



Russia/Russians on Ice: Imagined Identity and Cross-cultural Communication in *Yuri!!! on ICE*

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Abstract

Yuri!!! on ICE (2016; 2017) is a Japanese TV anime featuring multinational figure skaters competing in the ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating Series. The three protagonists, including two Russian skaters Victor Nikiforov, and Yuri Purisetsuki (Юрий Плисецкий), and one Japanese skater Yuri Katsuki (勝生勇利), engage in extensive cross-cultural discourses. This paper aims to explore the ways in which Russian cultures, life style, and people are 'glocalised' in the anime, not only for the Japanese audience but also for fans around the world. It is followed by a brief study of Russian fans' response to YOI's display of Russian memes and Taiwanese YOI fan books relating to Russia and Russians in YOI. My reading of the above materials suggests that the imagined Russian identity in both the official anime production and the fan works can be regarded as an intriguing case of cross-cultural communication and cultural hybridisation.

Keywords: *Yuri!!! on ICE*, Japanese ACG (animation/anime, comics, games), anime, cross-cultural communication, cultural hybridisation

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Russia/Russians on Ice: Imagined Identity and Cross-cultural Communication in *Yuri!!! on ICE*

Yuri!!! on ICE (ユ-uri!!! on ICE; hereinafter referred to as YOI)¹ is a TV anime² broadcast in Japan between 5 October and 21 December 2016, featuring male figure skaters of various nationalities. According to a study conducted by the Kadokawa Ascii Research Laboratories Inc., the anime was “the most-tweeted fall anime...with 1,440,596 tweets” between 24 November and 14 December in 2016 (Pineda, 2016). The story is mainly about the relationship among Japanese figure skater Yuri Katsuki (hereinafter referred to as Yuri K) and two Russian skaters Victor Nikiforov (hereinafter referred to as Victor) and Yuri Plisetsky (herein after referred to as Yuri P), on their way towards the ISU (International Skating Union) Grand Prix Final (GPF) championship. Later YOI turned out to be extremely popular not only in Japan but also in many countries around the world; it has also achieved monumental merits, including Top One TV Anime Series of the Tokyo Anime Award Festival with 64,774 votes (Komatsu, 2016), Top One of the Best Anime of 2016 MEGA POLL (Anonymous, 2016), and Top One Anime of the Year 2016 in Crunchyroll’s The Anime Awards (Guest Author, 2017).

Apart from the appealing settings of figure skating, the plot of YOI is also innovative, if not subversive, compared with mainstream sports anime. As shown in episode 1, the 22-year-old Yuri K is the top male skater in Japan, entering GPF for once though ending up in the last sixth place. In the subsequent episodes, he struggles to overcome his previous failure, kicking off a fresh start in the new season with the coaching of

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the Eighth International Symposium on European Languages in East Asia at National Taiwan University in Taipei, Taiwan, on 30 September 2017. I am grateful to the delegates for their useful questions and remarks. I am also indebted to the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and the Journal’s editors for their proficient assistance in editing and proofreading.

2 Unless otherwise specified, the term “anime” is used in this article to refer to Japanese animated works.

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his long-time idol Victor. Then the 27-year-old Victor, a Russian skater and five-time world champion, has known Yuri K at the previous GPF event. He decides to travel to Japan to coach Yuri K after being impressed by a video footage of Yuri K's skating, an imitation of Victor's performance in GPF championship. Soon the 17-year-old Russian skater Yuri P, winner of Junior Grand Prix Final and Junior World Championships, also visits Japan to compete with Yuri K for Victor's coaching. Later Victor develops a relationship with Yuri K that, as the author Mitsurō Kubo states in a magazine interview, is reminiscent of soulmates:

As the last part depicting ordinary life before the Grand Prix Final, I wanted to create a relaxing episode. ...The ring Yuuri [Yuri K] gave Victor also carries the meaning of a symbol that the two of them are like soul mates.

(Toraonice, 2017)³

Given its reputation as an anime celebrating affectionate friendship between men and even gay marriage, YOI soon attracted scholarly attention, with a handful of journal articles and MA theses published since 2017. Most of these studies share a dominant interest in fandom (Heinrich 2017, McInroy & Craig 2018, Zhang 2018) and the anime's portrayal of same-sex friendship and affection among the male characters, from the perspectives of Boys' Love (BL)⁴, homosexuality, and queer studies. Laws (2017, pp. 10-11), for example, compares YOI with two famous Japanese BL works, *Sekai-ichi Hatsukoi: World's Greatest First Love* and *Junjou Romantica*. She contends that the popularity of these works indicate significant progress in the acceptance of homosexuality in Japanese media. Berndt (2018, p. 1) takes a different angle of cross-culturalism, arguing that "[t]he transcultural consumption of Japan-derived popular media has prompted a significant amount of academic research and teaching", though she only mentions YOI briefly as "a recent popular series by female directors" (Berndt, 2018, p. 6, ft. 12).

³ In the original Japanese interview, Kubo uses the Katakana 'ソウルメイト' to describe this relationship. See the scanned image of the magazine page: <https://karice.wordpress.com/2017/02/21/p559/>

⁴ Boys' Love (BL) is a specific sub-genre in Japanese ACG (animation/anime, comics, and games), featuring erotic or romantic love between men.

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Building on Berndt's study of "transcultural consumption of Japan-derived popular media", my paper seeks to focus on the creation of imagined Russian identity, as well as issues relating to cross-cultural communication in YOI. As I will elaborate later, the anime's cross-cultural features help in attracting huge attention from fans in Japan and worldwide. More importantly, YOI presents interesting and inspiring cases of cultural hybridisation and glocalisation through a series of figure skating training and events in an international setting. In this study, I will explore two issues: the first is the ways in which YOI and its fan works present the imagined features of Russia, including the country, its culture, and its people; the second is the extent to which this may suggest an effort to facilitate cross-cultural communication and cultural hybridisation. In the remainder of the paper, I will first discuss YOI's characterisation from the perspective of "Cool Japan" and Koichi Iwabuchi's theory of "cultural odor" (2002, 2004). Then I will address the YOI production team's treatment of Russia and Russian memes in the anime. This is followed by a case study of Russian and Taiwanese fans' response and fantasy about Russia and Russians presented in YOI, with a focus on online forum comments, doujinshi (i.e. fan-made fiction and manga), and cosplay. In so doing, my study is expected to contribute to Japanese anime studies by exploring and complicating the nuances regarding the image of Russia and Russian in YOI.

1 Globalised and "Culturally Odorless" Characterisation in YOI

YOI's chief achievement lies in facilitating cross-cultural communication, in particular among the three protagonists Victor, Yuri K, and Yuri P. Indeed, in the real world of competitive figure skating, most major events are international, involving numerous hosting countries and skaters of various nationalities. This provides the YOI production team with a rich cross-cultural context for creating the anime. The choice of such an international theme and characterisation can be seen as a growing trend in Japanese ACG (anime, comics, games). In order to investigate "how foreigners are constructed, reproduced, and contested through language and visual clues in anime that feature foreign char-

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acters”, Ito and Bisila (2018: p.1, 3) conducted a survey of 17 Japanese anime, including YOI, and 73 foreign characters with 14 different nationalities. As I will elaborate in Section 2, the foreign characters in anime of this kind may still be based on conventions, if not stereotypes, as the production teams of Japanese anime perceive and present the characters’ foreignness.

YOI’s international settings in both the plot and characterisation also echoes with Iwabuchi’s notion of “culturally odorless” products. In *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, he argues that

it is no accident that Japan has become a major exporter of culturally odorless products. Japanese media industries seem to think that the suppression of Japanese cultural odor is imperative if they are to make inroads into international markets.

(Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 94)

Here the term “cultural odor” refers to a culture’s unique features that serve as “labels” for people outside of that culture to identify it. Later in his study of Pokémon, Iwabuchi (2004, p. 56, 58) again points out that Japanese global commodities (i.e. consumer technologies, comics and cartoons, computer and video games) are “culturally odorless”. Such a marketing strategy is also applied to anime, especially those are intended to display little or no Japanese nationality; by quoting from the world-famous Japanese anime director Mamoru Oshii (1996), he asserts:

Japanese animators and cartoonists unconsciously choose not to draw realistic Japanese characters when they wish to draw attractive characters...His characters tend to be modeled on Caucasian types. Consumers of Japanese animation and games may be aware of the Japanese origin of these commodities, but they perceive little “Japanese bodily odor”.

Iwabuchi (2004, p. 58)

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Although Iwabuchi's idea of "culturally odorlessness" helps in interpreting YOI's globalised characterisation, still there is a complicated vortex of cultural exchanges in it. On the one hand, Yuri K the Japanese skater has long been admiring Victor as his role model, while at the same time he is ambitious to win the championship of the next GPF. In some ways this may imply Japan's long-term endeavor since Meiji Enlightenment to imitate and then surpass European countries, while Russia's Peter the Great also launched a large-scale project of Europeanisation in the early eighteenth century. According to Schönle, Zorin, and Evstratov (2016, p. 1):

The changes initiated by the emperor Peter the Great...arguably represented the most far-reaching attempt at enforced Westernization until the Meiji restoration in Japan in 1868 and the Atatürk reforms in Turkey in the 1920s.

Bukh (2007, p. 10) also notes the similarities shared by Japan and Russia:

Both are presented as haunted by the question of whether they belong to Europe or Asia, embarked on the road to modernization in mid-19th century with the abolition of serfdom in Russia and Meiji Restoration in Japan.

On the other hand, both Victor and Yuri P are attracted by Yuri K's performance and potential for the championship, hence deciding to visit Yuri K in Japan. Upon their arrival, the two Russian skaters are soon amazed and enchanted by the local food and culture, in particular the hot spring in Yuri K's home-run hotel and home-made *katsudon*⁵ (カツ丼; deep-fried pork cutlet with egg sauce, served with rice).⁶ There are also scenes featuring Victor and Yuri K enjoying *katsudon* with satisfaction.⁷ Victor and Yuri P's response to Japan and Yuri K the Jap-

5 The cultural icon of *katsudon* in YOI will be discussed in Section 2 of this paper.

6 An image of the *katsudon* from YOI can be found here: <https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/yurionice/images/8/88/Katsudon-2.png/revision/latest?cb=20161203142113>

7 Images showing Victor and Yuri P devouring *katsudon* after their arrivals in Japan:

<http://www.fictionkitchenpodcast.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/YOI-Victor-eating-katsudon->

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anese may suggest many European and American visitors' perception of Japan, Japanese culture, and Japanese people—it involves a sense of amazement and appreciation, induced by the exoticism they expected and experienced during the visits to Japan. Yet at the same time they may be in awe of Japan's potential of catching up and even surpassing the dominant European/American cultures and countries.

In YOI, the enthusiasm or even cult of Japanese food expressed by Victor and Yuri K can be elaborated in two ways: one is Western countries' orientalism towards Japan in the 19th century, and the other is Japanese government's policy of "Cool Japan". As Holt (2016, pp. 128-129) points out:

Japan plays an intriguing role in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates about culture and civilization. ...Japan also became a model of secular civic virtue—a quality that could be instilled by cultivating "correct" taste and responsible habits of consumption.

Since the 1980s, Japan has endeavoured to export its national image to the world; polls about Japan's national image were carried out in various countries between 1996 and 2011, including Russia in 2010 (Hashimoto, 2018, p.47, 50). In 2015, the Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Council 2015 issued a proposal for measures to attract foreign fans of Japan and to rediscover "Japan's goodness" —all based on foreigners' views (Hashimoto, 2018, pp. 52-53). The target products of Cool Japan include

games, manga, anime, and other forms of content, fashion, commercial products, Japanese cuisine, and traditional culture to robots, eco-friendly technologies, and other high-tech industrial products.

(Hashimoto, 2018, p. 52)

Hence in YOI, the overly positive impression held by Victor and Yuri

[screen-shot-1.jpg](#);

https://vignette3.wikia.nocookie.net/yurionice/images/7/79/Yuri_p_eating_katsudon-1.png/revision/latest?cb=20161224161719

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P about Japan (including hot springs, food, Yuri K and his family and friends) can be seen as a device created deliberately to present the image of “Cool Japan”, not only to the foreign characters, but also to the anime’s audience around the world.

The intricate relationship between Japan and Russia is also transformed into the relationship among the Japanese and Russian protagonists in YOI, especially that between Yuri K and Victor. Such a relationship can be regarded as a parallel to Japan’s admiration, imitation, and ambition to surpass its role models, namely Russia and other Western-European countries. This seems to resemble the Japan-Russia relationship in history—both had perceived each other as rivals since the Meiji period, while Japan sought to construct its own national identity (the Japanese “Self”) by seeing Russia as the “Other” (Bukh, 2010). Both countries’ quests for their new identity and position in the world also fit well the quests for self-development of Yuri K, Victor, and Yuri P in YOI.

2 Imagined and Mixed Identity: Russian Culture, Life Style, and People in YOI

In many aspects YOI demonstrates features of globalisation and globalisation by creating mixed identity of facts and fiction. As mentioned in the introduction, two of the three protagonists of YOI are Russian, namely Victor (the world champion and Yuri K’s coach) and the young junior skater Yuri P (later the gold medalist of the Grand Prix Final). It is generally accepted that the characterisation of Victor was based on the American actor John Cameron Mitchell, while that of Yuri P the Russian female skater Julia Lipnitskaia (Hanashiro, 2016). The writer Kubo affirmed that it was her idea to model the characterisation of Victor and Yuri P on real-world figures, as she appreciate Mitchell and Lipnitskaia’s charms and charisma (Kubo, 2016). She even posted a photo with Mitchell on Twitter to demonstrate her affection and admiration towards the actor.⁸ Although the production team has admitted no connection

⁸ Source of image: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/72/98/14/7298141f4432318d89c06d02ce61e617.jpg>

between Victor and any male competitive skaters, along with a tweet by Victor's voice actor Junichi Suwabe (2016) denying such a liaison, many fans have speculated about the similarities between Victor and Plushenko. Plushenko's princely style, highly artistic performance (high GOE, i.e. Grade of Execution), and mastery of extremely challenging techniques, are all visible in the portrayal of Victor in the anime. Some of the YOI audience even pointed out that Victor's signature movement of hushing looks identical to "Plushenko hush of the crowd in Sochi 2014 Olympics" (Hanashiro, 2016), an alluring gesture that made "the arena [go] wild" (Newcomb, 2014). Apparently Victor shares many qualities with Plushenko, as "a showman and one of the best men's skaters to ever grace the ice at the games" (Newcomb, 2014).

One may wonder to what extent YOI is unique in mixing real-life figures in the modern world into character design. Except works based on history (especially the Japanese War States Period), most of Japanese anime seem to focus on fictional characterisation. Insofar I have found only two representative works that base their characterisation on real people. The first is the TV anime adaptation of Inoue Takehiko's sports manga *Slam Dunk*, broadcast in Japan between 16 October 1993 and 23 March 1996. Since Takehiko is an NBA fan, fans have found convincing evidence showing that many of the characters in *Slam Dunk* are modeled on NBA stars, such as Hanamichi Sakuragi for Dennis Rodman and Kaede Rukawa for Michael Jordan (Detroitja, 2008). The other example is a TV anime adaptation of Akimi Yoshida's manga *BANANA FISH* (1986-1994), broadcast in Japan between 6 July and 20 December 2018 (Seko & Utsumi 2018). According to Beaty (2013, pp. 24-28), the appearance of the protagonist Ash Lynx is believed to be inspired by former Swedish tennis player Stefan Edberg (1966-present; early stage only) and later the American actor River Phoenix (1970-1993), while the other protagonist Eiji Okumura is said to share the look with the Japanese actor Hironobu Nomura.⁹ Still, this kind of "real-person" characterisation is rare in the Japanese anime industry, which makes the case of YOI significant and note-worthy.

⁹ <https://bananafishlovers.tumblr.com/post/176168085069/so-i-bet-new-banana-fish-fans-have-a-lot-of>

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Back to the fictional characterisation in Japanese ACG, Victor appears to bear similar visual traits with Russian characters in other Japanese anime, though with differences in personality. For example, his silver hair is in common with two other famous Russian ACG characters, namely “Russia” (the personification of the country Russia; he is named “Ivan Braginsky” by the manga artist) in the anime series *Hetalia: Axis Powers* and the Japanese-Russian volleyball player Lev Haiba in *Haikyuu!!*.¹⁰ All these three characters have silver hair and blue eyes; Victor and Russia are also of similar height (Victor is 180 cm; Russia is 182 cm; Lev is 194 cm). Yet there are sheer differences in their personality: Victor is sociable, charismatic, and level-headed (in episode 1, for instance, he is extremely friendly to fans and fellow skaters, warmly inviting Yuri K to have photos taken); Russia is shy, childish, and pushy; Lev is insolent, egotistic, but candid. The above comparison reveals that significant visual conventions are applied to Russian characters in Japanese anime, while their personality traits vary to a great extent.

Whether or not Victor’s friendliness and enthusiasm should be regarded as part of typical Russian identity, there are two issues emerging from his characterisation: one is how are foreigners presented in Japanese anime; the other is to what extent do world-famous Russian figure skaters share the national identity with the majority of Russians. To discuss the first issue, I would like to refer to Ito and Bisila’s study (2018) again. According to their findings, over 80% of the foreign characters in their selected anime are male, while “65% of the characters depicted as white” (Ito & Bisila, 2018, p. 4). They also discovered that the stereotypical “harmless” American style of characters “tend to be white with blond hair and blue eyes, and are unable to speak ‘proper’ Japanese” (Ito & Bisila, 2018, p. 4). They made an important conclusion that:

These are NOT a reflection of reality; rather, these are constructed to reflect a certain viewpoint. Thus, *anime* depictions is not “neutral” at all. Our results suggest the ideology of *nihonjinron*

10 Images of Lev in *Haikyuu!!*, Victor in *YOI*, and Russia in *Hetalia*: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/213146994847625182/?autologin=true>; retrieved April 2, 2019.

is operating behind the scene.

(Ito & Bisila, 2018, p. 6).

Such an ideology of “Japaneseness” (by which I would refer to as the visual conventions of Japanese ACG) may be mingled into the characterisation of Victor as well. Like the Western ACG characters in the above study, Victor appears in YOI as a white young man with light-coloured hair and blue eyes, looking harmless and sexy, and speaking Japanese with occasional Russian and English words to mark his foreign identity.

Apart from the intervention of Japanese ACG conventions, it should also be noted that a majority of international figure skaters are far more “globalised” than people in their home countries. For example, famous Russian skaters such as Plushenko and Evgenia Armanovna Medvedeva do share the “non-Russian” features with Victor (i.e. friendliness, proficiency in English, open-mindedness), making them extremely popular in media and fandom worldwide. Like Victor, these Russian sports athletes enjoy foreign cultures and international exchanges, as Medvedeva tweeted about her cosplay of Yuri K in YOI; she even received a YOI gift from a fan at Grand Prix 2016 and a hand-drawn YOI picture from Kubo in November 2016 (Baseel, 2016). These qualities appear to be “international” (or “culturally odorless”) rather than “Russian”; such qualities are also shared by many figure skaters from other countries who are active in international skating events and competitions.

Compared with Victor, the YOI production team seemed to create Yuri P as a more culturally hybridised figure, namely a cool Russian bearing Japanese *moe* (“cute”) elements. The characterisation of Yuri P is based on the Russian figure skater Lipnitskaia, who is known for her talent, temper, and passion for cats (all shared by Yuri P). Fierce and competitive, plus the mixed nature of harshness (hence nicknamed as “Russian Punk”) and an angelic look (aka “Russian Fairy”) —all these qualities make Yuri P a heart-throb for YOI fans. Lipnitskaia’s appealing image as a “wild kitty” contributes to Yuri P’s charms as a rebellious and “cat-like” boy. His first appearance in episode 1 makes one thing of a spoiled

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and bad-tempered teenager, as he confronts aggressively the defeated Yuri K by shouting at the poor and depressed Japanese skater in the male toilet after the GPF.¹¹

Yet as the plot develops, it is gradually revealed that Yuri P is actually kind and caring to Yuri K, though in his own tough and concealed ways. This may echo with the identity of Russians imagined by people outside Russia, as complicated and mysterious. As Smith (1990) states in a *New York Times* article, the Russian character features a “combination of coldness and warmth”. This seems to share the characteristics of *tsundere* in Japanese *otaku* culture. According to Kinsui & Yamakido (2015, p. 33), the term refers to a mentality (especially of young women; such a feature is also attached to male characters in Japanese ACG works targeting at female audience) involving “excessive coldness” towards one’s beloved while the real feeling about the loved one can be passionate or even crazy.

With his “tough love” to his friends and fans, Yuri K bears a typical trait of *tsundere*, which is an important element of *moeness* (cuteness) in Japanese *otaku* culture. Like many popular characters in Japanese ACG, the *tsundere* Yuri P is very often portrayed as a kitten, featuring a combination of coolness and cuteness. This is obvious in his outfit and many visual displays of him in the anime and the spinoffs. For instance, a scene in episode 8 shows Yuri K wearing cat ears, a common ornamental device for ACG fans and cosplayers, at a gathering with his fans (aka “Yuri Angels”).¹² Another example is the Chibi figure of Yuri P, designed by Sanrio as part of the YOI goods; it actually contains the key visual features of Hello Kitty.¹³ As Steinberg (2012, p.90) points out,

[T]he idea that character goods allow for inter- or intragenerational human communication has become a privileged explanation for the prominence of characters in Japan.

11 Source of image: <https://vignette3.wikia.nocookie.net/yurionice/images/7/7c/Bathroom.PNG/revision/latest?cb=20161201030028>

12 Source of image:

<https://i2.wp.com/luxasblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/yurio-nekomimi.jpg>

13 Source of image: https://i2.wp.com/wowjapan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/news_xlarge_yuri_kitty1.jpg?resize=640%2C183

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I would like to add that YOI's "character merchandising" is not only "inter- or intragenerational", but also "international", as the "foreign" characters (i.e. Yuri P, Victor, and many other skaters from various countries) are all culturally hybridised, with foreign and Japanese identities mixed and matched. To quote from Price (2001, p. 156),

A funny thing about anime: no matter how popular it is in the West and how universal it just might be, there is no way to disguise its very "Japaneseness".

Accordingly, Victor and Yuri P appear to be "foreign" with their Russian nationality, while they all bear a certain degree of "Japaneseness", no matter it is a hidden feature of traditional Japanese spirit or a strong presence of Japanese otaku culture.

In addition to characterisation, the intricate relationship based on admiration and competition between Victor and Yuri K reminds the audience of a similar bond between Plushenko and Yuzuru Hanyu, the Japanese gold medalist in figure skating. Even though the YOI production team has never disclosed any connection between these two star skaters and the characterisation of Victor and Yuri K, the two pairs do have things in common. Hanyu, for instance, is known as a die-hard fan of Plushenko since childhood. He not only wore a similar haircut of his idol but also imitated many of Plushenko's jumps and spins. He even admitted in an interview that his own growth and development were largely based upon his admiration and emulation of Plushenko (Yuuki, 2017). As Poulsen (n.d.) describes in an article for the *Healthy Living Magazine*, Plushenko also paid much attention to Hanyu, a rising star in the world of ice skating, in the 2014 Sochi Olympics. The article also contains a telling photograph showing Plushenko observing Hanyu closely at the ice rink of the Iceberg Skating Palace in Sochi, which indicates the two skaters' competitive and idol-fan relationship.¹⁴

The two skaters have been in touch since then and are still performing together at various ice events, including the Japan-based Fantasy on

14 Source of image: http://www.healthylivingmagazine.us/Articles/419/article_image11.JPG

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ICE series in May and June 2018. Plushenko's tweet during the performance, for instance, showed his admiration of Hanyu: "With strong Yuzu 🤝",¹⁵ with a photo of the two skaters doing a powerful manly gesture on Plushenko's official Instagram.¹⁶ More recently, Plushenko posted an uplifting message on his Instagram to encourage Hanyu, who felt defeated and regretful after winning only the silver medal in the ISU World Championship in March 2019:

My great friend Yuzu, with all difficulty and injuries, you perform such a great performance at world championships in Japan, I know how difficult was this for you, but you are the best skater in my heart.

(Plushenko, 2019).

Such a profound friendship in the real world of figure skating helps in justifying the affectionate friendship between Victor and Yuri K in *YOI*—unlike their battling ancestors in the nineteenth century, now the Russian and the Japanese young athletes, like many of the youngsters in both countries, are able to establish a much more friendly and mutually beneficial relationship.

Although the plot of *YOI* does not focus on Russian culture, there are a number of scenes in the anime that give the audience a taste of Russia. In episode 1, the story starts with Sochi Grand Prix Final in Russia. Donko (2016) confirms that this scene is based on a real geographical landmark in Russia, namely Iceberg Skating Palace, a 12,000-seat multi-purpose arena in the Sochi Olympic Park. The venue was used during the Winter Olympics, but also hosted a real Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final in 2012.¹⁷ There are also shots of the cityscape of St. Petersburg in episode 12, including Tuchkov Bridge,¹⁸ which is located "between the Yubileiniy Palace of Sport[s] and the Petrovskiy Stadium" (Anonymous, n.d.). Notably, Plushenko used to be trained at Yubileyny Sport Club in

15 Source of image: <https://twitter.com/EvgeniPlushenko/status/874881798299422721>

16 Source of image: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BVT4CpnBpLB/>

17 Image of Sochi Gran Prix Final in *YOI* ep.1: <https://www.crunchyroll.com/anime-feature/2016/10/22/feature-anime-vs-real-life-yuri-on-ice>

18 Source of image: <http://likeafishinwater.com/2016/12/28/weekly-review-of-transit-place-and-culture-in-anime-209/>

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St. Petersburg, as recorded by the ISU official biography (ISU, 2014). A few simple Russian words can also be heard in the lines by Victor, such as *dasvidaniya* (до свидания; meaning “goodbye”) in episode 2 and *vkusno* (вкусно; meaning “delicious”) in episodes 1 and 5.¹⁹

The insertion of Russian culture and language in YOI is a common hybrid device in Japanese ACG, mainly with a purpose to create a sense of exoticism. As Dorman (2016, p. 15) argues,

The fact that anime [particularly works such as *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and anime produced by Studio Ghibli] has been so widely successful while often appearing to be “un-Japanese” aesthetically.

Notably, the phenomenon of cultural hybridity is pervasive in the anime film *Ghost in the Shell*, since

[w]ithin this city, recognizable Japanese urban characteristics are difficult to distinguish among an intricate sprawl of multiple languages and ethnicities, a Chinese street market, the Taiwanese Daija Mazu Festival, and allusions to Jakob Grimm’s tale of the Golem.

(Dorman, 2016, p. 43).

Metaphors of cultural hybridisation also appear in mainstream *shōnan manga*, such as the mixture of Western/Eastern alchemy, martial arts, Western fantasy literature, and steampunk (based on the development of science and technology in the first half of the twentieth century) in *Full Mental Alchemy* (Chao, 2014, pp. 177-178). Additionally, Von Feigenblatt (2012, p. 2) regards Japanese anime (with three cases selected: *Naruto Shippuden*, *Bleach*, and *Onigamiden*) as showcases of “two important cultural currents, namely hybridity/globalism and *Nihonjinron*”.

In response to the above views, I would like to draw from the most

¹⁹ Source of image: https://68.media.tumblr.com/ad3a46735dfb5e962271fde84de655b4/tumblr_oglw2f7lzC1svzpkxo1_400.gif

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significant (and successful) example of cultural hybridisation in *YOI: katsudon pirozhki*. The pastry is an invention of Yuri P's grandfather Nikolai Plisetsky in episode 9. The old man shows a worrying look in episode 8 as his grandson takes a bite of his hand-made *pirozhki* and then simply asks, "Have you tried Japanese-style pork cutlet rice bowl before? I had some in Japan, which were super tasty!"²⁰ Here Yuri P's words indicate that his fondness of Japanese culture is gradually affecting his native Russian identity (symbolised by his love of the *pirozhki* made by his grandfather in the past), hence his grandfather Nikolai's anxiety. Later Nikolai comes up with a solution, namely making *pirozhki* with the fillings of *katsudon* — "an awesome twist on the popular Japanese food" (Bushman, 2016). This innovative cross-cultural treat soon becomes Yuri P's new favourite. In episode 9, he gives Yuri K a bag of *katsudon pirozhki* as a birthday gift and a friendly gesture, though in his signature *tsundere* manner. Yuri K is clearly impressed by the *katsudon pirozhki* and Yuri P's good will, which comes in a way to develop their relationship further.

The intriguing creation of *katsudon pirozhki* can be seen as a metaphor of cultural hybridity, a new identity "in-between". The "hybrid" pastry succeeds in mingling the Japanese and Russian ingredients into a new cross-cultural product of wonders. In Homi Bhabha's words, it creates a "third space", meaning

differential temporal movements within the process of dialectical thinking and the supplementary or interstitial "conditionality" that opens up alongside the transcendent tendency of dialectical contradiction.

(Mitchell, 1995, pp. 80-84).

It also suggests the trend of globalisation and glocalisation among the young, web-based generation who may actually be more "international" and "borderless" than their parents and grandparents. This is perhaps because "*Anime*'s popularity across barriers of language and nationality is an extension of such unity in diversity" (Price, 2001, p. 168), which

²⁰ Translated by the author of this paper from the Chinese subtitles.

encourages the audience to be more open-minded to cross-cultural communication.

3 The Image of Russia and Russians Fantasised by YOI Fans in Russia and Taiwan

The discussions in Section 2 suggest that the portrayal of Russian people and culture in YOI is a hybrid of the exotic “foreignness” of Russia and the formulaic “memes” attached to Russian characters in Japanese ACG. In this section, I will examine the ways in which YOI fans in Russia and Taiwan perceive and imagine the Russia and Russians presented in this anime, in particular the characterisation and the lifestyle. As Lamerichs (2013 p. 170) states in her comparative study of ACG fandom in Japan, USA, Netherlands, and Germany,

anime fandom appears to be a homogeneous community but after these observations, local practices emerge. *Doujinshi* and cosplay make the balance between the local and international identity of fans visible and show its practices and social make-up to be locally anchored.

Her case studies of fan activities inside and outside Japan help in the understanding of the phenomenon of glocalisation in ACG fandom. The above studies have also intrigued my own research on Russian and Taiwanese YOI fans’ reaction to the anime’s rendition of Russia and Russians.

In this section, I choose to discuss Russian and Taiwanese YOI fans, which have not been explored by recent studies, to further investigate the impact of cross-cultural communication and glocalisation. I am curious about the ways in which Russian YOI fans perceive and interpret the anime’s Russian characters and settings —do they agree with them? Are there any issues relating to authenticity or national identity? Additionally, I would like to explore YOI fandom in my homeland Taiwan, where fans have long been appreciating and consuming Japanese ACG since the 1960s. As Jin-Shiow Chen (2007, p. 15) points out, in

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the early 2000s, 95% of the imported manga and anime products in Taiwan were translations from Japanese works, hence

Taiwan's animé/manga fan culture has mainly to do with Japanese animé and manga, and even fans' sociocultural activities conform with those of Japanese culture.

Many Taiwanese fans of Japanese anime or/and manga have actively participated in activities of fandom, in particular *doujinshi* (fan manga or fan fiction) and cosplay (Chen 2007, Martin 2012). Hernandez & Hirai (2015, p. 158) also comment in their study of the influence of Japanese ACG in Asia that Taiwan is an important hub of importing introducing Japanese ACG and cultural products:

Taiwan, which is one of the most important hubs for the consumption of Japanese popular culture in East Asia, has also historically played a key role.

Nowadays Japanese ACG is still dominating Taiwanese fandom (with a small portion of fan works dedicated to US fiction/comics/media and Chinese ACG), while an increasing amount of works starting to “translate” the Japanese ACG memes with a local Taiwanese flavour. Based on Chen's and Martin's studies of Taiwanese ACG fandom, I hope to find out how Taiwanese YOI fans, especially those who create fan works or cosplay, imagine and interpret Russia and Russians in the anime, and whether or not their participation facilitates any “cultural translation” that contributes to the globalisation and the glocalisation of YOI.

Here my discussion would start with Russian fans' reception of YOI's presentation of Russian memes, or rather, its hybrid settings combining Russianness and Japanese ACG features. Given the imagined and dramatised Russian identity in YOI, one may wonder if the “real” Russian people would embrace such an identity. The data collected from online ACG forums and tweets show that a majority of the Russian audience of YOI celebrated the anime's Russian characters and culture with enthusiasm. YOI “seems to be quite popular in Russia”, with a Russian

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franchise agent and quite a few fan communities on social media (Jun / ДЖЮН, 2017a).²¹ Some Russian YOI fans

like Victor because his personality is very similar to Russians in real life; they would even totally agree with a number of Victor's personal traits. The Russian World champion skater Medvedeva has also mentioned that she had something in common with Victor, while Yuri P's characteristics are a bit far from reality.²²

(Jun / ДЖЮН, 2017b).

So far the reaction has been overly positive; even the seemingly bro-mance-like or even "queer" display of the relationship and interaction between Victor and Yuri K succeeded in arousing the Russian fans' woos, wows, and yooooos.²³ As a Russia-based Japanese Twitter user commented,

Yuri!!! on ICE was received warmly by its Russian audience... Many of Russian men tend to be extremely homophobic. Yet an emerging group of people seemed to change their mind after the release of this anime.²⁴

(Jun / ДЖЮН, 2017b).

There are Russian artists doing fan books or cosplay to support LGBT values in YOI; this includes the well-known Russian cosplayer Gesha Petrovich (<https://twitter.com/geshapetrovich>), who have played the roles of Victor and Yuri P.²⁵ Even Medvedeva, who has multiple identities ranging from a world-famous figure skater, a self-acclaimed *otaku*, to a die-hard fan of YOI, chose to cosplay Yuri K instead of YOI's Russian characters, which might indicate her cult of Japanese

21 Translated by the author of this paper.

22 Translated by the author of this paper.

23 For a detailed discussion of queer elements in *YOI*, see Caitlin Casiello's blog article, "Gaps in the Ice: Queer Subtext and Fandom Text in *Yuri!!! on Ice*", *Animation Studies* 2.0, December 26, 2016. <https://blog.animationstudies.org/?p=1730>

24 Translated by the author of this paper.

25 Gesha Petrovich cosplayed Victor: <https://worldcosplay.net/photo/6386532>

Gesha Petrovich cosplayed Yuri P: <https://www.facebook.com/GeshaCosplay/posts/tiger-xdyurionice-cosplay-%E3%83%A6%E3%83%BC%E3%83%Aaonice-yuriplisetskyurio-professional/769989199861023/>

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otaku culture.²⁶ These Russian fans may still be a very small group of gay-friendly people, where the society is still largely uneasy, or even hostile, to gay people.

(The Editorial Board, 2016).

If YOI presents a fancified version of Russian identity, then the fans around the world create an even more interesting phenomenon by expanding and reinterpreting such a fantasy. For instance, cosplayers of Victor and Yuri P on Youtube emphasised the two Russian characters' light-coloured hair, even though the cosplayers may still look "Asian/*otaku*" to Westerners.²⁷ For example, even the famous Asian cosplayers of Victor and Yuri P, such as Baozi & hana (<https://zh-tw.facebook.com/hanaandbaozi/>) and KumaQi (<https://zh-tw.facebook.com/kumaqi/>), are unable to fully conceal their own Asian looks.²⁸ On the other hand, Western cosplayers who play the role of Yuri K may find it difficult to present the protagonist's Japanese look and temperament.²⁹ Perhaps the cosplayers' nationality or ethnic origins are not the real issue to YOI fans, since it is the imagined identities (including the conventional visual traits in Japanese ACG dedicated to these characters) of the "Russian" Victor and Yuri P, as well as the "Japanese" Yuri K that make the most of sense.

In Taiwan, YOI fans also highlight the crossover of Russian and Japanese cultures as a major source of interest. A quick survey of Taiwan's largest *doujinshi* website (<https://www.doujin.com.tw>) reveals that there are 347 fan fiction/manga on YOI, many of which focus on

26 Source of image: <https://twitter.com/JannyMedvedeva/status/799326889517219840>

27 Source of images:

https://www.google.com.tw/search?q=yuri+on+ice%2Bcosplay&rlz=1C1ROEB_enTW589TW589&source=lnms&tbnm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjZuOvSqpXWAhVBFJQKHSRaAtEQ_AUICigB&biw=1366&bih=662#imgrc=

28 Sources of images:

Baozi & hana performed Victor kissing Yuri K: <https://www.facebook.com/BLisonlyone/posts/%E5%8C%85%E8%8A%B1%E5%A4%AB%E5%A4%AB%E5%95%8A%E5%95%8A%E5%95%8A%E4%BA%B2%E4%BA%B2%E4%BA%B2/1302713743101898/>

KumaQi cosplayed Victor

<https://worldcosplay.net/zh-hant/member/KumaQi/characters/154250>

29 Sources of images:

Eli G Hidalgo cosplayed Yuri K: <https://worldcosplay.net/photo/6666933>

Lowen cosplayed Yuri K: <https://www.acparadise.com/display.php?c=92025>

the cross-cultural relationship between Victor and Yuri K, while there are a small number of fan works addressing Russia or Russian culture. For instance, extensive narratives surrounding *katsudon pirozhki* are pervasive in local fan fiction, even with an extension to other Japanese foods (Tianhaicong, 2017, p.141):

Regardless of Victor's hostility, Yurio said to Yuri, "I told Grandpa that you liked *katsudon pirozhki*, so he made a new kind of Japanese-style *pirozhki*, telling me to bring them to you."
 "Thank you so much! May I have a bite now?"
 Yurio accepted his request. Yuri split the *pirozhki*,
 "What...is this made of azuki beans?"
 "Yeah. The ones I gave you last time were savoury. These are sweet ones."
 "Well...thanks a lot," somehow Yuri noticed his vision blurred with tears.³⁰

Another feature often presented in Taiwanese YOI fan books is the fantasised Russian landscape, especially St. Petersburg. As mentioned in Section 2, the anime presents only a few scenes about Russia, such as the Grand Prix Final in Sochi (episode 1), the Rostelecom Cup Moscow (episodes 8-9), and the final scene in St Petersburg (episode 12). These scenes are further elaborated and fantasised in the Taiwanese YOI fan books. Many of them provide an extensive description of the imagined life of Victor and Yuri K (and occasionally Yuri P) living and training together in St. Petersburg, such as *Bonjour! Saint-Pétersbourg* by manga artist AKRU (2017), *How's the Weather in St. Petersburg* by Boys' Love illustration artist ZawarC (2017), and *Story of St. Petersburg* by amateur novelist Hane (2017), to name just a few.³¹

30 Translated by the author of this paper. Original Chinese text (by permission of the author of the fan book):

尤里無視敵意滿滿的維克托，又說：「我跟爺爺說你喜歡吃皮羅什基，他就做了新的日式口味，要我拿給你。」

真是太謝謝了！我現在可以吃嗎？

尤里應了一聲，勇利把皮羅什基掰開：「咦？這是紅豆餡？」

嗯。上次是鹹的，這次換甜的。」

勇利感覺眼前鏡片浮起一層水霧：「這真是……謝謝啊。」

31 A list of Taiwanese YOI fan books featuring St. Petersburg can be found here: <https://www.doujin.com.tw/books/search/0/1/6IGW5b285b6X5aCh>

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Most of the fan book authors had no experience of long stays in Russia. Even though many of them may have consulted extensive resources about Russia, or even visited the country to collect data (so did the YOI production team), the Russian people, culture, life, and landscape presented in their works are more like a fantasised version of Russia created by YOI, than Russia in the real world. In these works, Russia is an ideal “promised land” for Yuri K and Victor to fulfil their quest for love and life. Russian people, including Yuri P, Yakov (the Russian coach of both Victor and Yuri P), and all the other members of the Russian national figure skating team, are like angels on earth who care and support Yuri K and Victor. No matter it is fantasy, misreading, or misinterpretation, such an idealistic portrayal of Russia and Russians to some extent corresponds with the aspiration of Kubo (2016), as she reassured her fans in a tweet that in the world of YOI, all sorts of lovers are welcome, respected, and supported.³² In that sense, both the anime and the fan books of YOI turn Russia into a “Utopia”, a place of love, hope, and wonders, like many dreamlands created by Japanese ACG, inspiring artists, writers, readers and fans to transgress and transcend the existing boundaries in the real world.

4 Conclusion

This paper has presented the imagined Russian identity in YOI in three aspects, namely Russia & Russians imagined by the anime, cross-cultural interaction between the Japanese and the Russian characters, and Russia fantasised by YOI fans. As Kubo announced with excitement that “We observed Yubileyny sports club in St. Petersburg” with a drawing illustrating the main characters of YOI,³³ the production team has endeavoured to mix reality and fantasy of Russia and Russians in this anime. The above discussions demonstrate that the imagined Russian identity provides both the YOI characters and audience with an idealistic world to realise their dreams. In addition, the cross-cultural

32 The original Japanese tweet by Kubo: “この作品を現実の皆さんがどのように思われても、この作品の世界の中では絶対に何かを好きになることで差別されたりはしないです。その世界だけは絶対に守ります。” (<https://twitter.com/kubomitsurou/status/806843079244201985>)

33 Source of image: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BSm87-JgyZD/>

communication and cultural hybridisation (especially *katsudon pirozhki*) highlighted in YOI and its fan books indicate an effort by the production team (and even the whole nation of Japan) to acquire the knowledge of Russia and Russian cultures, then turning it into something both “global” and “local”.

By comparing the various adaptations and interpretations of “Russia/Russians on ICE”, my study contributes to the studies of Japanese ACG by triggering a further set of questions. Part of the success of YOI’s globalisation is the fans’ enthusiasm and support voiced on the Internet; given the rapid development of social media, would the issue of cultural appropriation be resolved by the “borderless” nature of online users, or rather intensified by the users’ lack of awareness of the real local culture? Would the formulation of “Cool Japan” be applied to other cultures via ACG, such as the “Cool Russia” created by YOI? What if it is drastically different from the “real Russia”? How would the ACG audience perceive such a difference? With the forthcoming YOI anime film *ICE ADOLESCENCE*³⁴ in December 2019 (announced by the production team to be based on Victor’s teenage life in Russia and Europe), I would expect more scholarly attention on the Russian elements of this new work. It is hoped that both YOI and *ICE ADOLESCENCE* will inspire future research to explore the above questions, though perhaps one thing is for sure at this stage: the borderlines of countries, cultures, and those between virtuality and reality, are blurring in the new world of Internet and multimedia.

34 Official website: <https://yurionice-movie.com/en/>

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