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The shifting representation of Japan in Belgian comics, in fifteen years after WWII (1945-1960)

Pascal LEFÈVRE

Abstract

This paper focuses on how Japan was represented in the most popular Belgian comics at a particular period in time, right after the Second World War and just before the image of Japan as an economic superpower (that exported many commodities to Europe or the USA) became widespread from the 1960s on.

Within the field of European comics, Belgian comics played a crucial role in the decades after the war with major artists such as Hergé, Franquin, Jacobs, Vandersteen and many others. Moreover, the Belgian comics industry attracted many artists from other countries and exported her products to various countries (especially France). The comics published in dailies, journals and albums formed at that time an important means of entertainment for the youngsters (television started only in the 1950s in Belgium). Furthermore, the Belgian comics culture is interesting since it involves two different traditions: a French language one and a Dutch language one.

In various stories, published between 1945 and 1960, we find representations of Japan. On the whole, two basic approaches of the Japanese Otherness stand out:

- *the “Yellow Peril”, strongly referring to the last World War (for instance Jacobs Blake et Mortimer, Le Secret de l’espadaon, Hubinon & Troisfontaines, Charlier Buck Danny, Les Japs attaquent). Usually these comics were drawn in a more realistic style.*
- *the “touristic ancient or exotic Japan” without any reference to WWII (for instance Vandersteen Suske en Wiske, De Stemmenrover, Will & Rosy Tif et Tondu, Le Fantôme du samourai). Usually comics of this approach combine adventure and humour.*

The first kind of comics is typically for the comics produced in the first years after war, while the second kind is rather typical for the late 1950s. So, even in this brief period of 15 years already an important shift of the image of Japan is noticeable, from a belligerent enemy to an exotic and touristically interesting culture. The paper will offer a more detailed analysis of some examples and formulates some possible explanations for this shift.

Introduction

There is clearly a growing interest in “Yellow Peril” studies (see Mayer 2013, Tchen & Yeats 2014, Greene 2014), which is only a

subdivision of the larger research domain of racial-ethnic stereotyping. These academic studies on Asian stereotypes however do not take into account the popular culture of smaller countries like Belgium.¹ Therefore this paper will focus on how a particular Asian country, Japan, in a particular period (between 1945 and 1960) was represented in Belgian comics. The chosen period is a crucial one in the history of international relations between Japan and the rest of the world: it commences when Japan was seen as the defeated enemy and it ends 15 years later, when Japan was still preparing to become an economic superpower (that exported from the 1960s on many commodities to Europe and the USA). During the post-war years the perception of Japan changed in a relatively brief period, from a treacherous war enemy to a trustful business partner.

The approach here will take the Grounded Theory-approach, which does not start with a preconceived theory in mind, but with the data themselves. As proponents of this approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 12) advocate: *“Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the “reality” than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation (how one thinks things ought to work)”*. But there is a crucial problem regarding data, as mass communication studies informs us:

“the physical text of the message in print, sound or pictorial image is what we can directly observe and is in a sense ‘fixed’, while the meanings which are embedded in the texts or perceived to be present by their producers or eventual audiences are largely unobservable and not fixed. Such meanings are both diverse and often ambiguous.” (McQuail 1994, 235).

¹ An exception is Rheault (2013) but his article did not delve deeply into the period that is of interest of this paper. Moreover, Rheault considers only the Francophone productions of Belgium, while we take into account also the Dutch language production.

In our case the ‘text’ is a graphic narrative that offers a complex interplay of words and static drawn images, with multiple references to reality and to other ‘texts’ (be it comics, films, novels, paintings, etc.). A complicating difficulty is that images are fundamentally different from language: while verbal language is coded, images are to a certain degree analogous representation. Moreover, each drawing delivers through its graphic style a specific view on reality, implying a visual ontology, “*the definition of the real in visual terms.*” (Rawson 1987, 19). Whatever the causes the final result of drawing, it is through this picture that the viewer perceives a created world and is thus confronted with the object-in-the-picture from the point of view (including graphic choices, framing, type of colouring...) that the picture / artist offers (Lefèvre 2016, 69). When we try to make a description or analysis of an image, we should try to transpose both elements: the degree of analogy and of expression.

Our analysis will first make a quantitative estimate of the proportion of Belgian comics dealing with Japan. Secondly and more importantly, the representations will also be analysed in qualitative manner to deduce their main stance towards Japan. The central research questions are to what extent and in what manner was Japan present in Belgian comics of the chosen period.

Unfortunately, there is no academic consensus on the modalities of the effects of cultural representations. Various theories in the social field (Raudsepp 2005, Jodelet 1989, Barker 2002, Morris-Suzuki 2005) claim that representations influence the way people perceive reality, but empirically testing a causal relation is still hazardous, because it remains extremely difficult to isolate only one factor and test

empirically its possible effects.² Recent experimental aesthetics research emphasizes that the sensory, perceptual, and cognitive processes that underlie experiences with art works are “*driven by a complex interaction among characteristics of the art object, the viewer, and the physical, social, and historical contexts in which the experience takes place.*” (Locher 2011, 697).

Historical and Medial Context

Before starting our analysis some contextual information may help to clarify what the situation of Belgian comics was in the chosen period. Within the field of European comics, Belgian comics played a crucial artistic and economic role in the decades after the war with major publishers such as Dupuis and Lombard, and mayor artists such as Hergé, Franquin, Jacobs and Vandersteen. Moreover, the Belgian comics industry attracted many artists from other countries and exported its products to various countries (especially France).³ The comics published in dailies, weeklies and albums formed at that time an important means of entertainment for the children of primary school age (television started only in the 1950s in Belgium) (Lefèvre 2000 & 2007a). While the French-language comics in the first post-war decades flourished mainly in specialized weeklies such as *Spirou* and *Tintin*, the Flemish strip thrived foremost in the Flemish daily papers and their children’s supplements. This difference in publication format had far-reaching consequences for the production, form, and content of the

² Effect studies of stereotyping of Asian people by media (as Zhang’s 2010 & 2015) are still quite exceptional.

³ In the fifteen years after the war, for example, the French Jacques Martin, René Goscinny, and Jean Graton moved to Belgium, Dino Attanasio came from Italy.

comics (Lefèvre 2013, 255-269): for instance, comics published in dailies were only published in black and white, while comics in specialized weeklies could be published also in full colour. Nevertheless, these differences in the years after WWII most Belgian comics were published as a series of various stories (like *Buck Danny* or *Suske en Wiske*), one-shots (an independent narrative not part of a series) such as *Tarawa atoll sanglant* were at that time rather the exception than the rule. Since Belgian comic culture combines two different traditions, a French language one and a Dutch language one, it might be interesting to study the possible differences in their representation of Japan.

Regarding the focus of our research it is important to remember that already in 1934 an important Belgian comic made explicit references to the aggressive politics of the Imperial Japan, namely the fifth *Tintin* adventure *Le Lotus Bleu*, which was published in *Le Petit Vingtième* between 1934 and 1935. In that story Hergé related how the Japanese staged the Mukden Incident to occupy Manchuria. The Belgian hero, Tintin, sides with the Chinese, against both the European occupiers and the Japanese invaders. Hergé let Tintin explicitly criticize the European stereotypes of the Asian (by showing a Fu Manchu like character). Tintin tells his Chinese friend how wrongly a lot of Europeans view the Chinese: “A lot of Europeans believe that the Chinese are cunning and cruel men, (...) who spend their time inventing tortures”.⁴ Hergé was, as is known, heavily influenced by his contacts with a Chinese arts student in Brussels (Peeters 2002, 120-121). Given Hergé’s crucial role in the

⁴ My translation of the original French text of the first edition : “ beaucoup d’Européens s’imaginent que... tous les chinois sont des hommes fourbes et cruels, qui (...) passent leur temps à inventer des supplices. ”(Hergé 1979,227).

development of the comics publishing industry in Belgium, it might be interesting to see to what extent Hergé's representation of Japan was influential in the immediate postwar period.

Corpus and Quantitative Analysis

To compile our corpus all comics published in Belgium (of a considerable length, namely more than 20 pages) with a more or less clear reference to Japan were at first identified by various means.⁵ As a "more or less clear reference" were seen not only comics that made verbally explicit references to Japan or parts of Japanese culture (like samurai), but also comics that offered characters, locations, scenes, etc. that could have been interpreted by contemporary readers as referring to Japan in one way or another.

The following table gives all the selected titles of comics with references to Japan, put in chronological order of their first publication in a periodical:

Year	Series title, story title	Author(s)	First publication in periodical (w=weekly, d=daily)	First album publication
1946	<i>Blake et Mortimer, Le Secret de l'Espadon</i>	Jacobs	Tintin (w), 26 Sep 1946 - 8 Sep 1949	1950 (part 1) 1953 (part 2) Lombard
1947	<i>Buck Danny, Les Japs attaquent</i>	Hubinon & Charlier	Spirou (w), N° 455-505	1948 Dupuis
	<i>Buck Danny, Les mystères de Midway</i>	Hubinon & Charlier	Spirou (w), N°506-548	1948 Dupuis

⁵ The list is based on my recollection of particular stories, on checking comics titles on the site <<http://www.bdoubliees.com/>> for typical references to Japan, and on Paul Herman (2009). Data of the publications are based on several sources like Béra et al (1996), Matla (1993), Kerremans and Lefèvre (1997) and the website BDthèque <<http://www.bdtheque.com/>>.

	<i>Nero, Het geheim van Matsuoka</i>	Sleen	De Nieuwe Gids (d), 2 Oct 1947 – 8 Jan 1948	1948 De Gids
1948	<i>Tarawa atoll sanglant</i>	Hubinon & Charlier	Le Moustique (w) (till 1949)	1951 Dupuis
	<i>Nero, Het B-gevaar</i>	Sleen	De Nieuwe Gids (d), 10 Jan - 18 May 1948	1948 De Gids
	<i>Nero, Het Zeespook</i>	Sleen	De Nieuwe Gids (d), 19 May – 6 Sep 1948	1962 Het Volk
	<i>Buck Danny, La revanche des fils du ciel</i>	Hubinon & Charlier	Spirou (w), N°548-604	1950 Dupuis
1949	<i>Buck Danny, Les tigres volants</i>	Hubinon & Charlier	Spirou (w), N°605-635	1951 Dupuis
1950	<i>Buck Danny, Dans les griffes du dragon noir</i>	Hubinon & Charlier	Spirou (w), N°636-659	1951 Dupuis
	<i>Buck Danny, Attaque en Birmanie</i>	Hubinon & Charlier	Spirou (w), N°660-683	1952 Dupuis
1956	<i>Valhardi contre le soleil noir</i>	Jijé	Spirou (w), N°967-988	1958 Dupuis
1957	<i>Suske en Wiske, De Stemmenrover</i>	Vandersteen	De Standaard (d), 21 Jan – 30 May 1957	1957 Standaard Boekhandel
1958	<i>Tif et Tondu, Le Fantôme du samourai</i>	Will & Rosy	Spirou (w), N° 1033-1044	1986 Dupuis
1960	<i>Suske en Wiske, De Gouden Cirkel</i>	Vandersteen	De Standaard (d), 4 Jan – 11 May 1960	1960 Standaard Boekhandel

It was customary that comics were first serialized in a weekly or daily before they got an album publication. Usually the album publication would follow rather quickly after the end of the serialization in the press.⁶

⁶ Of the selected titles only one story did not receive an album publication in the immediate years after the serialization: Tif and Tondu story, *Le Fantôme du samourai* was published only three decades later.

Already at first sight, it becomes clear that during the first five years after the war (1946-1950) various comics were produced in Belgium with references to Japan. But in the following 5 years (1951-1955) Japan seems to have disappeared almost completely from the Belgian comics' pages, before re-emerging from 1956 on (though in lesser quantities than the first period after the war). This first impression, however, needs however some nuances: the higher number of selected comics in the first period is largely due to the same authors. Artist Hubinon and scriptwriter Charlier were responsible for the majority of the selected titles (the one-shot *Tarawa atoll sanglant* and the 6 *Buck Danny* issue); their work repeatedly contains references to the war in the Pacific, mostly from the perspective of members of the American army. All in all, the number of selected titles is rather limited. We can assume that in this period in Belgium between 100 and 200 different albums were published every year (De Vries 2012, 88). We can infer that Japan was, proportionally speaking, not a major theme or motif in Belgian comics, but, it was nevertheless present.

Since some series were quite popular we have to take into account also the various re-publications in the selected period (1945-1960):

Year	Series title, story title	First album publication	Republication album 1946-1960
1946	<i>Blake et Mortimer, Le Secret de l'Espadon</i>	1950 (part 1) 1953 (part 2)	1955, 1957 (part 1) 1954, 1955, 1957, 1960 (part 2)
1947	<i>Buck Danny, Les Japs attaquent</i>	1948	1952
	<i>Buck Danny, Les mystères de Midway</i>	1948	1952
	<i>Nero, Het geheim van Matsuoka</i>	1948	

1948	<i>Tarawa atoll sanglant</i>	1951	1952
	<i>Nero, Het B-gevaar</i>	1948	
	<i>Nero, Het Zeespook</i>	1962	
	<i>Buck Danny, La revanche des fils du ciel</i>	1950	1953
1949	<i>Buck Danny, Les tigres volants</i>	1951	1953
1950	<i>Buck Danny, Dans les griffes du dragon noir</i>	1951	1953
	<i>Buck Danny, Attaque en Birmanie</i>	1952	1953
1956	<i>Valhardi contre le soleil noir</i>	1958	
1957	<i>Suske en Wiske, De Stemmenrover</i>	1957	1958
1958	<i>Le Fantôme du samourai</i>	1986	
1960	<i>Suske en Wiske, De Gouden Cirkel</i>	1960	

Clearly the majority of the titles was reprinted, moreover the two volumes of the *Blake and Mortimer* series were reprinted more than once. Reprints are thus important, but their weight needs to be balanced accordingly to their circulation figure. Circulation figures may vary strongly from edition to edition. An essential factor is the way the album was published: with soft or hard cover, black and white print versus full colour, etc. Generally, the more the production for a first print run is costly, the lower the circulation figure (Lefèvre 2007a, 115-117). Of course, the more copies are sold over various years, the longer certain representations keep circulating. In addition, it was habitual that readers did not throw away their acquired albums, but kept them and also other members of the family or friends had access to them. Thus, the real readership is much higher than the circulation figures.

A problem here is that we do not know those historical circulation figures of the album publication. Also the circulation figures of the

weeklies, *Tintin* and *Spirou* vary according the source, but by the late 1950s in France alone *Tintin* sold more than 200,000 copies, and *Spirou* about 150,000 (Lesage 2014, 205). Given the smaller population of French readers in Belgium, it is reasonable to assume that the Belgian circulation would not surpass that of France. Furthermore, in the late 1940s the circulation figures for both weeklies were much lower, below 100,000 copies. These originally Francophone magazines were also translated into Dutch, for the Dutch speaking readers of Belgium, but the circulation figures of the Dutch versions were lower than the French editions.

All in all, the readership of the weeklies or dailies was much more extensive than that of the album publications.⁷ A complicating factor is that such weeklies offered various series in each copy and one it remains unsure to which extent a contemporary reader actually read the whole issue.

Qualitative Content Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the way Japan was represented, both in text and in pictures, tries to describe mainly the general idea or feeling that a comic or certain excerpts are expressing or suggesting. Of course, we cannot be sure how the contemporary reader, often a child, would have interpreted or experienced these stories. The only thing we can do is trying to objectively read the comics and not deform them through some prior ideological stance or theoretical framework. Some particular

⁷ For instance, the albums of the Flemish series *Suske en Wiske* were at that time printed at 30,000 copies (Lefèvre 2007a, 117)

fragments from the comics will be used to illustrate their rather general stance.

Analysing the representation of the Japan in all these comics it became evident that there was a difference between comics from various sub-periods in our demarcated time frame 1945-1960. This paper will argue for two main takes in two different periods, one immediate after the war (the late 1940s) and one in the late 1950s. The first approach, in the comics of 1946-1950, is still clearly marked by the Yellow Peril view from before World War II. The second model, historically situated in the years 1957-1960, could be called 'touristic'.

In between lay a short period of non-interest in Japan and a short period of transition (1956) that combines elements of the models of the earlier and the later periods.

The Yellow Peril (1946-1950)

In the first period, 1946-1950, the majority of the titles made explicit references to the Second World War. The comics by Hubinon and Charlier (*Tarawa atoll sanglant* and the 6 *Buck Danny* stories) refer explicitly to the war in the Pacific, they intertwine historical events (like battles) and fictive acts by fictive heroes. By contrast in the first *Blake et Mortimer* story, *Le secret de l'espardon*, (1946-49) by Jacobs, a fictive third World War is represented, whereby an Asian superpower conquers all the other countries of the World. The national identity of the Asian enemy is not clearly stated in this story, but in the representation of this enemy both Chinese and Japanese references are combined, probably because by 1946 the communist army of Mao was perceived as posing a threat to the interests of Western countries.

Strangely, but quite spectacular, the capital of this Asian empire is located in the mountains of the Himalaya (at the time the comic was published Tibet was, however, still independent, as only in 1950 did Mao's Chinese army invade that country). In the war stories by Hubinon and Charlier the Japanese soldiers are represented as fanatic and ruthless warriors with blades between their teeth, willing to kill themselves, and so on (see Fig. 1).

While all these Francophone comics refer explicitly to the recent war, in the humoristic Flemish series *Nero* the war does not directly play a crucial role: it features only an Asian figure, Matsuoka (see Fig. 2), dressed up as a traditional Chinese but having a typical Japanese name (based on Yōsuke Matsuoka, the former Japanese diplomat and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Empire of Japan during the early stages of World War II, 1940-41). The Matsuoka character plays the role of the bad guy, a mysterious inventor that tries to manipulate people in Belgium by various means (a beer that drives people mad, or a swivel chair that can change the age of people or produce clones of them). This Asian character is a clearly Fu Manchu-like figure, as will be explained further.

What all these comics of the first period have in common is that they underscore the much older stereotype of the Yellow Peril, which finds its roots in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions in Europe. Gina Marchetti contends that:

“the yellow peril combines racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East.” (Marchetti 1993, 2).

A military powerful Asia was seen as a threat to ‘Christian Civilization’ in the West.⁸ According to Gary Hoppenstand the stereotype developed further when Chinese emigrants came to the US. The white labour forces became resentful of the efficient migrant labour group from China. Hoppenstand explains further that the first entertainment mass medium in America to adopt the yellow peril stereotype was the dime novel:

“The most-often encountered villain of the Western dime novel was the savage Indian, but just as the Western was being replaced in popularity by the detective dime novel (from 1880 to 1900), the savage Indian was being supplanted by the yellow peril stereotype.” (Hoppenstand 1992, 283).

Moreover, the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) in China fostered the impression in Western media that the Chinese “*would become aggressive and expansionist and seek to invade or otherwise gain control of the West*” (Pagello et al. 2010, 252).

From the early decades of the 20th century onwards many stories have been published in the US about imagined future wars in which Asians, armed with superior technologies, invade the US. The short story *The Unparalleled Invasion* (Jack London, 1910) was a direct response to the Russo-Japanese war (1905-06) where Japan surprisingly defeated a much bigger nation. According to Sharp it reinforced a stereotype of Japanese as “*inhuman, mindless drones who slavishly serve their emperor*” (Sharp 2000, 437). In Philip Nowlan’s short story *Armageddon 2419 A.D.* (published in *Amazing Stories*, August 1928) the ‘Mongols’ invade

⁸ Authors such as Hoppenstand have traced back the development of the yellow peril stereotype to the initial contacts between the European and Chinese cultures: “*As Europeans began to trade with China, they realized that Chinese craftsmanship was superior to theirs, and as Europeans began to estimate the “wealth” of the Orient, they became jealous of it. This jealousy manifested itself in religious terms. To the medieval and Renaissance European Christian, China was a land of heathen barbarians.*” – Gary Hoppenstand (1992, 281).

America; it was later adapted into the famous newspaper strip *The Adventures of Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*. Next to these ‘Yellow invasion’ stories, it was especially Sax Rohmer’s writings that had a profound effect on popular entertainment media, Hoppenstand explains:

“Rohmer’s unique addition to the stereotype was the creation of the evil Oriental mastermind – a brilliant, powerful character who plots the destruction of Western civilization, who commands the resources of Western science and Eastern magic, and who governs an army of devoted assassins.” (Hoppenstand 1992, 283).

The Oriental mastermind had many incarnations in various media, especially in cinema and in comics, such as Ming the Merciless, Emperor of the Universe in the *Flash Gordon*-comic strip series by Alex Raymond.⁹

Remarkably, while the 1930s “began with a series of films about the “Yellow Peril incarnate,” by the end of the decade images of Fu Manchu had virtually vanished from the screen”; China had become a “country of ordinary, believable, and immensely sympathetic people.” (Greene 2014, 57).

Such Anglo-Saxon popular culture products circulated to a certain extent also in the Low Countries: for instance, films like *The Yellow Mask* (Lachman 1931) and *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Brabin & Vidor 1932) were distributed, as local film posters of that period testify.¹⁰ Rohmer’s Fu Manchu-stories reached “an enduring international success, begin

⁹ The Sax Rohmer character Fu Manchu also received various cinematic adaptations, starting with a 15 episodes serial, *Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* in 1923, followed in 1929 by Paramount’s *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu*, in 1932 MGM’s *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, and in 1940 another serial of 15 episodes *The Drums of Fu Manchu*.

¹⁰ The collection of film posters of the Leuven film theatres contains a 1933 poster of *Le Masque Jaune* [*The Yellow Mask*] (<http://www.cinemaleuven.be/collectie/le-masque-jaune>). The Dutch site *Delpher* <www.delpher.nl> for old newspaper clips has various paperclips mentioning screenings of *De Terugkeer van Fu Manchu* (*The Mask of Fu Manchu*) in Dutch movie theaters.

vastly translated in other languages and adapted on other media" (Pagello et al. 2010, 253). In the late 1930s the comic strip *Flash Gordon* was translated into French and Dutch in the Belgian weekly *Bravo* (which was published in both languages). With this background we can understand that the Belgian post-war comics were actually continuing more or less the pre-war Anglophone tradition of stereotypes of Asian people. The Asian figure in the *Nero* series bears too much substantial similarity with the Fu Manchu figure of the pre-war American or British movies to be purely accidental. By contrast, in the war stories of *Buck Danny* there is not a real Fu Manchu figure, but from the outset a suspect Asian is presented, who is immediately unmasked as a spy of Japan. The Japanese enemy in *Tarawa atoll sanglant* is indicated by offensive expressions such as "vermine jaune" (yellow vermin) (Hubinon & Charlier 1993, 8 & 17), and in all the selected Hubinon & Charlier war stories the skin of the Asians was coloured in rather yellow tones, quite contrasting to the skin tones used for the American characters. Various scholars have already analysed the representation of the enemy in the *Buck Danny* stories, this essay will therefore not consider this issue in detail (Paymans 1976, 219-229; Leguèbe 1977; Malcorps & Tyrions 1984; Rehault 2013, 383-394). In summary, from 1945 till 1950 the image of the Yellow Peril, often related to Japan, is thus quite persistent, but after 1950 for five years no more new stories with such representations were made – though many albums of the late 1940s were reprinted in the 1950s and later. The "Yellow Peril" stereotype endured somewhat by these reprints. Nevertheless, the idea of the Yellow Peril shifts from Japan to China. The new post-war situation whereby Japan was incorporated in the Western influence sphere (at

first through the occupation by the US army) and China developed into another large communist country, opposing Western interests, may be an explanation.¹¹

Resurgence and Extinction of the Yellow Peril in Belgian Comics (1956)

In 1956 there was an almost unexpected but brief resurgence of the image of Japanese military threat in Belgian comics. In the Francophone comic *Valhardi contre le soleil noir* by Jijé, published in the weekly *Spirou*, a group of Japanese conspirators is trying to raise on an island a new army that should conquer, first Asia, and later the rest of the world (see Fig. 3). The French hero, Valhardi is able to counteract this dangerous conspiracy and in the end the leader of the conspirators comes to admit the futility of their enterprise:

“Our organization has lost its reason to exist... The developments on a global scale and new alliances have completely transformed our problems... The “Black Sun” belongs henceforth to the past.”¹²

The development to which he is alluding was probably the Cold War, where former enemies like Japan and the Federal Republic of Germany became important allies against the big communist countries like the

¹¹ For instance, in a 1958 *Spirou* story *Le prisonnier du Bouddha* (by Franquin, Jidéhem, Greg), the enemy is the Chinese army (precisely at a time when Japan was represented as a touristic country). Some Belgian comics series feature a recurring enemy with Chinese roots: think of Tsai Tsou Ming, leader of the Shin Than gang of the *Bob Morane* stories (since 1959), or Le Leader in the *Michel Vaillant* stories (since 1967), who was instructed by Tibetan monk. Even in the imagined distant future of *Le Piège diabolique* (Jacobs, 1960), when the civilisations of the earth are scattered by nuclear and bacteriological wars, a new dictator rises at the heart of Asia and reorganises the world with a iron fist on the model of a anthill (“*Cependant, au cœur de l’Asie où avait survécu par miracle un noyau de civilisation, surgit un chef énergique qui, d’une poigne de fer, entreprit de reorganiser l’humanité sur le modèle de la fourmilière.*”) E.P. (Jacobs 2013, 38).

¹² My translation of the French balloon : “*Notre organisation avait d’ailleurs perdu ses raisons d’être... L’évolution mondiale et les nouvelles alliances ont complètement transformé nos problèmes...Le « Soleil Noir » appartient désormais au passé...*” (Jijé 1993, 103).

USSR and China. This scene marks, in an explicit way, also the provisional end of the representation of Japan as a warlike nation in Belgian comics. The comics that would be published in later years offered a quite different image of Japan, an image that I qualify as 'touristic', because that is the dominant perspective of this new generation of Belgian comics on Japan.

The Touristic (1957-1960)

From 1957 on, three comics were published with a new, far more positive perspective on Japan: one francophone story published in the weekly *Spirou* and two issues of the most popular Flemish comic strips series published in the dailies, *Suske en Wiske*. Except for the *Tif et Tondu* story that was only published in 1986 as an album, the Flemish stories were also quickly put on the market in album format, and later many times reprinted, so they reached quite a large audience. A new perspective did not necessarily mean that stereotypical representations belonged completely to the past, just that the stereotype of the Yellow Peril was largely interchanged for some other stereotypes.¹³

The first Belgian comic that really featured the country Japan as a background for a story was Willy Vandersteens' *Suske en Wiske, De Stemmenrover* (The Voice Robber) (see Fig. 4). Already from the start of the narrative Japan is referred to by one of titular heroes as a beautiful country. The boy Suske flicking through a book about Japan says to the girl Wiske: "Look, a book about Japan. That has to be a magnificent

¹³ An exception is a comic made by French author Bielsa, who tells in *Soleil levant contre aigle noir* (1956), which was published in the Belgian weekly *Spirou*, about the Russian-Japanese war of 1904. In this story the Japanese army is portrayed negatively. But this comic made it never into an album, so its importance is rather minimal.

country".¹⁴ This explicit evaluation is followed by an illustration from the (fictitious) book figuring a beautiful landscape with a typical curved bridge and a snow-capped mountain, and a female figure in a kimono. The author was thus clearly not so much interested in contemporary Japan - only a few scenes are located in the rebuilt Tōkyō - but rather in a fictive medieval era Japan, that is assumed, in the diegetic universe of the story, to prevail somewhere on the main island, behind some 'wild mountains', where a princess and samurai warriors are living. This is not an extraordinary approach for this comic strip series, because the use of a fictional past in contemporary times was also used in various other adventures of *Suske en Wiske*.¹⁵ In general, one can see that such a fictionalized past offers arguably a more exotic and imaginative backdrop than a contemporary setting could offer to a young audience (but the series aimed, with references to the contemporary society, at an adult reader as well – see Lefèvre 2013). But as time went by, the author, Willy Vandersteen, began to incorporate increasingly contemporary locations and only three years after *De Stemmenrover*, in 1960, he let his heroes travel again to Japan (*De Gouden Cirkel*, The Golden Circle), but this time it was contemporary Japan, and more precisely Tōkyō, which served as the backdrop including views of the Tōkyō tower, airport, the parliament, and night life. These new views of Japan are arguably the consequence of a first trip by the author to Japan. While the characters in the Vandersteen stories were always more or less obliged by the circumstances (like helping a friend in danger) to

¹⁴ My translation of the Dutch balloon: "Kijk, het is een boek over Japan! Dat moet een prachtig land zijn, hé!" (Vandersteen 1997, 2).

¹⁵ The very first story of *Suske en Wiske*, *Het eiland Amoras* offers a medieval age Flanders on a yet undiscovered island somewhere in the ocean.

travel to Japan to solve a problem, in the 1958 story, *Le Fantôme du samouraï* (The Phantom of the Samurai) of the *Tif et Tondu* series (by Willy Maltaite and Rosy), the two protagonists are from the very start of the story already in Japan. They are there for purely touristic reasons, as the caption in the very first panel states (“*Tif and Tondu had decided the location of their holidays. They are now in Japan.*”).¹⁶ The protagonists are placed in a beautiful and typical landscape (see Fig. 5). Quite similar views were already well known through Japanese art, which was circulating in Europe already since the 1860s: the so-called *Ukiyo-e* printmakers like Hokusai or Hiroshige drew from the beauty of the Japanese landscape (Flynn 2016). In our example the protagonists of the comic, Tif and Tondu admire the sight. Tif exclaims: “*Really, I’ve never seen something that beautiful. How calm, how serene!*”; and his friend confirms: “*Splendid country!*”.¹⁷ Just as the opening of the *Suske en Wiske* story, the emphasis is no longer about armies of yellow faces that threaten the West, but now it concerns westerners enjoying themselves in the Japanese landscape. Later in the story, there are a few visual remains of the American occupation, like an old American military camp with a discarded jeep. Furthermore, the characters also have to experience another side of Japanese nature, a ruthless earthquake destroys a city and causes many casualties (see Fig. 6). Similarly to Vandersteen in his first Japan story, the French scriptwriter Rosy was not able to resist refraining from using the samurai elements and in the

¹⁶ My translation of the French text box: “*Tif et Tondu ont décidé du lieu de leurs vacances. Ils se trouvent actuellement au Japon.*” (Will & Rosy 2009, 37).

¹⁷ My translation of the French balloons: “*Vraiment, je n’ai jamais rien vu d’aussi beau. Quel calme, quelle sérénité!*” and “*Pays splendide!*”. (Will & Rosy 2009, 37)

contemporary setting a story is told about a samurai ghost.¹⁸ As in the *Suske en Wiske* story, in the *Tif et Tondu* story the Japanese characters can be differentiated on the basis of how they stand towards the Belgian protagonists. The reader is presented with two opposing groups: those on the side of the protagonists are presented as the 'good Japanese', the others are antagonistic and thus – in the logic of the story – 'bad Japanese'. The bad Japanese are, moreover, mainly criminals. The Belgian heroes, aided by their Japanese friends (mostly authority figures: princes, police), have to fight against a gang of robbers. This was a typical dualistic approach of these humoristic adventure series, wherein scriptwriters assumed that such crime fighting or Manichean conflicts were interesting for their young readers. Good and bad were usually clearly differentiated. Readers were assumed to identify with the heroes and with the values they stood for. Especially in a fierce struggle with characters that were being identified with morally despicable values, the heroes could show how good always won against bad. In a way the good could not shine strongly without the active presence of the bad. We have to remember that a decade earlier there was not even such a differentiation among the Japanese group of characters: all the Japanese characters were fighting the American or European characters. In retrospect, it is however supposable that readers, actually, enjoyed in these comics of the 1950s the presence of bad guys, who are often more colourful than the eponymous heroes themselves. The deterministic theory of educators and critics alike, at

¹⁸ In France in a weekly children's publication *Bayard* in 1956 was also a story about samourai published: *Les 7 samourai*, Pierre Forget & Mérou, [Accessed on May 21, 2014], from the URL: <http://www.bdoubliees.com/bayard/annees/1956.htm>.

that time, that morally admirable heroes would help to impart good values in the young reader, is arguably too simplistic (Tilley 2012, Konijn and Hoorn 2005); because the bad characters are in their own way quite attractive. Konijn and Hoord (2005, 136) found in their effect study that their participants made a crucial difference between real life and fiction: *“In fiction, higher degrees of artificiality allow moral boundaries to be flexible.”*

Nevertheless, the explicit moral of these comics stories remains that Good will prevail over Evil in the end. In the two analysed comics the titular heroes win at the end: in *Suske en Wiske* thanks to the superior strength of a kind of superhero friend and the shrewdness of the children (they outsmart the cunning Japanese conspirator), in *Tif et Tondu* mostly thanks to a Japanese man who has dressed up as a samurai ghost. Thus only in the *Tif et Tondu* story can the Japanese themselves act decisively in setting things straight.

It is possible to argue that this new approach paved the way for the later main Japanese protagonists in francophone Belgian comics. After American, French, British and Roman heroes in Belgian comics, the very first Japanese title character was a comic figure, the myopic soldier *Taka Takata* (1965) and five years later, the adventurous female engineer *Yoko Tsuno* (1970), raised in Japan but living in Europe. Both titles were first introduced in a weekly comic (*Tintin* and *Spirou* respectively) and became quite popular series, which were also published in album format: *Taka Takata* 13 albums (1969-2004) *Yoko Tsuno* 27 albums (since 1972). Later a samurai series as *Kogaratsu* (since 1983, Michetz & Bosse, 13 albums) would also become somewhat popular. Outside Belgium, the belligerent image of the Japanese did not evaporate

completely in other European comics, because from the early 1960s in countries such as Spain or France, various comics, including series, about the war in the Pacific continued to be published.¹⁹

Possible Explanations

It is not easy to determine just one reason for this remarkable change in the late 1950s; it is likely to be the result of the interaction of many different factors, related to the comics themselves or to the broader historical context.

The noticeable difference between the comics that were first published in the 1940s and those of the late 1950s can be partly explained by the difference in genre. Except for three comics (the *Nero*-stories) of the first period all the other comics belong to a more realistic genre (like SF or war stories partly based on real events): the various stories of *Buck Danny* are rendered in a more naturalistic style, in contrast to the loose, caricatural style of Marc Sleen. On the contrary, the three comics of the late 1950s belong rather to the crossover genre of humoristic adventure (Lefèvre 2013), with a somewhat less naturalistic style and less detailed backgrounds. On the whole the style has less naturalistic pretensions.

Secondly the broader historical background can also offer some insight in the particular shift we have observed in the Belgian comics. It is likely that the Belgian population years after the liberation longed for

¹⁹ Think of 171 *Tora* monthlies (Impéria, 1972-1986), and of the series *Les Tigres Volants* (6 albums in the 1990s, Nolane-Molinari), and the short-lived series of three albums *Le Dernier Kamikaze* (Mitton-Molinari, 2006-2009).

something other than the recent war experiences.²⁰ Furthermore, since Belgium did not have any colonies in the Far East that were occupied by the Japanese army, this country did not completely share the experiences of Great Britain, France or Holland, whose fellow citizens had been suffering in the Japanese concentration camps. The Belgian authorities fully approved the US policy of reconciliation with Japan (De Coomon 2005, 271). Furthermore, the Japanese Imperial family and the Belgian Royal Family were keeping close ties: the first personal contacts between the Belgian royal family and the Japanese imperial family dated back to 1921, when the then Crown Prince Hirohito visited Belgium as part of his European tour. The friendly relationship continued to the next generation as Akihito and Michiko stayed several times in the royal palace as private guests of King Baudouin in the 1950s.²¹ Moreover in 1958 at the World Exhibition, Expo 58 in Brussels there was a Japan pavilion. A year later, on 20 June 1959, the Air Transport Agreement between Belgium and Japan was signed (De Coomon 2005, 173).

Another aspect of the broader political background that we have to take into consideration is the changing position of both Japan and China in the postwar period. In 1952 the Allied occupation of Japan ended with the Treaty of San Francisco and in 1956 Japan was granted membership in the United Nations in 1956. The communists of China became the enemies of the western countries: think of Cold War conflicts such as the

²⁰ In an earlier study I found that after a boom of resistance heroes comics and some Buck Danny stories, in the years after WWII, for more than three decades Belgian comics seldom referred again directly to the war. (Lefèvre 2007b, 296-310).

²¹ Site of Embassy of Belgium in Japan 'Diplomatic relations' [Accessed on May 21, 2014], http://countries.diplomatie.belgium.be/en/japan/relationship_belgium_japan/diplomatic_relations/

Korean War (1950-1953) and the first two Indochina Wars (1946-1954 and 1956-1975).

General Conclusion

The image of Japan in Belgian comics as a belligerent enemy, which was strongly present in the aftermath of the war, was relatively quickly forgotten (within 10 years of the end of the war) and interchanged in the late 1950s for a quite different representation: Japan as an exotic place and culture of interest to tourists. The late 1950s marked a crucial turning point, since the outbreak of the war the Japanese were not represented in a favourable light, first in *The Blue Lotus* (1934-1935) by Hergé, and later, after the ending of the war, in the war narrative in particular (both the historically based ones by Hubinon and Charlier, as the futurist stories by Jacobs). It is clear that not only did the Second World War play a decisive role in the perception of Japan, but also the longstanding tradition in the West of the Yellow Peril continued to circulate (see the humoristic adventures of *Nero*). While in the Francophone production of Belgium the focus lay on the second and a possible third world war, in the three Flemish *Nero* albums it was rather a Fu Manchu-like character, with an ambivalent nationality (identified as Chinese, but having a typical Japanese name). Also in the Blake and Mortimer story, the Yellow Peril was a mixture of Chinese communist and Japanese imperial army elements.

However, a decade later, some new comics offered a different perspective, that can be labelled as touristic; because there was suddenly more interest in some exotic aspects (especially of Japan's past) and, on the other hand, for the first time in Belgian comics, the

European title characters made a trip to Japan, in the case of Tif and Tondu explicitly as tourists. These comics started with an explicit admiration by the title heroes of the magnificent beauty of the country. It is, however, important to remember that the stories of the late 1940s were also reprinted in the 1950s and that readers collected these albums. Consequently, the older representation of Japan also continued circulating in the late 1950s and it is quite probable that readers at that time thus were confronted with quite contrasting representations of Japan.

Finally, it is remarkable that the new image of Japan in the Belgian comics took shape already before Japan was widely regarded as exporting country for many modern commodities such as cars and electronic devices. I have proposed various possible explanations for this cultural shift in Belgium such as the changing geostrategic context of the Cold War.

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FIGURES



Fig.1. Hubinon & Charlier (2011) *Buck Danny L'intégrale 2*. Dupuis, 61.



Fig.2. Sleen (1998) Nero, *De Klassieke avonturen van Nero, 1, Het geheim van Matsuoka*. Standaard Uitgeverij, no page number.



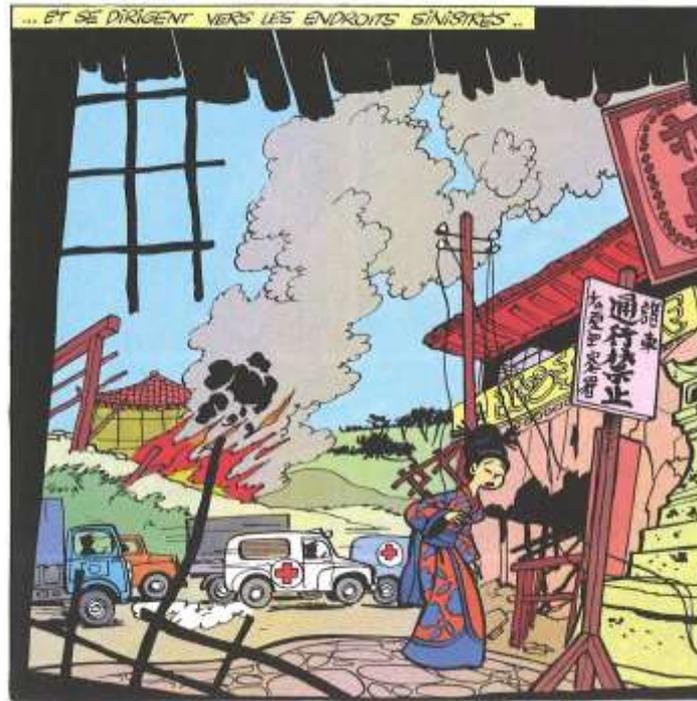


Fig.6. Will & Rosy (2009) *Tif et Tondu, Intégrale 6, Horizons lointains*. Dupuis, 47.