manga market brings to light both similar and unique patterns. Firstly, in contrast to world literature which is produced in dominant Western spaces, manga is circulating and created in diverse global spaces, where the original Japanese market functions as a norm and stable support with its consistent readership. Secondly, in comparison to world literature, there is a relatively constant demand for original manga from Japan on a global level, not only in the West (Lent, 2014). This makes the Japanese manga market a dominant space for recognition and publication. Given that the suggested parallel applies, English and French literary spaces consecrate contemporary literary classics, while Japan constitutes a space for consecration and canonization of manga (Casanova, 1999).

Strategies for integrating and bypassing the dominant space

Examples from France show strategies for both integrating and bypassing the Japanese dominant space in the manga field, and for gaining attention as well as legitimization. In 2015, the website Krozmotion announced that the French manga writer-artist Tony Valente would be published in Japan with the first volume of his series *Radiant* (Krozmotion, 2015). The news was presented as a great breakthrough for the *manfra* (manga from France), while the website Actu BD put things into perspective by reminding of previous French comics writer-artists translated into Japanese, such as Nicolas de Crécy with *La République du catch* (The Republic of Wrestling), Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido with *Black Sad*, and Baru with *L'Autoroute du soleil* (The Sun Highway; Actu BD 2015).

Considering the internationally established French comics field with its large variety and accumulated cultural capital, the small number of French writer-artists translated into Japanese does not seem impressive. It is hereby possible to identify, on the one hand, a desire to get recognition from the dominant Japanese manga field, and, on the other hand, gateway functions in the dominant space, controlling the domestic access to Wes-

tern dominant spaces. Accordingly, it is noteworthy that *Radiant* was published in the anthology *Euromanga*, a generic term that obscures the division between “purely” Japanese manga and “hybrid” manga from abroad. Nevertheless, Valente’s work is, at least in Western spaces, confounded with Japanese manga and regarded to be inspired by series like *One Piece* and *One-Punch Man* (Anime News desk, 2015), thereby forming an example of the desire to conform to and be included in the dominant Japanese space.

Like the term *Euromanga*, “world literature” implies a tension, in this case between Western “pure” literature and transcultural literatures originating “from abroad” while marked by Western aesthetics and referents (Rosendahl Thomsen, 2013). Connected categories in the Francophone and Anglophone spaces are “Francophone literature” and “Commonwealth literature.” These categories have met with scholarly critique concerning their exclusive functions (see Almassy, Le Bris and Rouaud, 2007) for preventing certain categories of culturally mixed literature to be considered French or English, and thus to gain in status. The opposite standpoint also exists but is less prevailing (see Lindberg & Cedergren, 2016). It argues that these categories have been important ways to open the market and offer opportunities to authors with diverse backgrounds, whose country of origin may neither have an editorial system nor a readership in place to support literary publications (see Ducournau, 2017).

When observing the global manga field, it is somehow refreshing to recognize that the reigning hegemony in the global literary landscape seems reversed. For once, it is not the European standard situating itself as a norm. On the contrary, writer-artists in the West are bound to adapt to a Japanese tradition and culture in order to gain recognition and legitimization. Japan’s International Manga Award, launched in 2007, is an enlightening manifestation of the central manga field on a global scale. On average, 250 manga works from 35 countries are sent in every year to be evaluated and nominated by a jury, composed of Japanese *mangaka*, editors, and publishers. During the last ten years, representatives from Asian spaces, such as China, Taiwan, Korea, Mongolia, Russia and Ukraine, have received 77 gold, silver, and bronze awards, compared to 36 awards that have gone to Western geographical spaces during the same period: Europe, USA, Canada, and Australia. This may have been due to the fact that the Asian space, especially Southeast Asia with its prominent place on the lists, has had the largest number of applications. However, the strong presence of Southeast Asia is also an indication of what scholar John A. Lent (2014) describes as Japan’s usurpation of markets in these countries.

The geographical and cultural distance is not as obvious between Japan and surrounding Asian countries as between Japan and Western countries. As a consequence, the dependent relationship engendered by this closeness is likely to have set in motion the absorbing “wave” put forward by literary scholar Franco Moretti (2000) in connection to dominant European spaces’ invasion of subordinate spaces. Thus, awards are one way to emerge from the wave and gain recognition (see English, 2005), and they are also a strategy by the center, in this case Japan, to claim superiority in the field.

Concerning the Western space, there is a gap between Francophone spaces and Anglophone spaces. Representatives from Francophone spaces (France, Belgium, ex-colonies in Africa) have reaped 21 awards during the last decade, while representatives from Anglophone spaces (USA, Canada, Australia) have brought home only nine. Two gold awards have gone to Franco-Belgian publications, and one has gone to the USA. This discrepancy could reflect a French desire for integration and inclusion in the dominant Japanese space. American actors, for their part, might instead have focused more on bypassing the dominant space through the development of a functional local editorial field and publications in English, which, as today’s dominant language, allows for global circulation. This idea is supported by sociologist Casey Brienza’s (2016) work on how America progressively has domesticated manga in the 21st century. In addition, especially in the USA, “scanlations,” i.e. fans’ translations distributed freely online, have become a phenomenon that can very well be considered a bypassing strategy (Anderson Terpstra, 2012).

The Franco-Belgian space possesses functional editorial structures as well as a readership, and cultural resources to lean on. Nevertheless, the French space remains a European dominant location for high culture, where symbolic capital is considered an exploitable resource (Casanova, 1999). Consequently, this space is targeting integration and consecration with regard to the Japanese dominant space in the manga field. As observed, this is done through the crafting of manga series like *Radiant*, which consciously imitates typical Japanese manga. Furthermore, the list of awarded French and Belgian manga series reveals supplementary strategies, which seem to be aimed at recognition. Firstly, in contrast to the Anglophone publications, some of the publications in French tell stories from within Japanese society, for example, *Face cachée* (silver award 2011); stories that give elements from traditional Japanese culture center stage, for example, *Otaku blue* (bronze award 2013), featuring the theme of Japanese collectors, or *Tebori* (bronze award 2012), featuring the tradi-

tion of Japanese tattoos. There are also examples of stories that observe and experience Japanese society from an outsider's perspective, for example, *Tokyoland* (bronze award 2012). These award winners resemble world literature authors in their strategy to adopt a bicultural outlook, just as they reflect, through their thematic choices and knowledge of the target culture, a desire to contribute to and be recognized in the dominant space.

On the other hand, the Franco-Belgian space has stable positions and markets in the field of comics, allowing the above-mentioned works to be published locally. Since these publications primarily reach a Franco-phone readership, they act like an interface between Japan and Western-European cultural spaces, in other words, they become a channel for knowledge about Japanese culture. The Franco-Belgian space has in this way found a strategy to bypass the dominant Japanese space.

A supplementary strategy that the Franco-Belgian space makes use of for bypassing is observation of cultural trends and traditions in both the dominant and the domestic space. For example, Ishikawa Jirō is introduced in France as being an *artiste maudit* in his homeland (Actu BD, 2017), which is an excellent brand in France, where the *artiste maudit* has far-reaching roots. The exhibition of his works in Paris in 2017 reflected how the French local space recycles material that the dominant Japanese space has rejected, in order to accumulate its own cultural capital in the manga field.

A last integrative strategy the Franco-Belgian space uses to gain recognition is collaboration. The work *Si loin si proche...* (So far so close, gold award 2011), as well as the work that Zaya (silver award 2009) created in collaboration with Chinese artists are representative examples of this strategy, which characterizes dominant Western spaces like the USA, France and Belgium, where collaborations are relatively frequent. Furthermore, France possesses structures to attract Asian writer-artists, for example, the publishing house Le Léopard Noir, where almost all writer-artists have Japanese origins. This strategy can be seen as a bypassing more than an attempt at integration, since the goal seems to be to absorb talent from the central space.

In summary, the Franco-Belgian space makes use of strategies for recognition and *integration* by the central space, represented here by Japan. These strategies can take the form of: i) imitations, ii) an interface between the central manga space (Japan) and global cultural centers such as France, and iii) collaborations. The same space also makes use of strategies for *bypassing* the Japanese center, for example, through: i) recy-

clinging material that the center has rejected, ii) attracting talents from the center, and iii) creating its own brand, *manfra*.

In subordinate spaces like Sweden, Poland, Russia, Southeast Asia, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast (to take examples from the Japan International Manga Award lists), collaborations across national borders are rare. As a developed literary landscape, the Swedish space could probably mobilize resources and channels to attract actors from the manga field's dominant spaces. However, such initiatives are hindered by the fact that manga in the Swedish space is marked by its association with children's literature, and thus is still struggling to gain recognition as a mature art form.

Strategies in the peripheral space of Sweden

The strategies taken in a dominant non-Japanese space, here represented by France, seemingly serve the double purpose to construct the local manga field and to be recognized by Japan. Subordinate spaces like Sweden do not have the same resourceful position permitting to enter these exchanges and have an impact on the manga market. Nevertheless, peripheral spaces contribute to the diversification of the field. In this concern, it is notable that the awards given to non-Japanese writer-artists during the last decade represent a variety of geographical and cultural spaces. Even Sweden, with its limited manga market, has received a bronze award at Japan's International Manga Award (artist Yosh, Yokaj Studio, *Beneath the surface*, 2011). This relative openness indicates that the international manga field allows for (re)negotiation of power relations and contribution to an inclusive literary globality, offering visibility to countries excluded from other arenas, particularly world literature where ex-colonized countries are prevailing. However, the fact that the collection *Euromanga* only targets the Franco-Belgian space, and often canonized writer-artists like Mœbius and Enki Bilal at that, contradicts the suggested openness to peripheral spaces in the manga field.

Despite its subordinate position, the case of Sweden presents writer-artists who explore several strategies with the objective of integrating themselves into the global manga field in Western dominating spaces, as well as in the Japanese space. These dynamics also facilitate the development of manga within Sweden's national borders. In the domestic market, writer-artists' inventiveness and entrepreneurship are primordial, such as in the case of studios like Yokaj and Nosebleed. In addition to creating manga series, writer-artists take on connected assignments, such as teaching at the comic art school in Malmö, in libraries and elementary

schools, working for game companies, collaborating on illustrated books, and self-publishing. These diversified activities are important for spreading manga in society at large and making the art form count in different areas.

Subordinate spaces are manga fields under construction; thus, they do not possess resources for adopting bypassing strategies to the same extent as dominant spaces. Instead, as the example of Sweden shows, they tend to investigate possibilities to integrate themselves into dominant spaces; Anglophone, Francophone, and Japanese. For instance, Nosebleed Studio's website is in English, and several of their works are available in English. Using this global language opens channels to global arenas and possibilities for recognition. This strategy is also identifiable in the broader comics field in Sweden. For example, the illustrator Joanna Hellgren went straight to the French space and published her work *Frances* (3 vols, 2008-2012) there. Comics artist Åsa Ekström's pioneering manga work in Sweden remains the most notable example of this strategy, since she has engaged concurrently in learning Japanese and publishing her series in Japanese in Japan. In world literature, it is common to adopt the language of dominant spaces in order to get published and gain access to readership and literary awards, which will lead to translation and circulation on a global level (Ducournau, 2017; Lindberg, 2016b). Ekström's tenacity to succeed in the dominant Japanese space resulted in her works also being published in Taiwan and arriving there on the top list of travel literature. This is proof of the importance for the periphery to gain recognition from a central space in order to make a work circulate globally. In addition, the linguistic and intercultural competences that Swedish writer-artists acquire when trying to reach out are resources that global as well as local manga fields may be able to capitalize on in future, for example, for collaboration purposes.

The Swedish manga market has characteristics that resemble the main traits of Swedish children's literature, which has been legitimated and consecrated in dominant cultural spaces abroad (Nikolajeva, 2016). Primarily to be acknowledged are a pronounced norm criticism, a sensitivity to young people's life situations and challenges, and the depiction of young women as active, in contrast to traditional gender roles in children's literature where the girl remains passive (Kåreland, 2005; Lindberg 2016a, 2014). Furthermore, Swedish manga tends to target young readers. An eloquent example of how manga blends in with children's literature is the series *Bleckmossen* (2006, first volume in 2011) published regularly in the widespread magazine for children and young adolescents, *Kamrat-*

posten (*KP*) [The Buddy Press], founded in 1892. The writer, Oskar Ekman, a journalist at *KP*, and the illustrator, Carolina “Carromic” Ståhlberg, describe *Bleckmossen* as “manga-inspired,” which suggests a hybrid story situated in a typical Swedish small-sized urban milieu. While local pizza makers, the school building with its specific universe, and segregated quarters between rich and middle-class people signal the normality of Swedish everyday life, events and characters go beyond expectations of the normal. Thus, the fictive place *Bleckmossen* presents a type of enhanced reality which insidiously lets in a strand of magic and the aesthetics of fantasy literature. Fantasy is well established among young readers in Sweden, leaning on a long tradition that dates back to Astrid Lindgren (Nikolajeva, 2016). In addition, the illustration style, postures and facial traits of *Bleckmossen*'s characters are underscored by influences from Japanese manga, such as *Sailor Moon*, *Naruto* and *Dragon Ball*. In this blend, the manga dimension allows for an innovative twist which has attracted a consistent readership across social classes from all parts of Sweden. The magazine *KP*, where *Bleckmossen* was first published (2006), has become the forum where the series is negotiated through collaborative participation of the fans. Thus, some of the characters have emerged from *KP* drawing competitions.

The features and strategies in the Swedish space point to contrasting tendencies. On the one hand, there is a desire to make local manga that gives voice to the periphery's specific needs for storytelling through a visual genre associated with Japan. The double look at the world generated by this hybrid use of manga can be compared to the bi-referential gaze in the world literature field. However, we do not know yet if this bicultural gaze will allow Swedish manga to circulate internationally. What is important now are the efforts to make Swedish manga recognized in international contexts through an application of dominant languages, which can be compared to the world literature field, where peripheral spaces adopt dominant languages in order to get published and gain a readership.

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