



Helen Chang *

Freelance Journalist

Home Media: Freelancer, Vienna, Austria

Guest Media: Financial Times Deutschland, Hamburg

Helen Chang is a regular contributor to *ArtNews* and the *Wall Street Journal Europe*. Her work has also appeared in *Frieze*, *Bond-Buyer* and the *New York Times*. Based in Vienna, Austria since 2006, she was a Milena Jesenka fellow at Vienna's Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM), where she researched the subversive-affirmative art practices in Eastern Europe. Her journalism career began in Nashville at the *Tennessean*, where she learned to chase cops and robbers

before moving on to urban planning and immigration issues.

While in Hamburg, she is interested in investigating the differences between German and American media, especially concerning subjectivity as well as the role of the feuilleton in cultural discourse. A native of Huntington Beach, CA, Helen earned her B.A. and M.A. from Duke and Columbia Universities, where she studied literature, cultural and visual studies.

Report by Helen Chang

„Tell us about yourself, why you’re here,“ said my editor, kindly, the morning of my first day at the *Financial Times Deutschland* in Hamburg. I sat at the conference table feeling like some lumbering creature emerging from the mist, still silently congratulating myself for having found the right office. Sleep-deprived and jet-lagged, I guess it was no wonder that every door, stairway and corridor at the paper’s maritime-style office looked the same to me. But now I leaned forward and mumbled something about writing on visual arts and culture as a journalist and critic from Vienna, where I’d been based the last several years. And then, silence.

I could see question marks wafting up around the table: *And the why?* But my new colleagues were too polite to push, and I didn’t trust my German just then. My ears were still adjusting to the pace of newsroom German—turbo-speed, I thought—of which I caught only every other sentence depending on who spoke.

In fact, I lacked the answer to that question in any language. I feared there’d been a mistake. My placement choices were papers better known for their cultural coverage, and I’d protested to the program director that I wanted to work at a ‚real‘ German newspaper, not some knock-off of an English one. He swiftly assured me that the latter wasn’t the case and that I’d be fine. But it was with all these reservations that I began.

As it turns out, I shouldn’t have worried. The staff proved extremely generous and open to my contributions from the start. And to a large degree, my greatest credential wasn’t any specialized knowledge or familiarity with Germany but rather my background: An all-purpose knowledge of American culture and politics perfect for those questions arising during a typical German newscast. What’s tea-bagging? Preppy hip-hop? The ubiquity of ‘like’ in California slang? Somehow, I never tired of answering, even when the fellowship wound down at summer’s end which arrived too quickly as it always does.

The *FTD* began nearly 10 years ago, and today it still has the reputation of being young and dynamic. Most of the office could star in a fresh-faced GAP ad for khakis, hardly anyone breaks 40. The atmosphere flaunts a non-hierarchical, scrappy, can-do spirit of cooperation. As one reporter said to me: „Here, I can write *Kommentar* pieces, whereas if I worked for another paper, I’d have to wait 20 years before they’d let me do that.“

The department I was assigned to was Agenda, the daily magazine section of the paper, comprising mainly reportage, op-eds, sports, lifestyle and entertainment. Until last November, this used to be all the Agenda staff was responsible for. Then Gruner + Jahr, one of Europe's largest publishers, bought out Pearson, the publisher of the U.K. Financial Times, to become the full owner of the *FTD*. The *FTD* staff was then handed additional responsibilities at three existing G+J business titles, whose own staffs were significantly reduced. By the time I arrived in July, the air was still jumpy and brittle. Even the interns, who seemed to outnumber actual staff during the prime vacation days of August, seemed nervous to me.

My first assignment came on day two. "Do you like emoticons?" asked my editor. I do use them, though not in work emails. Eager to contribute, I said yes. I wrote my copy in English and then spent hours laboring over the translation. Needless to say, it didn't work. As my editor later declared, English to German doesn't translate *Wort für Wort*. He then showed me his translation, and with that, I learned my next major lesson: Neither did my sense of humor.

Contrary to old stereotypes, Germans do prize humor. Nearly a quarter of the *FTD*'s two editorial pages is dedicated to a cartoon, witty quote or anecdote of the day. Also, the last page of Agenda, an entertainment section titled *Out Of Office*, attempts for light-hearted distraction on the job. But like the bulk of news humor which revolves around word games it's hard to translate. And so I watched my next attempts wither in the process of translation and editing.

For a story on Reverend Billy, a New York performance artist with a Southern preacher act, I prepared three different endings, one of which I hoped would amuse and survive. Instead, it was 'Thank you for your efforts' as my editors pulled out their own ending. A similar situation arose later when helping to select cartoons for print on the one-year anniversary of the Lehman Brothers crisis. I began imagining the average *FTD* reader (German, business-oriented and male) with a scowl and thin, unsmiling lips, pressed to an invisible line.

But as luck would have it, along came an intern and I was given the boot from *Out of Office* to the *Kommentar* or Op-Ed room. It was only 50 meters or so down the hall, though worlds apart: No more Johnny Cash on the loudspeakers or YouTube videos of animal wildlife. Instead, a constant whirr of debate on current events that seemed to grow louder as the day went on. And somehow in the midst of all this,

things began to click and I fell into the rhythm of a regular staff member. There was the daily *blattkritik* (critique of the day's paper) at 10:15 a.m., lunch promptly at 12.30 p.m. in G+J's massive canteen (large enough for several thousand employees, followed by chocolate at 3:00 (we took turns hitting the upstairs vending machines), and on occasion, beer after the paper was sent out (there always seemed to be a case or two in someone's office). And though I didn't anticipate it earlier, I slowly became designated as the American correspondent, with the majority of my remaining work touching on the U.S., from foreign oil consumption to healthcare and student loan reform.

One afternoon in August, I began complaining to a German colleague about the increasingly freakshow-quality of the healthcare debate in the US. Why not write it up, she suggested. I'd forgotten that in comparison to mainstream U.S. media, where a wall separates op-ed writers from journalists and editors, German papers have no such rules. A reporter might write an article, then publish an editorial on the same issue later in the week. The rationale is that the reporter, as a result of his interviews and research, is now well-positioned to form an opinion, one colleague explained.

To ease the pressure, my editors agreed that my piece would be taken on spec. I considered the various aspects that might interest German readers. Perhaps the American media's role? My colleagues seemed to think that the death panel meme would never get very far in Germany, where journalists aren't bound to the objective ideal of he-said, she-said approach. But this seemed too media-centric. I could also explore why ordinary-seeming folks were storming townhalls to protest universal healthcare, or why Obama was being compared to Hitler. No explanation I offered, however, seemed to satisfy my colleagues, and eventually it seemed appropriate to try for some perspective, to compare the situation to Clinton's attempt in 1993 and the progress made since.

The day my piece ran, the chief editor led the staff critique. He began with: "Schön geschrieben, aber..." (*Well-written, but...*). What was the point, he wondered, if the majority of Americans support a public option, but their politicians wouldn't give it to them? More directly, he seemed to ask, what were you trying to say?

The highest praise you could hope for at these morning conferences, it seemed, was that your piece was soundly argued (the worst criticism being that your piece was illogical or had run adrift). These seemed to apply not only for commentaries but articles. And though my editor's comments were a stinging departure from what I was used to, I

came to appreciate his candor and attempt to coax forth thoughtful debate, as well as for the well-argued and written analyses that appeared within our pages everyday.

My next story began around the point when I realized that the fellowship was turning into a good opportunity to write about themes and ideas I ordinarily wouldn't have the chance to. Feeling more omnivorous than usual, I volunteered one week to assist with a front page reportage on oil. I teamed together with the resident energy reporter and we divided the research and reporting before glueing the drafts together, which went surprisingly smoothly.

This was probably the closest I collaborated with a staff journalist, and the disparities between our reporting and writing processes, which we discussed before beginning, were surprising. In general, Americans seem to give more emphasis on ground reporting, which I had understood before arriving. But I hadn't realized about differences when it came to the use of sources and quotes or the structure of stories, which struck me as being both more efficient and perhaps effective ways of storytelling. In addition, when I asked my colleague to dissect an old story, he mentioned the addition of a thesis following the usual nut graf. On this particular story: Obama pledged during his campaign to end the American addiction to oil, but now he'll have to admit that this is impossible.

Once our story was published, readers responded—to my dismay—with near ecstasy in their letters to the editor and web comments. Thanks to my partner the story *was* a good read, but as happy as I was about its reception, I was also disheartened by how much delight the readers took in America's energy woes. *Schadenfreude*, perhaps? I felt like slapping speed limits on all *Autobahnen*. But stereotypes cut both ways, I guess, because not every German is an Obama-loving environmentalist, for instance, which I slowly found out.

Nowhere else did our cultural differences emerge more clearly than during the Sept. 27 parliamentary elections, which dominated the last month of the fellowship. In contrast to the U.S., which seems stuck in permanent campaign mode, candidates here were reluctant to go politicking. My colleagues were also unmoved by the dazzling rhetoric and personality of Georg Gysi, head of the upstart Die Linke party, though they grudgingly admitted that he 'makes good *Sozialkritik*.' The *FTD* practices the Anglo-Saxon tradition of formally endorsing candidates, and during the run-up to the elections, they invited representatives from the five major parties to present their platforms. You might expect they'd support the pro-business FDP party, but they eventually endorsed

the CDU and the Greens—an unlikely combination they admitted, but also one that has operated in Hamburg for the last year.

On election weekend, I met up with the Burns fellows in Berlin. Together we made the rounds at Mauer Park where we saw heated protests to save the park, but hardly any mention of the elections. Later on at the Literaturhaus it was the same. You'd never know that the polls were closing as we sipped our tea. Finally, around 6:00 p.m., as election results were pouring in, we were reduced to crawling around the Ku'damm area to find a bar with broadcasting election results rather than soccer. We found one eventually, though the waitress with the remote seemed surprised when we asked her to flip to the news channel. When I related this to a German colleague, he noted the irony that these same people were mesmerized by the Obama campaign just last year.

By now, the fellowship was quickly coming to an end, and just as we were warned in Washington, I would leave behind plenty of unwritten stories in Hamburg. While the city seemed isolated compared to Berlin, the capital was only a quick train ride away, and previous Burns fellows in the city were quite hospitable. One of the best ways to while away time, it seemed, was to sit on the Elbe and watch the tiny tugboats maneuver around massive container ships which were loading and unloading 24 hours a day.

For all their reserve, the locals know how to protest and party—and sometimes the two overlapped. There was plenty to protest this summer: the coming of IKEA in Altona and gentrification in general but especially in the Gängeviertel and Wilhelmsburg, the demonstrations for and against neo-Nazis, as well as protests following the Schanzen festival, though the reason for this one was unclear to me, other than tradition. After every outburst, city clean-up crews came in swiftly, and all traces of unrest would be erased with a few hours' work. One Sunday morning, I even brunched on a street which looked to have been engulfed with rioting just hours before.

As an American abroad, this fellowship proved to be a great opportunity for me to immerse myself in a less-familiar part of the German-speaking world, and both in and outside the office. I left with a better understanding of the European context, and more important, I think, a deeper impression about how each side imagines the other. Eventually, it was the writing on topics I was familiar with but had little background on, and for readers who didn't share my same world view, that forced me to leave my comfort zone. The new perspectives and energy I've gained will carry me in Vienna and beyond.