

Chapter 6 The Influence of Manga and Taoism in the Mexican Comic *Hermanas* (2021)

Capítulo 6 La Influencia del Manga y el Taoísmo en la Historieta Mexicana *Hermanas* (2021)

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Abstract

This work states that the comic book *Hermanas (Sisters)* (2021), by Paulina Ramos González, is the result of a productive consumption that retakes Japanese manga elements: ways of creation, philosophy, and imageries, thus resulting in a hybrid that transposes references and imageries from similarities and conflict. We base our argument on a methodological proposal based on the paradigm of indexical inferences proposed from the microhistory of Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi; from which we analyze the details present in the comic's graphics and narrative, to make interpretative inferences about the context of creation, and the socio-cultural and historical processes present in the author's visual culture. Our primary sources are the *Hermanas* graphic novel, and a series of interviews made to the author. Secondary sources are the background resources used in this analysis.

Paradigm, Historical, Hybrid, Cultural, Indexical

1. Introduction

In this paper, we argue that the comic book *Hermanas (Sisters)* (2021), by Paulina Ramos, is the result of a productive consumption that assimilates oriental elements of Japanese manga: ways of doing, philosophy, and imagery, thus resulting in a hybrid product that transposes referents and imagery from similarity and conflict.

We base the above on the following premises:

First, the graphics of *Hermanas* (2021) assimilate the forms of the face, the childish characterization of the characters, the handling of emptiness, and the representation in black and white typical of Japanese manga. Concerning the story's philosophy, we can see it returns to Taoism, representing, Life and Death as complementary opposites of each other through allegories.

Second: In this comic, the representation of Yin resorts to Western media and contemporary references, such as the image of Death with a skull on the head, which alludes to the religious reference of the scapegoat (often called Azazel in the Bible). The Yang takes up the myth spread across cultures of the symbolism of the renewing symbolism of the deer. The interaction of both characters alludes to the imagery of the vegetable tomb.

Third, the conflict inherent to the cultural hybridization of its referents is present in the representation of polarized and opposed spaces (life-death forest, death-war desert) typical of Western Christian philosophy.

Finally, the elements are mixed from the contact by the accentuation of the rapprochement between cultures, from which, the author made a productive consumption in which she assimilated elements from sympathies between her culture (graphic tradition, opposites in religion), which is not exempt from processes of conflict and tearing.

Concerning the studies linked to the sociocultural influence derived from the contact of manga and anime with Mexican production, we were able to locate two main aspects:

1. Influence of Japanese manga and anime on cultural practices in Mexico. The studies included in this area have the characteristic of focusing on the impact that both Japanese anime and manga have had on the communities of young fans. These studies show the forms of organization and meetings between young people who share the hobby, as well as the consumption and production of goods that derive from or are highly influenced by these Japanese products. Moreover, the processes of interaction and internal relationships among them are also studied (Rivera Posada, Piña Moedano, San Román Arteaga, & Jiménez Cuellar, 2016), (Cobos, 2010), (Cedano González, 2017), (Romero Quiroz, 2012), (Rodríguez Aguirre, 2017).

2. Influence of Japanese manga and anime on Mexican cultural products. The studies included in this section have the purpose of analyzing the results of the processes of cultural contact, which result in the exchange and hybridization of cultural products with different traditions. These works have a particularity focusing on how the content of such cultural products accounts for particular social processes (Castelli Olvera, 2017), (Castelli Olvera, 2019a), (Castelli Olvera, 2019b), (Castelli Olvera, 2021).

As we have observed, the contact between cultures and the consequent impact of manga and anime in Mexico, have aroused the interest of academic research; nevertheless, even though various spheres of the practices and productive processes of the agents who consume these products have been analyzed; it is still necessary to examine the influence that oriental narratives, impregnated with philosophical elements, have had on these processes of cultural appropriation, and it is also necessary to provide a broader view of these processes of hybridization, change and cultural enrichment, observable in Mexican products such as *Hermanas*.

In this article, we intend to account for these processes, based on a case analysis of the aforementioned comic strip; to this end, we have structured this article into three main sections: in the first one, we review the graphic elements typical of Japanese graphics, which are adapted to this Mexican comic strip. In the second section, we examine the main iconographic references that build the characterization of the two main characters of the story, to later identify the thematic points of conflict, which are a source of conflict in the process of cultural hybridization within the process of cultural linkage and transposition. Finally, in the last section, we analyze how the processes of cultural hybridization that give way to this source are structured; from the type of dispersion to the identification of convergent elements that allowed the linking and cultural transposition between elements of different traditions. In the last section, we offer appropriate conclusions.

2. Methodology

This work is based on a qualitative, interpretative analysis of the comic strip, based on its graphic and narrative elements. The methodology is structured in the following order:

1. Formal description of some vignettes that conglomerate formal and thematic representative elements of the comic.
2. Identification of iconographic and cultural references of the comic.
3. Interpretative analysis of the processes of cultural hybridization implicit in the source of information.

This work is based on the epistemic-methodological proposal of microhistory, developed by Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, which consists of paying attention to details that would otherwise be considered insignificant. These details serve as sources of sociocultural and contextual information on the creative processes of the source. It is a proposal that implies a microscopic approach to the source of information, which allows a more complete approach to the details, based on processes of deep interpretation, since “For microhistory, downscaling is an analytical procedure applicable anywhere, independently” (Levi, 1996, p. 122). This proposal is based on the assumption that this type of detailed observation of the source “will reveal previously unobserved factors” (*Ibidem*, 1996, p. 124). In this sense, through the interpretative analytical process described above, we approach the details present in the graphics and narrative of this comic strip, which support our argument.

As theoretical support for Taoism, we refer to Paulina Rivero Weber and Anne H el ene Su arez Girard (2016), who proposes two dimensions of Taoism: the religious and the philosophical; the latter is defined as the “philosophy of becoming” (Rivero Weber, 2016, p. 12). For culture and its processes, we use Alfred Kroeber (1963), who analyzes the processes of cultural survival and change; on the other hand, N estor Garc a Canclini (2016), whose studies on cultural hybridization, marked not only by the points of convergence but also of conflict, are of importance. Finally, we take up, in the same way, Keisuke Matsui (2014) and Tetsuro Watsuji (2006) with their proposals on the cultural link that is established in religion, based on geographical conditions.

Finally, our primary sources are the single fascicle of the comic book *Hermanas* (Ramos González, 2021) as well as interviews with its author conducted first-hand. Secondary sources are the bibliography and general audiovisual material.

3. Analysis

Story and format

Hermanas is an independent publication created in 2021 by graphic designer Paulina Ramos González, a Mexican author whose work style was strongly influenced by Japanese creators such as CLAMP, Ogure Ito, and Daisuke Moriyama. Among her first contacts within the field, the visits to the comic conventions held in Mexico City since the nineties stand out; in them, Paulina met Mexican independent artists, whose work moreover influenced her; among them are Larenn Syanne,²⁰ Sareki,²¹ Alberto León,²² Tozani,²³ Ivonne Cruz,²⁴ etc. (Ramos González, 2022).

Hermanas was published independently in a format measuring 13.3x20 centimeters; the volume consists of 18 pages of bond paper printed in black and white. The covers are in color and printed on couché paper.

As an initial situation, Life and Death (Yin and Yan, in a perhaps reduced sense),²⁵ are two sisters who live peacefully in the forest, both notice that they have powers over the life and death of the beings that surround them, nevertheless they do not understand them nor make sense of them. The transformation comes when both are forced to act during a forest fire: to avoid the agony of the animals, the sister who attracts death kills them, so that after the fire, her sister regenerates the forest.

Eventually, both sisters understand their role and set about traveling the world, activating the cycle of death and resurrection throughout the story.

Japanese manga and the graphics in *Sisters*

In this section we argue that formally, in *Hermanas*, the graphic forms and canons of manga are assimilated; while conceptually, Taoist philosophy is taken up again, representing, life and death as complementary opposites of each other through the use of allegories. Among the characteristics that make evident the influence of manga in this Mexican comic, we find the graphic feature that is characterized by broad expressiveness, minimal development of facial features, as well as a representation of eyes that occupy much of the dimensions of the face. The latter is one of the best-known elements of manga, which allows identifying it, without being the only definitive element. In general, the drawing styles of manga authors are very varied, so establishing a specific typology is complicated. Santiago Iglesias (2013), states that “The only way to standardize all these different artistic typologies is to repair in the purely pictorial aspects that all of them share: in other words, the simplification and dynamism of the strokes” (p. 147). So, we are before a criterion that allows us to identify the use of simple graphics, designed to be highly expressive; as well as the exacerbation of dynamism from the kinetic line and expressive characters, strategically highlighted. Aspects that we observe in this cartoon, where certain features of the face such as the mouth and nose of the characters have economized in favor of exacerbating the eyes; the same happens with the body, from which details are eliminated in favor of accentuating the kinky details of the hair of life and the skeletal form of a sternum with ribs that is explicitly observed in death. We observe as expressed by Santiago Iglesias (2013):

²⁰ <https://estudiosyanne.mercadoshops.com.mx/>

²¹ <https://tandemcomics.mx/sareki-lopez/>

²² https://www.tebeosfera.com/autores/leon_abad_alberto.html

²³ <https://www.deviantart.com/tozani>

²⁴ <https://dibujando.net/Yvon>

²⁵ Both Ying and Yang, philosophically, imply more aspects than just life and death; but in this comic, these two are the ones that stand out primarily.

[...] the secret of the design of manga characters lies in the discrimination of the superficial elements; in not representing all the elements of the human body giving them equal importance, but in privileging those facets or characteristics that contribute to defining the character, to the detriment of other unnecessary features for the understanding of the character. The character has a synthetic design, but at the same time is very descriptive, which gives unity to the whole (p. 149).

Another feature we observed in *Hermanas*, which is characteristic of manga and coincides with the Mexican visual tradition of comics, is the black and white printing, which although mostly determined for commercial reasons, “has become by tradition and technique a characteristic formal resource” (*Ibidem*, 2013, p. 132); in this case, we studied a very simple author’s edition, in which the only color space is the cover, surely with commercial issues as well.

A third key feature of manga, which we observe in *Hermanas*, is the predominance of image over text, since, in this type of graphics, “text and dialogue are much less important than in Western comics” (*Ibidem*, 2013, p. 145); this feature of manga implies several things: reduction of the written text in benefit of the image, the use of a reduced number of vignettes, the use of emptiness for expressive purposes, and the use of the whole page as a totality.

An image that shows the formal construction of this cartoon can be found on page 10 (Figure 1). The rectangular vignette occupies more than half of the page, approximately 12.5x13.4 centimeters; in it we can see the sister who symbolizes life, in the foreground, sitting, crying, holding a bunny in her arms. In the background, we can see the onomatopoeia of crying: Buaaaaa!!!! In the background is the emptiness, marked by a grid of dark lines that are thicker at the top of the image, and get thinner as they descend. In the balloons, Life says:

Figure 1 Comic book’s formal construction



(Ramos González, 2021, p. 10)

“I can’t... I can’t stand it, I can’t do anything sister!” (Ramos González, 2021, p. 10). The vignette is complemented by two cartridges placed at the bottom where the narrator explains, “For the sister of destruction, death was natural. Nevertheless for the sister of life, it was something she could not bear” (*Ibidem*, 2021, p. 10).

In this vignette, she uses several expressive resources taken from the manga and designed to increase the expressiveness of the scene: the written text is reduced and the vignette occupies most of the page, trimming the edges; this gives more weight to the scene and occupies a good part of the page, which is taken as a whole; this is because it usually has more weight than the isolated vignette, since “The setting on the page has always been and continues to be more important than the vignette considered in isolation since it must communicate the impression of a flow of images” (Santiago Iglesias, 2013, p. 140).

On the other hand, emptiness is presented to accentuate the expressiveness of Life’s emotions, so the scenery of the burning forest disappears to give way to emptiness, which is a characteristic not only of manga but moreover of Japanese art,

Japanese art has found diverse ways to express this duality [...] The fusion of a vibrant flow with immutability in a vertiginous sensation of intricate states, the transformations and distortions of a counter perspective, the material recording of memories, the special interest in emptiness and negative space, the simultaneous vision of past and present, the interaction of reality and fantasy (Ibídem, 2013, p. 502).

A last characteristic element of manga, which we observe in *Sisters*, is the childlike representation of the characters, the so-called neoteny, which refers to

[...] the persistence of larval or juvenile characters after the adult state has been reached. In the case of comic and animation characters, this would be reflected in the superior head size, as well as large eyes and dilated pupils (Ibídem, 2013, p. 154).

About this cartoon, both characters present extremely large heads, a feature evidenced by the small size of their bodies, which barely reach four and a half heads. Both characters present childish features, particularly the sister who attracts Death (Yin); in the case of Life (Yang), she presents a slight development of breasts, although the drawing does not detail body features such as hair or nipples.

In addition to the formal elements that have influenced and enriched Ramos’ work, we have the philosophical aspects of Taoism present in many of the stories of the Eastern mass media, where the duality of life-death and light-darkness are intertwined, giving the protagonists of their stories complex lessons. In *Hermanas*, the conceptual axis of the story is, precisely, this idea of complementary opposites, which also takes elements from the Taoist Yin and Yang that entered Japan via China, and which was adopted in its worldview and philosophical-religious practices. Paulina Rivero Weber (2016), distinguishes between religious Taoism, whose practices seek immortality, and philosophical Taoism, centered on the duality of yin yang and its eternal becoming: “Man can only describe the inexpressible, the permanent dao that is absolute [...], through his subjective experience, by resorting to the relative, to the yin yang duality: nothingness-being, dark-light, death-life, feminine-masculine, and so on” (Suárez Girard, 2016, p. 41).

The entire story and graphics of *Hermanas* revolve around that concept, a significant example in which Paulina Ramos managed to graphically balance the idea of complementary opposites is the cover, in which the sister who attracts death (yin) appears in the foreground, seated with her arms supporting her legs, while the other sister (yang) is standing behind her, holding a skull with both hands. The whole illustration is surrounded by symbols referring to the life-death cycle: there are two bird skeletons near Death, a small one perched on her finger, and a larger one fluttering near her. On the side of Life the skull she holds is filled with new plant buds; while her hair is covered with flowers and several live birds perch on her antlers (Figure 2).

Figure 2 The Yin-yang in *Hermanas*



(Ramos González, 2021)

This image shows the complementarity of both manifestations because their symbols are intertwined without being assigned opposite or separate places; as we observe in the image, the story itself consists of the acquisition of the consciousness of these two entities that are represented anthropomorphically in the story: the consciousness of their function in the world, by making it pass from emptiness and being, and its consequent journey through space and time, thus activating the historical becoming.

As such, the narrative presents the yin-yang cycle: “‘Nothingness’ refers to the phase before the first determination, the first duality that is the (here called “heaven and earth”), the phase in which everything is in potency” (*Ibidem*, 2016, p. 41). This first phase of nothingness can be observed in the initial moments in which both sisters share their life in the forest; although in this comic, the forest is full of beings that in the original philosophical conception would not yet exist in the “nothingness”; in our story, the nothingness is the one that the two protagonists have in their consciences, because they are not able to understand their gifts, as expressed on page 6, in the dialogue that states: “The sisters loved each other very much but neither of them understood the power they had been given” (Ramos González, 2021, p. 6). It is until both sisters manage to understand their function in the world, that the phase of being is activated, then they start their life-death journey around all the entities that emerge and are integrated into this principle; “being refers to the phase in which, from that first duality all determinations (‘all things’) begin to appear: animate and inanimate beings, physical or immaterial phenomena” (Suárez Girard, 2016, p. 41).

It is a paradoxical beginning of this process of becoming the Dao that is illustrated in this comic, paradoxical because to illustrate itself, it is done through entities that take anthropomorphic form and surround themselves with things and beings that should not exist in the nothingness, but that in the story, fulfill a function.

The origin of these dualities (including that of nothingness and being), the infinite sum of these, and all their possible evolutions is the Dao. "Thus/In permanent nothingness its mystery will be glimpsed/Permanent being its limit will be glimpsed/Both spring from the same, though they have different names/Together they mean darkness/Darkness of darkness,/Gate of all mysteries (Ibidem, 2016, pp. 41-42).

In *Hermanas*, the cycle of the eternal becoming of complementary opposites is perfectly represented.

***Hermanas* and its iconographic referents**

In this section, we start from the argument that in the analyzed source, the visual representations of Life and Death (Yin Yang), resort to Western media and contemporary references such as the image of skeletal death, and the character carrying a goat skull on his head, which alludes to the religious reference of the scapegoat. The yang takes up the extended myth between cultures of the renovating symbolism of the deer. The interaction between both characters alludes to the imagery of the vegetable tomb.

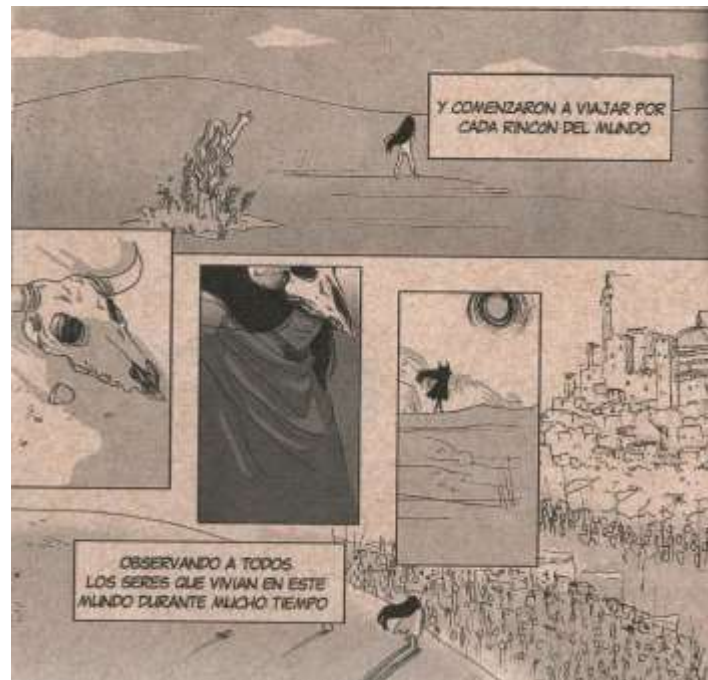
In the desire for anthropomorphic representation of the abstract entities embodied by the characters, a series of references whose diffusion and construction have been historical and/or media are used, as is the case of the representation of the sister who attracts death (Yin) as a skeleton, and the iconographic use of the goat's head placed as a helmet on the head of one of the characters. In this character, who philosophically embodies Yin, we can identify two main references: a part of the skeletal representation of the death of the medieval western tradition is retaken by the author. Nevertheless, we do not see here the whole skeleton, but only the sternum and part of the ribs and neck on the anthropomorphic body of this character. Thus, from the western reference, only a fragment of the typical skeletal death is retaken,

The image of the skull as a symbol of death is medieval in origin, unknown in this sense in antiquity (Causey, 1993; Hind, 1963). As a reminder of the transience of life on the Earth, the image of the skull found its place in vanitas paintings (Hall, 1974). These representations are depicted in religious paintings in penitent scenes and secular paintings in still-lives and portraits, including allegorical portraits, group portraits, single portraits, and self-portraits (De Girolami Cheney, 2018, p. 267).

On the other hand, the second attribute that the author of this comic book links with the character of the sister who attracts death, has to do with the second sequence of the story, on page 14 when both characters separate, and Death crosses a huge desert of dunes where he finds a goat skull, which he later places on his head, like a helmet. The scene is composed of five vignettes that occupy the lower part of the page: the first vignette is located right in the center of the page, measures approximately 4x12 centimeters, and in it we observe the two sisters saying goodbye; the sister who embodies Death and Yin goes forward in the middle of the desert, while the other sister bids her farewell with her hand, from a distance. The dialogue of the cartouche says: “and they began to travel to every corner of the world” (Ramos González, 2021, p. 14). The second, third, and fourth vignettes are small and are superimposed on the fifth, which is larger. In the first small vignette, we see a close-up of the goat skull in the middle of the sand; in the second we see a medium close-up of this character, already carrying the skull on his head and with his cape covering his shoulders and chest. The third vignette shows her walking in the middle of the desert sun.

The fifth vignette is located at the bottom of the page, below the three small ones we have described in the previous lines; it measures approximately 14x7 centimeters, and it shows the sister who embodies the yin, standing on a hill; she is already wearing a goat skull as a helmet and a kind of ragged cloak around her shoulders, she observes in the distance a kingdom and its inhabitants at war. Above this vignette, we are presented with three more, which narrate the events that lead this sister to stand in front of the village at war. The cartouche that accompanies these four vignettes reads: “observing all the beings that lived in this world for a long time” (*Ibidem*, 2021, p. 14) (Figure 3).

Figure 3 The attributes of Death in *Hermanas*



(Ramos González, 2021)

The referent of the goat skull placed as a helmet on the head of a character is difficult to trace since it is not something that is specifically linked to death; it does not seem to have a direct historical reference and usually appears in comic characters of varied character, as in the case of Judge Mortis of the English comics of 2000 AD and the saga of Judge Dredd,²⁶ or even the work of Mexican Edgard Clément, who places what looks like a goat's head as the helmet of the archangel Uriel.²⁷ In the case of *Hermanas*, the skull, having been found in the desert by the sister who attracts death, serves as a symbolic element that relates this space to death and desolation.

Historically, we could only trace the reference of a goat in the desert in the Bible, in Leviticus 16:

The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord. 2 The Lord said to Moses: "Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die. For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover". 3 "This is how Aaron is to enter the Most Holy Place: He must first bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering". 4 He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments; so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on. 5 From the Israelite community he is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. 6 "Aaron is to offer the bull for his sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household". 7 Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. 8 He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. 9 Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. 10 But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.

This relationship is established because, in this comic, we observe the representation of the desert according to the imagery of desolation and death. We will go deeper into this topic later on, because right now, the important thing is to highlight the negative relationship established with the desert and its link with death.

²⁶<https://www.sddistribuciones.com/JUEZ-MORTIS-JUDGE-MORTIS-FIGURA-1676-CM-JUDGE-DREDD-3A-2000-AD-Isbn-4897056213593-Codigo-3AT,3A 1603JM>

²⁷ https://twitter.com/edgar_clement/status/606162908746113024?lang=ca

In the case of the Bible, the link is established from the interpretative tradition in which Azazel (the scapegoat), is related to a demon that inhabited the desert, “this myth would further settle the connection of Azazel with the word מִירְיָעַש [..] It seems that this idea persisted until the 15th century since the emissary goat was supposed to be thrown into an abyss where Azazel resided, which was described as a demon goat” (Asmat, 2015, p. 11). According this researcher, the word Azazel is associated with the terms “desert” and “uninhabited land”, it is in this uninhabited land where the entity that attracts death, meets not with the Christian demon, but with the remains of what she justly represents, and it is the moment when the skull is placed on the head as a helmet.

In the case of the sister, whose representation is related to life and yang, let us remember that her attributes and characterization allude to the extended myth between cultures of the renovating symbolism of the deer. In this sense, as with the sister linked to death, life does not have classical Western attributes²⁸ either, but rather resorts to botanical symbols from the nocturnal regime of the imaginary, which would be closer to the symbolism of the Taoist Yin Yang, although not precisely of its circular visual representation.²⁹

The sister who brings her to life, and who alludes to Yang, is represented as a very young character, almost in the middle of puberty, and on whose head protrude two antlers that look like elk or deer, which are usually covered with flowers and vegetation; in this way, the iconography of this character is directly linked to the deer and

its symbolic meaning is linked to that of the tree of life, due to the resemblance of its antlers to tree branches. It is also a symbol of renewal and cyclical growth, as observed by Henri-Charles Puech. In various Asian cultures and pre-Columbian America, the deer is a symbol [...] the deer is related to the sky and light, while the snake depends on the night and subway life. Therefore, on both sides of the bridge of death and resurrection (Milky Way), eagles, deer, and horses appear as mediators between heaven and the earth of renewal, because of the buds of their horns (Cirlot, 1992, pp. 129-129).

Iconographically, this character is represented with attributes of rebirth and fertility, as they are presented textually in the narrated story; in this sense, we understand that both representations of the sisters are close to what Durand (1981) knows as the nocturnal regime of imaginaries. This regime is composed of schemes, archetypes, and symbols characterized by what Durand identifies as “double negation”, which is a procedure that “resides essentially in the fact that using the negative the positive is reestablished, by a negation or negative act the effect of first negativity is destroyed. We could say that the source of the dialectical regression, can be found in this process of double negation lived on the plane of images before being codified by grammatical formalism” (*Ibidem*, 1981, p. 193). It is a set of imaginaries characterized by complementary opposition, wherefrom the nocturnal emerges the diurnal, and the diurnal gives way to the nocturnal. In this imaginary regime, the Taoist philosophy of yin and yang can be inserted, characterized precisely by this symbolic inversion, translated into complementary and interdependent opposition.

Within the diurnal regime, we can find a conglomerate of symbols that are embodied in the thematic and iconographic references of this comic, as is the case of the cyclical symbols, which have two types of symbolic supports: those of the moon, which we will not address in this text, and those of the botanical cycle, which are precisely those used by Paulina Ramos to represent the sister who is linked to life and rebirth, since in her we observe the vegetal fructification, not only seasonal but also linked to the cycle of life. These types of symbols are present in “The history of religions shows us with many examples of this collusion natural cycle and vegetable.

²⁸An example of this are the Vanitas, a type of baroque paintings in which attributes of life and death were usually represented together. This type of work exalted the transitory nature of life and of the vain objects of consumption, which were nothing, against the inexorable destiny of death to which every human being was condemned; the Vanitas were “a type of painting of high symbolic value, included in the still life category, in which a series of figures appear that serve to awaken in the spectator the idea that all the honors, pleasures and riches of the world are fleeting, passing, and that death -at the least expected moment- will put an end to them. The skull, or skeleton, together with a clock are ideal symbols to put before the eye the brevity and transience of life. Passing beauty, in various forms, is nothing other than the clearest manifestation of the deceptiveness of all that is worldly” (Labarga, 2012, p. 626).

²⁹ The yin yang symbol could be taken as a traditional way of representing life and death, although it alludes to broader concepts, as we have seen above.

It is what explains the so frequent confusion, in the word ‘Great-Mother’ of the earth of the moon by representing both directly the domain of germs and growth” (*Ibidem*, 1981, p. 282). It is these symbols that materialize in the representation of the sister linked to life, and which culminate, both narratively and Figureally, in the symbolism of the vegetable tomb, linked precisely to death and rebirth.

Finally, the vegetable symbol is often explicitly chosen as a model of metamorphosis. In folklore or mythology, a plant or a tree is often born from the sacrificed dead [...] A very close argument of multiple metamorphoses is the mythological motif of the vegetable tomb: The body of Osiris is enclosed in a wooden chest, enclosed in turn in a trunk of heather and which will serve to make the main beam of the royal palace. But a plant is always born from the death of the hero and announces his resurrection (Ibidem, 1981, pp. 283-284).

We find that in this comic: this symbolism of the vegetable tomb is illustrated at a conceptual level, when the sister who incarnates Death ends the life of the animals so that they do not suffer during the fire, and later gives way to her sister so that life can make its way again: from the tomb of the living beings sacrificed in the forest fire, life emerges; time and the fear of death are dominated,

All the symbols of the measuring and mastery of time will tend to progress according to the thread of time, to be mythical, and these myths will almost always be synthetic myths, which tend to reconcile the antinomy that time implies: the terror before the time that flees, the anguish before the absence, and the hope in the realization of time, the confidence in a victory over time (Ibidem, 1981, p. 268).

The story of *Hermanas* is precisely about this reconciliation of opposites, how the characters become aware of their function in the world (Figure 4), as can be seen in the following dialogue:

It was in these acts that she understood the power with which she was born. Her heart allowed her to give death with wisdom and justice without feeling anger or revenge as men did, and she exercised her gift with love and compassion to end the lives of old and sick people and marked the beginning and the end of a new cycle, even when she cannot stop the course of time and destiny, as in that fire; but where death lies, life always rises to continue the cycle, she destroys what should no longer continue and her sister restores beauty and life to what was. One is the origin, the other is the end and they always walk together because they are life and death (Ramos González, 2021, pp. 16-17).

This reconciliation of opposites, this complementarity proper to the nocturnal regime of the image, encompasses precisely the Taoist yin and yang, and the life-death structure described above, is nothing other than the Dao cycle:

[...] philosophical Taoism opposes this claim to immortality because it considers death as something natural and proper to live it considers it part of life. The life-death cycle is simply the cycle of Dao: birth and death, creation and destruction are facets of the same process [...] to be born and to die is part of the becoming of a cosmos whose way of being is that: to create and destroy, to always transform everything (Rivero Weber, 2016, p. 12).

Figure 4 Nocturne symbolism and Taoism in *Hermanas*



(Ramos González, 2021, pp. 16-17)

As we can see in this comic, the Dao cycle is presented as a conceptual reference that is even materialized in the Figures; in this case, the openly illustrated philosophical aspect is mediated by the author's reading and consumption of the stories told in the Japanese mass media, where the theme of the interrelation between life and death, and light and darkness are a constant; An example of this is the work of CLAMP, authors who inspired Paulina (Ramos González, 2022), who create complex stories where the dialectical relational factor is a constant; even their illustrations of light and darkness created for the Sakura Card Captor series could have served as Figure inspiration for the creation of the sisters in this comic.³⁰

Conflict and polarization of spaces in *Hermanas*

Up to this point, we have analyzed our primary source, both Figureally and conceptually, and we observe how it perfectly embodies the cycle of the vegetable tomb of the nocturnal imagery of the image, as well as the very becoming of the oriental Dao; nevertheless, in every process of hybridization there are conflicts, aspects or elements that fail to integrate between the elements of the cultures that are found, points of rupture, unresolved aspects; Therefore, in this section, we argue that the conflict inherent to the cultural hybridization of the referents is present in the representation of polarized and opposed spaces (life-death forest, death-war desert) typical of Western Christianity.

It is important to remember that we are working with a comic derived from a type of productive consumption by the author, where elements from the Japanese Figure tradition and philosophy are mixed with Paulina Ramos' Figure tradition and sociocultural processes. We will delve into how this process may have occurred in later pages, in this premise, we just want to remember that any process of cultural miscegenation, in addition to having similar aspects between cultures, allows the process of mixing and acculturation; moreover accounts for forms of conflict, aspects that do not coincide and do not end up integrating, tearing between the different elements that overlap; therefore, for García Canclini (2016) the "hybridization is not synonymous with fusion without contradictions, but can help to account for the particular forms of conflict generated in recent inter-culturalism" (*Ibidem*, 2016, p. II).

³⁰ [https://sakuracardcaptors.fandom.com/es/wiki/Oscuridad_\(The_Dark,_闇\);](https://sakuracardcaptors.fandom.com/es/wiki/Oscuridad_(The_Dark,_闇);)
[https://sakuracardcaptors.fandom.com/es/wiki/Luz_\(The_Light,_光\)](https://sakuracardcaptors.fandom.com/es/wiki/Luz_(The_Light,_光))

As we have seen in the pages above, this comic presents a Figure and a concept very integrated with the Taoist philosophy and the nocturnal regime of the imaginary. The concept narrated in the story is perfect and congruent; the tearing comes, however, at the Figure level from page 14, after both sisters had understood their role in the cycle of death and rebirth of the world, they leave the forest and in the cartouche, the narrator expresses the following: “and they began to travel through every corner of the world, observing all the beings that lived in this world for a long time” (Ramos Gonzalez, 2021, p. 14). While at the narrative level it is understood that both sisters travel together, because life and death always go hand in hand; there are a couple of scenes where it is Figureally followed that they separate: on that same page we see death departing towards the desert while her sister says goodbye; later, she looks, alone and from a distance, at a kingdom at war and enters among the combatants to give death. It is only at the end of these scenes that a reference is made again to the two sisters going together in a cycle. This pair of scenes shows a small process of tearing apart how the author introduced the Daoist philosophy, the verdict is given by the Figure representation of polarized and opposing spaces: while in the forest a very clear life-death cycle predominates, as it moves under botanical symbolism; the version we see of the desert is not that of a place where there is both life and death, but the vision of the desert as desolation, derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition that syndicates the desert “as a place where demons dwell” (Asmat, 2015, pp. 25-26), from which derives the idea of the desert as death.

According to Gilberto Giménez, geoFigureally, the term desert is “used to describe areas characterized fundamentally by aridity, that is, by the absence or scarcity of water, which implies a deficit water balance. Aridity in turn causes dryness, that is, the lack of atmospheric humidity that results in the formation of dry, stony or sandy soils” (Giménez & Héau, 2007, p. 9).

Accordingly, the desert landscape can be of two main types: the ergs, which correspond to the common imagery of the Great Plains, covered with sand and dunes; and the stony plains carved by the wind called regs. The type of desert represented in *Hermanas* represents the first type: we observe on page 14 that the sister of death travels across great sandy plains, a desolate space marked by the goat’s skull and the incandescent sun; it is a vision of a desert that is not only a desert, but also nourished by a whole religious imagery of the desert already carried by the Spanish colonized, familiar since their childhood with a profuse iconography of an anchorite and hermit saints. This imaginary, inherited in turn from the medieval West, emphasized solitude and the absence of human presence. Deserts were conceived as uninhabited or uncivilized zones, regardless of their climatic characteristics (*Ibidem*, 2007, p. 30).

A vision of desolation is sufficiently justified due to the extreme temperatures and the lack of water that make it difficult for human beings to survive in this environment. Both in the construction of the forest and the desert by Paulina Ramos, we observe the notion of fudo, proposed by Tetsuro Watsuji, which is “a collective term that encompasses the weather, meteorological phenomena, geology, landforms, and the landscape of a region (Watsuji, 2006); although the word refers to these elements, Watsuji posits that the fudo of a region is closely related to the spiritual foundation and history of the region’s people” (Matsui, 2014, p. 18). Watsuji establishes three types of relationships between people and the fudo: the monsoon zone, the desert, and the pasture. We will focus on the first two because they are the ones present in our primary source.

For Watsuji, the monsoon zone is characterized by heat and humidity, so he argues that in this region, the people who live there are passive to nature, because nature nurtures them and provides them with everything they need, “The world of man becomes a lush place, full of plant and animal life. Nature is not death, but life. Death is rather on man’s side” (*Ibidem*, 2006, p. 46). In contrast, the desert zone corresponding to the areas of Arabia, Africa, and Mongolia is a barren and desolated area,

The people in this second zone were united vunder the absolute authority of tribal chiefs and constantly struggled against both nature and other tribes. These conditions engendered the development of the notion of an absolute personal God who transcended human strength. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are part of monotheistic, desert-created religions that share a belief in one God who is linked to humans through testaments (Matsui, 2014, 18).

In this proposal, the relationship between climatic characteristics and the predominant type of religious thought is highlighted. What we see in *Sisters* are precisely these first two types: the monsoon zone that gives ample forests, where cyclical thinking is a constant, as we can observe in the forest where the protagonists are born and grow. In the second sequence, Death, as a foreigner accustomed to the abundance of the forest, sees the desert as desolation, where linear thinking makes sense because the choice of the wrong path can cost the living being its subsistence.

However, forest people, such as those of ancient India, developed the idea of samsara (cycle of rebirth). According to Suzuki, the desert people had to determine whether a path led to water. The decision was important as a wrong choice could lead to death from thirst (Ibídem, 2014, pp.18-19).

Therefore, the only point of conflict and tearing that we observe in the processes of cultural mixing in this comic book is integrated by these two scenes, where the Figure of the comic book gives an account of aspects introjected into the unconscious of the author, typical of her Christian culture manifestations.

4. Results

In the previous section, we examined a good part of the formal, narrative, and thematic characteristics of the comic strip *Hermanas*; in this section, we will give an account of how this Figure product derived from a type of consumption that mixed Figure and philosophical traditions coming from different contexts. In this section, we argue that in *Hermanas*, the Figure and thematic elements are mixed from the contact of the accentuation of the rapprochement between cultures, from which, the author made a productive consumption in which she assimilated elements from sympathies between her culture, which is not exempt from processes of conflict and tearing.

Paulina Ramos Gonzalez is a 30-year-old Mexican young woman from Mexico State; since she was a child, she came into contact with Latin American comics and American comics, when her father bought her copies of series such as *The Pink Panther*, *Popeye*, *the Woody Woodpecker*, *Condorito*; since she was a child, she began to draw characters from the cartoon series she saw on television, but it was the series *Card Captor Sakura*, from CLAMP, which marked her creative process:

[...] but one day the manga of Sakura Card Captor arrived to Mexico by Toukan publishing house, there I got to know the manga as such and I fell in love with the style, the stories, and the characters, it seemed incredible to me that a story from Japan could have the scope for someone to read it on the other side of the world and also that these were shown on television. Over time, I began to know the world of anime and manga and well... here I am, working and living from this (Ramos Gonzalez, 2022).

It was within the framework of the introduction and implementation of the neoliberal system in Mexico, that the opening to foreign markets took place, “This opening was based on the reduction of tariffs, this re-articulation of the national economic space had the result of improving the possibilities of exchange between Mexico and the countries with which it signed these treaties, and led to a notable intensification of commercial traffic with those countries” (Zapata, 2005, p. 21). This opening was most clearly observed when, in 1986, Mexico joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT); later, in 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into force.

To these economic processes, which introduced a large number of previously unknown cultural products to the country, we must add the technological changes and transformations that changed not only the way of producing, communicating, and working, but also of consuming, “the social emergence of technological innovations, a product of digitalization, coincides with neoliberal policies because these are the ones that orient their exploitation and exploitation towards the private sector” (Crovi Druetta, 2013, p. 15).

In this context, several anime series that had been censored since the seventies entered Mexico, and in the mid-nineties, the first manga of Japanese origin entered the country, from publishers such as Vid and Toukan. This entry of foreign products generated changes in cultural consumption and with it in Figure production due to the contact of Figure traditions of different origins.

Concerning Paulina Ramos, we have an author who produced a type of consumption that Calabrese calls *cult*, which is a type of productive repetitive consumption, since the one who consumes “adds something of her own in the same modality of consumption” (Calabrese, 1999, p. 51). Paulina got to know different ways of drawing and telling stories, from the traditional comics mentioned above (The Pink Panther, Popeye, the Crazy Bird), to her contact with Mexican authors of different generations, some of whom had a long tradition in Mexico, and others were beginning to make themselves known with works that also took up Japanese Figures, such as the case of authors like Larenn Syanne, Sareki, Alberto León, Tozani and Ivonne Cruz.

For Alfred Kroeber (1963), culture can be defined as “all the activities and non-physiological products of human personalities that are not automatically reflex or instinctive” (p. 61); this leaves a very wide margin for all kinds of cultural manifestations; this culture is unlimitedly receptive and is always going through patterns of stabilization and change,

By processes of culture, we mean those factors which operate either toward the stabilization and preservation of cultures and their parts or toward growth and change. Changes, in turn, may consist either of increments, such as new developments, inventions, and learned traits acquired from outside, or of losses and displacements (Ibidem, 1963, p. 152).

The processes of change can be of two types, diffusion, and tradition, and are carried out utilizing cultural transmission, as we observe in this case, in which both the economic and technological systems accentuate cultural contact and exchange and the production of new elements within a society, with which we have more intense and prolonged contacts with various foreign cultural elements, as is the case of Asian mass media in general, and manga and anime in particular,

In other words, a new culture is transmitted geographically as well as chronologically, in space as well as in time, by contagion as well as repetition. The spread in the area is generally called diffusion, as the internal handing on through time is called tradition (Ibidem, 1963, p. 219).

The type of cultural transmission and change, which gave way to the hybrid processes that generated this Mexican comic strip, is precisely diffusion, which encompasses the contact between cultural elements coming from different areas, and which is a much larger scale extension in which an invention, innovation or cultural product is dispersed from the society in which it originated to new societies and becomes established in their cultures (Kroeber, 1963).

To talk about the processes through which diffusion generates cultural changes in the face of constant exchanges between societies, we take up two concepts that are related to each other: the notion of cultural hybridization, which García Canclini (2016) takes from biology and adapts to culture, and the notion of acculturation by Kroeber (1963); since both speak of this enrichment, adaptation, and modification of cultural elements, derived from contact between cultures. For García Canclini (2016), hybridization is understood as “sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, which existed separately, combine to generate new structures, objects or practices” (*Ibidem*, 2016, p. III). On the other hand, Kroeber’s notion of acculturation (1963), also presents us with this notion of contact, of approximation between cultures, of fusion with contradictions, including the issue of power, employing which, one culture takes greater strength or dominion over the other; thus, acculturation implies “changes produced in a culture by the influence of another culture which result in an increased similarity of the two [...] Practically all the diffusion we have been considering either contributes to acculturation; and conversely, all acculturation in full of diffusion” (*Ibidem*, 1963, p. 233). This acculturation is more or less reciprocal, but for Kroeber, it is incomplete.

This notion of contact, exchanges, adaptation, transformation, and cultural reproduction, regardless of the degree of loss recognized by each definition, implies the following:

1. Contact between diverse cultures, which exchange and spread their cultural elements.
2. Common aspects that allow the linking and overlapping of an element within another culture, an attractor, a sympathy between cultures, which, in Gruzinski’s words, “selects one or another connection, reorients one or another link, or suggests one or another association between beings and things. It intervenes as if endowed with an energy of its own” (Gruzinski, 2007, p. 237).
3. The existence of a conclusion and aspects that do not end up being integrated.

In *Hermanas*, the attractor is marked by two fundamental aspects: the existence of opposites, both in Christianity and in Eastern philosophy and religion, and the existence of a strong Figure tradition of comics in both Mexico and Japan.

Concerning the former, both in Christianity and in Eastern Taoist philosophy, we find a magical world constituted by two forces whose characteristics are opposites: good and evil, light and darkness, day and night, above and below, everything and nothingness, etc. The difference, nevertheless, lies in the fact that both have a different logic, while Christianity moves with “a bivalent logic that underlies the definition of reality from the classic metaphysical principles that arise from it: the principle of identity [$A \leftrightarrow A$]; the principle of non-contradiction [$\neg(A \wedge \neg A)$]; and the principle of excluded third [$A \vee \neg A$]” (Lázaro Pulido, 2010, p. 98). Thus, we are witnessing different logical ways of understanding this bivalent thought:

The difference is thus expressed in logic. That of contradiction (which makes being and its negation impossible in the same time and sense) governs the origin (non-dualistic) of thinking established in Greece; that based on the overcome contrariety (which makes one thing possible and its opposite as another) is established when explaining the origin (non-dualistic) in the East (Ibíd., 2010, p. 99).

In *Hermanas*, the logic that dominates is the second one, the one that admits contradiction and is not dualistic; however, in the desert scenes, the author returns, at least in the Figures, to the contradictory dualistic logic.

The other element that acts as an attractor and makes the creation of a comic strip like *Hermanas* possible is the fact that both Japan and Mexico have a strong tradition of comic strip production. In Mexico, the origins of this tradition come from the periodicals and illustrated publications at the end of the 19th century, in contact with French caricature and American comic strips.

The irregularity in the delivery of these American products led to the publication in Mexico of local creations that later became independent in miscellaneous and specialized comic magazines, such as Paquín and Pepín. The golden age of Mexican comic strips lasted from 1934 to 1950, and was characterized by humorous and melodramatic publications, aimed at all types of audiences; the stories maintained continuity over several issues and were usually printed in sepia. The silver era lasted from the 1950s to the 1980s; during this period, many of the classics of the golden era were reprinted, the format became novelized and the print run was reduced, although sales continued to be in the thousands of copies (Hinds & Tatum, 2000). The eighties brought the decadence of the worn-out formulas of the Mexican industrial comic strip, while the author’s comic strip, enriched by the contact with European and Latin American comic strips, emerged and rose.

Manga also arose from the contact between the Japanese Figure tradition and the European caricatures that entered Japan at the end of the 19th century; by the 1950s, Osamu Tezuka revolutionized manga with his narrative and Figure style and the different genres he created. In the sixties, alternative magazines to Tezuka’s proposal appeared, such as the countercultural magazine *Garo*, where artists such as Yoshiharu Tsuge collaborated. In the seventies, manga diversified with the emergence of genres such as yaoi with homosexual themes, and yuri with lesbian themes (Santiago Iglesias, 2013). For the eighties and nineties, there was a boom in manga due to the intensification of trade with foreign countries, due to the implementation of neoliberalism.

This makes it clear how this sympathy, this attractor, could arise between the cultural elements of such distant societies: the coincidence in this bivalent thinking, the convergence between the tradition of comic production, which although it took different directions in the early eighties of the last century, continues to be an excellent link that allowed the transposition and mixing of Japanese manga and Mexican comics. Finally, we must not forget that every process of hybridization has conflicts, remember that in previous pages we analyzed how the Figures of the desert scenes, visually breaks with the perfectly grounded idea of complementary opposites, in these scenes what predominates is a polarization of spaces, where the forest represents life and rebirth, while the desert represents death and loneliness; This rupture is not very visible since it does not occur at a narrative level, but at a visual level, and comes from a process of cultural introjection of the author, who grows and develops in a country highly marked by western Christian polarization.

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6. Conclusions

In this article, we started from the argument that the comic book *Hermanas*, created by the designer Paulina Ramos González in 2021, is the result of a productive consumption that assimilates oriental elements of Japanese manga: ways of doing, philosophy, and imagery, which derives in a hybrid product that transposes referents and imaginary from similarity and conflict. Our argument is based on a methodological proposal based on the paradigm of indexical inferences proposed from the microhistory by Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, from which we analyze the details present in the Figures and narrative of the comic, to make interpretative inferences about the context of creation, and the socio-cultural and historical processes present in the visual culture of the author.

Throughout the analysis, we find that the open oriental influence of the Japanese mass products, not only in the philosophical aspects of the comic but in its Figures and narrative; besides enriching the conceptual reading, not only with the similarity of the story with the Taoist philosophy of yin and yang but with the nocturnal regime of the imaginary, proposed by Gilbert Durand, in which the Daoist philosophy itself can be inserted.

We identified that *Hermanas*, is a cultural product derived from constant exchanges extended in a relatively short time, between cultures, specifically the Mexican culture and its contact with the Japanese mass media; this contact nurtured the Mexican Figure tradition with narrative, Figure and thematic forms, which were uncommon in our country; the process of cultural hybridization that allowed the emergence of this work was the cultural diffusion, which allowed the identification of coincidences, sympathies, points of convergence and overlapping between different elements that are generating not only a comic strip in an isolated way, but are giving way to a whole generation of creatives that mix and reinterpret these new creative forms; the products that are generated are of all kinds: comics, illustration, clothing, merchandising, and even videogames.

Thus, in *Hermanas* we observe that the attractor is the religious-philosophical convergences and the Figure tradition of both countries, while the point of conflict visible in the comic, is observed as a slip perhaps unconscious of the culture of the author, who at some point in the story presents the Figure polarization of the spaces in which the characters move, which brings a conceptual and symbolic polarization, which generates some ambiguity in the notion of complementary opposites that dominates the comic.

Finally, we can say that one of the main contributions of this work is this first attempt to integrate an analysis where both the micro aspects of the source, translated into its Figures, narrative, and philosophical concept, are interpreted and understood in a broader macro-structural framework, marked by the idea of analyzing and describing how this process of contact, exchange, overlapping and cultural hybridization with its convergences and conflicts could have been carried out; dialectical integration that until now had not been done, or had been attempted and achieved in a very superficial way.

7. References

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