

When Manga Fans Become Pirates: The Art of Translating and Navigating Japanese Manga

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Introduction

Japanese manga published outside of Japan has shown significant growth in the last decade or two, and its growing recognition along with anime helped brand the nation, as can be seen in the “Cool Japan” project of the METI (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry).¹ One of the driving forces behind this has been enthusiastic manga fans called “scanlators.” They scan and translate the latest chapters in comic magazines just released in Japan that are not yet available in English or other languages, and share them with other readers via the internet free of charge.

This scanlation has been indispensable for the international growth of Japanese manga; it works as a free advertising tool before Japanese manga publishers enter foreign markets. Furthermore, aggregation websites that shared scanlated manga, which rank them by popularity and the number of views (regardless of publisher), have been used as a reference by manga publishers when they choose which manga to translate next.² However, a combination of circumstances in recent years, namely, the potential growth of e-book market, the beginning of “Cool Japan” projects, and the increased number of scanlators who broke their unspoken agreement with publishers to delete uploaded manga chapters once a series has been licensed³ led them to be increasingly positioned as “pirates.”

Given this recent change, this paper aims to identify how scanlations differ from manga’s legally published English versions in terms of scanlators’ attitudes towards translations and its content, and in doing so demonstrate how the former’s approach to enriching and improving manga culture and its literacy differ from that of the latter. Then, it further explores how the narrative of scanlators as “pirates” was developed, focusing on the case of an anti-piracy campaign so we can understand challenges surrounding manga translation. Although scanlations are available in French, Spanish, Chinese and other multiple languages today, I will limit myself to discuss the case of English scanlation.

¹ For details on this Cool Japan Initiative, see “Cool Japan Initiative,” *METI*, July 2015, http://www.meti.go.jp/policy/mono_info_service/mono/creative/150706CJInitiativeJuly.pdf, accessed 31 May 2016.

² This usage of scanlation websites by publishers is mentioned in various articles, such as “Nihon manga no kaigai mudan honyakuban saito ni yōchūi,” *ScanNetSecurity*, 14 January 2014, http://www.excite.co.jp/News/it_biz/20140114/Scannetsecurity_33339.html, accessed 12 December 2015. For a detailed description of the history of scanlation, see “Inside Scanlation,” <http://www.insidescanlation.com/history/index.html>, accessed 25 September 2015.

³ For details on this unspoken agreement, see Hye-Kyung Lee, “Between Fan Culture and Copyright Infringement: Manga Scanlation,” in *Marketing the Arts: A Fresh Approach*, ed. Daragh O’Reilly and Finola Kerrigan (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 165.

How Translated Manga are Delivered to English Readers

When a publisher is going to release a Japanese manga in the U.S., it usually takes about eight to ten months to translate and publish this English version. For example, consider *One Piece*. Although it is one of the most popular series worldwide today, it took about seven years for a publisher to discover this manga and publish the first volume of its English version after the release of the Japanese original. The publisher attempted to narrow this gap by publishing five volumes every month from January to June 2010 (from 24 to 53 volumes), but a huge time lag still remains because it is taking ten months to publish English versions of newly released Japanese originals. The same release pattern can be seen in the case of other publishers. For example, the English version of *Barakamon*, a serialized comic that firstly appeared as a one-shot in the comic magazine *Gangan Powered* (Square Enix) in 2008, was translated into English and published by YEN PRESS in 2014. In the case of less popular titles, the gap between the release date of the original and that of the English version is even wider.

In order to minimize this time lag, publishers have employed various strategies, such as setting more regular release dates for English versions (there are usually two to three months gaps between volume releases⁴). They even have launched simultaneous release projects. In one of the Simul Publishing projects initiated by Kodansha in 2013 with Crunchyroll, a U.S. video streaming service provider, new manga installments became digitally available for 12 to 21 titles annually on the same day as they were released in Japan.⁵ Although this project was one of their attempts to meet the needs of English readers, it was also hoped that it would reduce the impact of scanlation.⁶ Square Enix also partnered with YEN PRESS to release more than 200 series simultaneously.⁷ However, the number of manga that the simultaneous reading services offer remains very low in comparison with the annual number of manga published in Japan (which hit 12,700 titles in 2014, including both comic magazines and comic books⁸), and even more so if previously published titles are taken into account.

Scanlators, on the other hand, are known for their speed in translating and uploading content. Furthermore, readers are given access to the latest chapters of popular titles, and even other less popular series that are unlikely to be published in English. Once the Japanese original is released in Japan, a scanner obtains it and shares the scanned images (called “RAW”) with their scanlation team via the internet. Then, they adjust the scanned images by cropping, rotating, and redrawing illustrations if necessary. At the same time, they translate and edit the

⁴ For example, in the case of *Naruto*, the publisher releases its English version every two to three months. There is an eight to ten month gap between the Japanese original and the English version.

⁵ Deb Aoki, “Manga Publishing Update, Spring 2015,” *Publishers Weekly*, 20 March 2015, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/65957-manga-2015.html>, accessed on 15 December 2015.

⁶ Tomohiro Osaki, “Kodansha Manga to Get Same-Day Global Release,” *The Japan Times*, 29 October 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/10/29/national/kodansha-manga-to-get-same-day-global-release/#.VmpqgmSLR7M>, accessed 18 July 2015.

⁷ Aoki, “Manga Publishing Update, Spring 2015.”

⁸ Zenkoku Shuppan Kyōkai and Shuppan Kagaku Kenkyūjo 全国出版協会・出版科学研究所, ed., *Shuppan shihyō nenpō 2015 出版指標年報 2015* (Tokyo: Shuppan Kagaku Kenkyūjo, 2015), 218.

text. Native English checkers are often involved at this stage. After completing this editing stage, they embed the translated texts in the illustration (“typesetting”). When the quality check is finished, they upload these chapters to scanlation websites. It only takes about three days for them to translate and upload a chapter of 20 pages. This translation process significantly differs from that of legitimate English translations, which involve more steps up to publication: legal procedures such as securing a license to translate the manga, setting its release date, actual translation and editing, and a quality check. There is also another phase that leads up to the release date comprised of printing and sending out comic books to distribution channels. Without any such legal restrictions and a systematized publication process, scanlators can deliver the latest episode of popular titles far earlier than the publisher. Scanlation allows English readers to have a smoother reading experience by providing access to the latest chapter just like Japanese readers, who can read it right after it is released in comic magazines. It provides missing episodes of popular titles that are not yet available as legitimate English translations, thereby catching their attention in advance.

Choosing and Managing the Cargo: Selecting Manga for English Translation

Another distinctive difference between these two types of translations is the manga that are used. To identify patterns in their selection, I looked at VIZ Media, one of the most active manga publishers in the North America. Its manga list is comprised of a “frontlist” and a “backlist.” The frontlist usually consists of newly released manga that were quite popular in Japan, such as *One Piece*, *Naruto*, *Fullmetal Alchemist* and *Blue Exorcist*. What makes its choice of such manga more distinctive is that most of them have been made into anime.

In addition to these top-selling manga, they also republish older manga series as part of their backlist. In the long run this backlist (which includes *Golgo 13*, *Dragon Ball*, and *Ranma 1/2*) has proven to be very popular among English readers. Moreover, once a manga series on the frontlist is entirely published, they republish it as three-in-one or two-in-one comic books. Although the number of manga is limited, the publisher tends to select major manga hits, which are likely to be released together with their anime versions in English speaking countries, and older popular titles—manga that have potential to maximize the company’s profit by being reproduced in different forms.

In the case of scanlations, on the other hand, manga are selected as if filling in missing pieces of a puzzle. In addition to translations of the latest chapters of popular manga series serialized in comic magazines, they also translate bonus episodes and one-shots, which are less likely to be published in a book form. They sometimes even discover and translate manga that are already out of print in Japan.

When publishers stop releasing the English versions of a manga mid-series, scanlations take up where they left out. For example, only 16 out of the 25 volumes of *Nodame Cantabile*, which was a popular series that was made into dramas, films and anime in Japan, were translated into English. The legitimate English version came to an abrupt ending in the middle of the hero’s debut concert as a principle conductor (chapter 94), though the scene set in this concert continues to the next chapter, which is part of the next volume. However, by having access to

the scanlation, English readers can read the rest of series, and find out how the heroine comes to be inspired by the hero's performance and more seriously starts practicing the piano with the hope of entering a competition someday. As can be seen from this case, scanlators make the manga lists available to the English readers more complete and even richer.

This richness is made possible by the website "Baka-Updates," which provides information on manga series useful for scanlators (such as the name of groups that scanlate a manga, or, if it is already licensed in English, up to which volume it has been published). This information allows scanlators to know which chapters are not yet covered, or who their competitors are. It thus enables them to increase the diversity of the type of manga available in English, and can even lead to the mass production of scanlations. If the number of manga available for English readers increase, manga literacy and the ability to identify high quality manga can be developed, and the culture and the experience of translated manga thus also becomes richer.

For Wider Audiences or For Manga Fans?

Scanlation is also unique in its approach to translating manga. To examine how it differs from that of legitimate translations, let us begin by illustrating translation strategies employed in the latter.

In the case of published English manga, one immediately notices that illustrated sound effects are fully translated. As a part of the illustration, they help to visually convey the energy circulating within the frame or surrounding characters. Furthermore, they show how, for example, magic works, or how a character moves along with the sound. For example, in chapter 1 of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, there is an illustration in which the main protagonist throws a piece of metallic head armor at an enemy's face. The metallic sound effect "かゝゝゝん (*gain*)" is embedded in this scene. It is written vertically in brush strokes to indicate an echo.⁹ However, in the English version, it is replaced with "CLONG," which is spelled out from left to right, and each character is filled in with black ink. Its sound and visual effect does not linger, unlike "かゝゝゝん" in the Japanese version. This approach shows that rather than fully preserving effects of the original, the full localization of illustrated sound effects is a priority for publishers so that they can obtain a wider readership that includes those who are not familiar with Japanese manga.

In contrast to published English versions, scanlations take a distinctively different approach, particularly in terms of the extent to which they transfer and translate the content, text, and form of the original.¹⁰ Unlike legitimate English editions, illustrated sound effects from the Japanese versions are kept in most scanlations. Their English translations are then added in speech balloons, or alternatively, provided next to an "SFX" (i.e. sound effects) sign.

Transplanting words and expressions unique to Japan into the English version is another point that merits attention. Japanese specific expressions such as *sensei* (translated as "master" in published English versions) and the Japanese honorific title "- san" (usually rendered as "Mr."

⁹ Arakawa Hiromu 荒川弘, *Hagane no Renkin jutsu shi 鋼の錬金術師*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Square Enix, 2002), 35.

¹⁰ Scanlation groups have individual characteristics of their own, in terms of their quickness to upload translations, translation strategies, and the genre of the works they translate. Among them, there are also some groups that fully localize illustrated sound effects by redrawing illustrations.

or “Ms.” in published English versions), which are quite well-known among fans, are kept in scanlations. Scanlators even translate announcements about up-coming anime series (*aori*), which appear at the beginning or at the end of each episode to spark the interest and excitement of readers. For instance, on the very first page of episode 5 in the scanlation of *Tokyo Ghoul:re*, the announcement states that “[t]he second season of the anime is going on air in January,”¹¹ and a flashback of the previous episode in the comic magazine version is also retained (which is normally omitted in the final comic book form). Although such information is not immediately relevant to manga fans in English-speaking countries, it enables them to stay up-to-date regarding recent developments in Japan related to the manga series. In addition their role as translators, scanlators also function as mediators that provides the latest news that enthusiastic manga fans need to be equipped with.

The uniqueness of scanlations is not limited to their approach to translation. More detailed background information on the manga is provided via “translation notes” between chapters so that readers can better understand the series. Not only do they compensate for untranslated parts, they also describe why chapter titles have been translated as they are, the meaning and original pronunciation of the original title, and even related rumors circulated on 2channel.¹² In this way, scanlations tend to pay particular attention to details that evoke the original, and they incorporate information to enrich manga fans’ understanding of manga titles. As can be seen by these thorough translations, it is clear readers of scanlations are enthusiastic manga fans, whereas the official translation is intended to attract wider audiences.

How Manga Fans Became Pirates

Despite this difference in terms of assumed target readers and content, these scanlators have increasingly been seen as pirates in recent years. In June 2010, members of Japanese Digital Comic Association and U.S.-based comic publishers asked 30 scanlation aggregation websites (including One Manga and Mangafox, which attracted millions of visitors per month) to stop providing scanlations, and informed them that legal action would be taken otherwise.¹³ Also, while I was conducting this research in the autumn of 2015, websites that I was analyzing such as Imperial Scans and Redhawkes, which were known for high-quality scanlations, closed down.

Various circumstances can be seen as driving forces behind this change. For example, the need to create an environment to effectively grow the e-book market outside of Japan,¹⁴ the

¹¹ “Imperial Scans,” <http://imperialsfans.com/read/tokyo-ghoul-re/5-persistent-people/1>, accessed 30 October 2015, no longer available.

¹² “Imperial Scans,” <http://imperialsfans.com/read/tokyo-ghoul-re/5-persistent-people/18>, accessed 30 October 2015, no longer available.

¹³ Calvin Reid, “Japanese, U.S. Manga Publishers Unite to Fight Scanlations,” *Publishers Weekly*, 8 June 2010, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/digital/copyright/article/43437-japanese-u-s-manga-publishers-unite-to-fight-scanlations.html>, accessed 6 November 2015. Although the article connects the rise of traffic on scanlation websites and the decline of manga sales in the U.S., it is important to note that this decline of sales was caused by combination of causes.

¹⁴ Finlay and Furman argue that the effects of piracy may not necessarily be negative; by focusing on the growth of the Japanese manga and anime in the U.S., they demonstrate how legal markets arise from this

decline of the domestic publishing business, and the beginning of Cool Japan project—all of these circumstances seem to have influenced the situation surrounding scanlations. 2010 was also the year that the Japanese publishing industry started to more actively participate in the e-book business (including the development of e-book devices, tablets, and smartphones). The decrease in popular titles despite an increase in newly published books and the declining sales of comic magazines (which used to be one of the strengths in the publishing industry) also played a role.¹⁵

Moreover, it seems that articles and an anti-piracy campaign highlighting the damage caused by pirated manga and videos accelerated this move. In order to further understand how this narrative that positioned scanlators as “pirates” was created, I examined the anti-piracy campaign called “MAG PROJECT,” set up by the “Manga-Anime Anti-Piracy Committee” (organized by 15 publishers and anime production companies and the METI) in August 2014. In this project, they succeeded in having 168,112 scanlations on 184 scanlation websites deleted by the end of September 2014, particularly focusing on about 500 popular manga titles.¹⁶ The total amount of damage caused by pirated products was mentioned in the press release as a reason for doing so: “It is estimated that the cost of damage from online piracy was about two billion yen in the United States.”¹⁷ This estimated cost of damage seems to be based on a study conducted by Roland Berger, a strategy consultant agency, at the request of METI.¹⁸ However, in this report, other interesting findings that show us different aspects of “web-based pirated products” (in this study, scanlations and fan-subtitled animations) are also covered: how web-based product users purchase related items in addition to the official content and the amount they spend compares favorably with that of the users who use official content only.¹⁹ However, when the results of this study were disseminated to the public via a press release and media outlets that quoted this press release, only the estimated cost of damage that these web-based pirated products had on the industry and the Japanese economy was extracted, and other details were not mentioned. In communicating this message to the public, the project used the limited

grey zone. For details, see Nikki McIntyre Finlay and David Furman, “Intellectual Property Piracy: The Case of Manga and Anime in the US,” *Business Journal for Entrepreneurs* 3 (2014): 106–118.

¹⁵ Zenkoku Shuppan Kyōkai and Shuppan Kagaku Kenkyūjo, *Shuppan shihyō nenpō* 2010 (Tokyo: Shuppan Kagaku Kenkyūjo, 2010), 230.

¹⁶ METI 経済産業省, “Manga, anime kaizokuban taisaku no ‘fukyū keihatsu’ kikaku dainidan o jissai shimasu” マンガ・アニメ海賊版対策の「普及啓発」企画第二弾を実施します, 16 October 2014, <http://www.meti.go.jp/press/2014/10/20141016005/20141016005.pdf>, accessed 22 September 2015.

¹⁷ CODA 一般社団法人コンテンツ海外流通促進機構, “STOP! Kaizokuban ‘MAG PROJECT’ o honkaku shidō!” STOP! 海賊版「MAG PROJECT」を本格始動! 30 July 2014: 1, <http://www.meti.go.jp/press/2014/07/20140730001/20140730001-A.pdf>, accessed 22 September 2015. It is important to note that this number was an “estimate” based on preliminary calculations. It is difficult to measure the damage or impact that pirated products have on the industry, especially in our current digital age.

¹⁸ METI, “Heisei 25 nendo chitekizaisanken wākingu gurūpu tō shingai taisaku kyōka jigyō (contentsu kaizokuban taisaku chōsa) saishū hōkokusho” 平成 25 年度知的財産権ワーキング・グループ等侵害対策強化事業（コンテンツ海賊版対策調査）最終報告書, 31 March 2014, http://www.meti.go.jp/meti_lib/report/2014fy/E003740.pdf, accessed 22 September 2015. For this estimated cost of damage, see p. 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

but relevant information from the study that justified their motives for carrying it out, and this information, which hardened the image of scanlators as “pirates,” was disseminated further by the media.

Conclusion

By uncovering the process by which scanlators came to be categorized as pirates, this paper has shown how the narrative of scanlations as “pirated” products was conspicuously woven by disseminating partial information that supported the plans of an anti-piracy campaign. My comparison of scanlation translation and that of published English versions also illustrated how they play different roles. By not following the legitimate market system set by the publishing industry and the government that supports them, scanlators translated titles that publishers could not cover. Also, they even produced multiple translations for each manga title, thereby showing different aspects of them. Scanlations have enriched manga culture and helped to foster manga literacy among the English readers.

Moreover, the differences between these two types of translation clearly show that there is still a huge gap between the types of translation that core manga fans are seeking and those used in legitimate English versions produced to obtain new readership. Without considering this divide and the complementary role that scanlations currently play, counter-effects might emerge when stricter regulations are imposed on them. As an extended form of fan activities, scanlations shed light on the complexities of manga translation and could potentially provide clues for manga translations and business so that products can be made which resonate both with enthusiastic manga fans and general readers.

*This paper is based on the research findings presented at 50th International Symposium at International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken). My analysis of scanlations, scanlation websites, and publishers' websites mentioned in this paper was conducted from July to December 2015.