History of Cultural and Political Exchanges between Europe and Japan

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Europe and the Low Countries

The history of Japanese-European relations tends to be written in national terms. In this perspective Belgium easily falls between the mazes of the net, both in view of its size and its short history. Especially Japanese historians tend to write this history in the wambuis of nation-states, with strong emphasis on Great Britain, France and Germany, a tendency which I have labeled elsewhere eidokufutsu shikô 英独仏志向. The perspective of the nation-state is not illegitimate, but it is at least one-sided, since it tends to ignore the degree of interdependence and intertwining that existed between the various nations, although admittedly these relations were often antagonistic.

While it is true that the independent kingdom of Belgium was only established in 1830, it was not created out of the void, but was built on the foundations of an earlier entity, variously known to history as the Southern Netherlands, Spanish Netherlands, Habsburg Netherlands or Austrian Netherlands. During the sixteenth century these Southern Netherlands were part of a loose and greater entity, known as the Seventeen Provinces, and encompassing the territories that now more or less constitute the Benelux. What unity these territories had was enshrined in the Pragmatic Sanction, an ordinance promulgated by Charles V in 1549 with the purpose of passing on his possessions in the Low Countries inviolate to a single heir. During the conflict known to history as the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648), the tenuous unity of the Seventeen Provinces was shattered: in the north the Dutch Republic broke away and gained its independence, while the South remained loyal to the Spanish crown, and continued a semi-autonomous existence as part of the Habsburg empire. Throughout the subsequent two centuries, the territorial boundaries of the Southern Netherlands were regularly redrawn, especially during the wars waged by King Louis XIV of France. The War of Devolution, concluded by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1668), led to the annexation by France of some cities in the southern part of Flanders. The war between France and Holland, which was ended by the Treaties of Nijmegen (1678-79), entailed further loss for the Spanish Netherlands, notably in the southern parts of the regions Hainaut and Flanders. By the Treaties of Utrecht (1713-14), which put an end to the Spanish War of Succession, the Spanish Netherlands were parceled out to the Austrian House of Habsburg and remained the Austrian Netherlands until the end of the eighteenth century. At that time the territory was invaded and annexed by the French revolutionary armies (1795) and became part of the French Republic, subsequently the Napoleonic Empire (1804-1815). After the Battle of Waterloo (1815) it was united with the kingdom of the Netherlands, to form the United Kingdom of the Netherlands for a brief spell of fifteen years. In 1830 an insurgency put an end to this unity and an independent kingdom was proclaimed whose territorial boundaries roughly coincided with those of the Austrian Netherlands, except that under French rule the principality of Liège had been added to its territorial circumscription and remained part and parcel of the new kingdom of Belgium.

Even before the Dutch vessel De Liefde was cast onto Japan's shores in the year 1600, a subject from Tongeren, a city then located in the principality of Liège, set foot on Japanese shores. This was the Flemish Jesuit missionary Theodore Mantels (1560-1593), who reached the island of Hirado in 1588. He was admittedly preceded by many Portuguese and Spaniards, both missionaries and merchants, but himself preceded the Dutch. According to historical sources, the first Europeans to set foot on Japanese soil were

three Portuguese. They landed on the island of Tanegashima in 1543. This was the kick-off of a century of intense exchange between the Portuguese sea-borne empire and Japan, a century which was even labeled Japan's Christian century by Charles Raymond Boxer in his 1951 publication. The Portuguese are therefore the European nation who can lay claim to the first encounter with Japan. During the 1580s the Spaniards too came to Japan, in spite of the fact that Japan had been assigned to the Portuguese padroado by Pope Gregory XIII. Increasing rivalry between the two Iberian nations did not fail to compromise their presence in Japan. From the end of the sixteenth century on, the relationship they had built up with Japan came under increasing strains, until in the year 1639 all Westerners except the Dutch were banned from Japanese soil.

Flemish art reached Japan at an early stage in the course of the sixteenth century and subsequently exerted a considerable influence on artistic production in Japan. To this day Flemish tapestries of the late sixteenth century feature as one of the treasures adorning two floats that are paraded every year through the streets of Kyoto during the Gion festival. As the relationship of Portugal and Spain came under increasing strains, the early, mostly indirect, contacts between Japan and the regions that lie in present-day Belgium also grew gradually sparse and eventually ceased.

In the seventeenth century Japan allegedly entered a period of "splendid isolation," known in Japanese as sakoku 鎖国, but neither the splendor nor the isolation were unmitigated. Intercourse with the outside world went on, albeit in a severely restricted way. Japan's policy during the Tokugawa period has traditionally been called one of "isolation." The adequacy of this term, which was in fact coined by Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716), who resided in Japan from 1690 to 1692, has been challenged by scholars since the late sixties. They have demonstrated that the Tokugawa shogunate did not actually pursue a policy of downright seclusion, but rather one of state-controlled foreign contacts. The advocates of this view point out that there were more similarities than differences between the policies of the Tokugawa shogunate and those of the Chinese empire and the Korean kingdom. All three pursued a policy of restraint or prohibition of private navigation, but did allow state-sponsored diplomatic and commercial contacts. By adopting the format of the tribute relationship, each of these three states determined its position in the East-Asian regional context. The term sakoku gained coinage during the Meiji period, a time when openness came to mean exclusively openness to the West. However, for the Japanese during the Tokugawa period the outside world meant in the first place China and Korea, Hokkaido and Siberia, the Ryukyu archipelago and the lands of South East Asia. The West was limited to one European nation: the Dutch Republic (later the Kingdom of the Netherlands). This means that there were several channels through which information about the outside world kept trickling into Japan, and through which goods were imported into the archipelago. Contacts with the outside world were carried on through four gates on three levels: diplomacy (tsūshin 通信), trade (tsūshō 通商) and "civilizing" (buiku 撫育). Diplomatic relations were maintained with Korea through (1) the fief of Tsushima and those with the Ryukyu archipelago through (2) the fief of Satsuma. Commercial relations with Chinese and Dutch merchants were concentrated in (3) the port of Nagasaki, while (4) the fief of Matsumae was the frontier where the Japanese carried on their civilizing contacts with the Ainu people. Therefore the term "seclusion" is inadequate and should be substituted by kaikin 海禁, which means: control of the coast, prohibition of private individuals leaving the territory by sea.[1] There is a danger that after overemphasizing the seclusion, scholars now err on the other side, overemphasizing the external contacts during the Edo period. To take one example: Between the year 1607 and 1811 the shogunate received twelve official missions from the Korean kingdom. Both in terms of the number of persons involved in the contacts and frequency, this is to all intents and purposes a very limited form of exchange between the two countries.

[1] See e.g. Arano 1988.

Consequently, when comparing this situation with the movement of people and of goods that started with the Meiji Restoration, it is not entirely unwarranted to speak of "seclusion" in view of the tremendous contrast.

Another reason, if somewhat sophistical, why we are warranted to speak of four centuries of Japanese-Belgian relations is that, historically speaking, the term Belgium is by no means limited to the present-day kingdom of Belgium, but ever since the Renaissance was used as a kind of learned synonym for the Low Countries. It comes as no surprise then that in Latin texts the Dutch Republic too was commonly referred to as Belgium. By the same token, the Leo Belgicus was an allegorical or heraldic representation of the entirety of the territories of the northern and the southern Low Countries. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the term came to be used in the sense we give it today. However, for the sake of clarity we will refrain from using Belgium in that broader comprehensive sense, for that would indeed amount to "stealing the thunder" of the Dutch, to duplicating the book that was published in 2000 in Dutch, English and Japanese.

The year 2000 marked the 400th anniversary of Japanese-Dutch relations. The anniversary was celebrated in a series of events, including the publication of a book in Dutch, English and Japanese, containing contributions by a host of experts on the diverse aspects of Dutch-Japanese relations. Its English version is entitled Bridging the Divide, the Dutch title is Bewogen Betrekkingen.[2] The date it takes to be the beginning of this long relationship is 19 April 1600. On that date the Dutch vessel De Liefde landed off Bungo (Kyushu), casting a couple of dozen sailors, mostly Dutchmen, onto the Japanese shore. The pilot of that ship was the famous Englishman William Adams, known to the Japanese as Miura Anjin ("the pilot from Miura"), who was a model for James Clavell's best-selling novel Shogun. This was the beginning of a history of two centuries and a half of contact between Japan and Holland. The motto of the conquistadores and hidalgos is said to have been God, Gold and Glory,[3] but the Dutch were more pragmatic. In marked contrast to the imperial powers Spain and Portugal, the Dutch did not come to Japan in the name of God or the King, but only for the Gold. They were there as the representatives of a company, the newly established Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Joint-stock East India Company, VOC). Since this was a company, arguably the first multinational company in history, it enlisted people from different origins. One did not have to be a citizen of the Dutch republic to serve in the Dutch East India Company. As a result of this policy, a considerable number of persons from non-Dutch backgrounds were enlisted and served in the company. Some of them distinguished themselves, notably the Germans Engelbert Kaempfer and Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796-1866), as well as the Swedes Olof Eriksson Willman (c.1620- c.1373) and Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828), and the Englishman William Adams (1564-1620). This has led Japanologists from Germany, Sweden and England to claim or reclaim their countrymen for the glory of their own nation. Thus they posthumously claim an individual for a modern nation state, which in some instances did not even exist at the time. Neither Kaempfer nor Philipp Franz von Siebold could be called subjects of the German empire. This kind of approach is naturally to a great extent attributable to the tradition of national historiography, which goes back to heyday of the nation-state in the nineteenth century and which appears still to be strong. I am not going into an assessment of the legitimacy of these claims. Much will depend on the choices and priorities the historian makes. One can make a case that institutions, systems or organizations prevail over individuals. Consequently although some Germans, Swedes and British served in the Dutch East India Company, their history is embedded first and foremost in that of the East India Company and belongs only in a subsidiary degree to the history of their own nation. The consequences of giving priority to institutions over individuals are that not only the merits are to be attributed to the organization but also the demerits. So, if

[2] Blussé 2000.
[3] Blussé 2000, p. 5.

some events or episodes are less savory, they too are to be laid first to the account of the Dutch East India Company.

Moreover, by its very insistence on the bilateral relationship between Japan and Belgium, the present book makes a similar claim, especially for the period before the independence of Belgium (1830). When dealing with the period before 1830 we are in many cases highlighting the role of men whose roots lay in the Southern Netherlands but who were active in the Dutch East India Company or the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In so doing, and in view of the particular historical situation obtaining at the time, we imply that the history of the relations between Japan and Belgium is just as old as that between Japan and Holland. We are not motivated by any spirit of irredentism. Although the relationship between Holland and Japan has been extensively documented and studied, the Belgian side of the story has gone largely unnoticed and remains to be told in full. What we have tried to do in this book is precisely to shed light on some of those hidden and lesser-known aspects of the relations between Japan and the Low Countries, insofar as they also involved subjects and citizens from the Southern Netherlands. Far from stealing the thunder of the Dutch, the study of these "Belgians" amounts to a testimony to the enduring intertwined destinies of the Northern and the Southern Netherlands, even after their political division at the end of the sixteenth century. Especially during the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic remained strongly involved in the Southern Netherlands, if only to protect its interests from an expansionist France. At the same time, far away on the other side of the globe, through the agency of the Dutch East India Company, Flemish art and science continued to be transmitted to Japan. A case in point is the Herbarius, the herbal of the Flemish botanist Rembert Dodoens (Rembertus Dodonæus, actually of Frisian descent).

The fleet which attempted to circumnavigate the globe in the wake of Magellan, Drake, Cavendish and Van Noort, flew the Dutch flag, had been commissioned by people who hailed from the Southern Netherlands, notably the banker Johan van der Veken and the merchant Pieter van der Haegen. Although the attempt ultimately failed, the enterprise nevertheless left an indelible mark on history. The fleet, which included De Liefde, sailed under the command of Captain Simon de Cordes, another "Belgian." The VOC, the world's first multinational company, was set up mostly with shareholders' funds from Antwerp. The most famous of the ‘southerners’who distinguished themselves in the North was no doubt the Brussels-born François Caron, who is the author of the first Dutch-language book on Japan. Since there were no formal relations between the state that later became Belgium and Japan during the period between 1639 and 1854, no Belgian citizen could travel to Japan. Those who did had actually become Dutch citizens.

Beyond the questions of background, citizenship and nationhood, it stakes a claim, perhaps more legitimate, in the field of the exchange of ideas. Books—and the knowledge enshrined in them—that were written in the Southern Netherlands were taken to Japan and exerted considerable influence on the development of Japanese learning and science. Consequently through the vicarious medium of books there is a strand of exchange linking Japan and the territories that later became the political entity Belgium.

Belgium as an Independent Kingdom

After Belgium became a formally independent kingdom in 1830, it vigorously pursued its own interests, but even then its relationship with Japan always remained firmly embedded in and predicated on developments in the broader international context. The connections between Belgium and Japan cannot be dissociated from the international context, notably from the relationship between the Great Powers and Japan. The destinies of these countries were intertwined, although we must not be blind for the fact that they were competitive rather than cooperative. We must not pander too much to an anachronistic notion of a Europe in the making. In the

centuries under review, the states of Europe, i.e. their ruling elites, had at best only a fickle sense of common destiny and more often than not perceived their interests as opposed to those of the other states. They were often enemies of one another, or at best allies of opportunity. We only have to think of the wars waged by Louis XIV, Napoleon Bonaparte, the German empire and Nazi Germany. The last four centuries of European history have had more than a fair share of armed conflict. This does not mean that there was no Europe at all, for there was an international ecclesiastical community, as well as a community of scholars. Yet the aggregate of these international communities, in as much as they did not coincide, represented only a pitiful minority. For the overwhelming majority of the people reality was just around them, and often the only international sound they heard was the clatter of troops marching by. That was the unflattering picture Japan saw when it commenced its contacts with Europe in the nineteenth century. The international community was an arena where the laws of social Darwinism were being played out to the full, where strong states devoured weak ones. This view also informed Japan's view of Belgium: here was a small state, surrounded by strong and aggressive ones, and yet it managed to maintain its independence. Japan saw in the small yet flourishing and by no means weak state of Belgium a possible model for its institutional reform. This was one of the strongest motives for the early contacts between Japan and Belgium after Japan had opened its doors to the outside world. It sent experts and students to Belgium to acquaint themselves with the intricacies of the modern state.

Even in the case of the major powers it is not possible to write their history as separate, self-contained entities. How much less is it possible for Belgium, the country whose destiny was intertwined and entangled more than any other with its neighboring countries. Therefore, from the perspective of Belgium, its history with Japan cannot be dissociated from the general historical context it found itself in at the time. Nor is it possible to treat even Japan as separate entity, for Japan was often seen as one member of an East Asian region, and policies towards Japan were often subsumed under the policies towards China.

The early years (1830-1854)

At the end of August 1830 the Belgian Revolution erupted in Brussels, marking the beginning of the secession movement from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Independence was proclaimed on 4 October 1830 and the constitution was promulgated on 7 February 1831, thus marking the completion of the independence movement. However, it took until 1839 before the newly established kingdom achieved full international recognition. On 19 April 1839 a group of sovereign nations, including the Netherlands, signed the Treaty of 24 Articles in London, which Belgium equally endorsed. By this instrument the signatory nations recognized Belgium's independence, at the same time imposing perpetual neutrality on the fledgling state. These limitations on its sovereignty were necessary in order to win over William I of the Netherlands.

After its secession from the Kingdom of the Netherlands the newly established Belgian state found itself deprived of colonies and overseas markets. Constrained within a limited territory, it was forced to look for expansion through industrial development and external trade. During this time a Western Europe witnessed the ascendance of a new social class, one which did not derive its power and wealth from wars and battles but from trade, a class of entrepreneurs. They wanted frontiers opened up, trade barriers and other protectionist impediments razed, in other words they wanted international free trade. Since this class formed the backbone of the fledgling state, the Belgian political leadership enthusiastically espoused the pursuit of free trade as the mainstay of its foreign policy. Policymakers and entrepreneurs thus united transformed Belgium into the continental spearhead of the industrial and commercial revolution that was taking place around the middle of the nineteenth century.

It therefore became one of the prime objectives of Belgian diplomacy to explore new markets for

its products as a replacement for the Dutch colonies. Foreign Affairs and the king initially set their hopes on the American continent, but Asia and Africa were not ignored either. Possibilities were explored not only in far-off or less obvious places like the Gold Coast and Patagonia, but also in China, the Philippines and Singapore.[4] China formally opened a few ports to Belgium in 1845, but even before that date Belgium had explored its potential for trade.

In the 1840s Japan was still a secluded country, but this did not prevent many non-Dutch vessels from making their appearance in the waters off the Japanese coast.[5] The world was knocking at Japan's door with increasing insistence and it was only a matter of time before the doors would be forced open.

It is ironic, but probably not surprising that the first person in Belgium to draw the attention of the government to Japan was not a Belgian citizen, but the French journalist Etienne Mouttet. In March 1847 he submitted a report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, proposing that Belgium send a military expedition to Japan in order to prize its doors open for foreign trade. He set out the necessity, the feasibility and the legitimacy of such a project in considerable detail. This unsolicited report makes bewildering reading for a modern reader. Not only was it daring and unrealistic, but he also took pains to put up a moral justification for the enterprise, arguing that it could be construed as a punishment of the Japanese for their long-time religious persecutions. He reckoned that about 200 men and between 20 and 30 cannon would suffice to do the task. He argued that violence was the only means to gain any result, because Oriental peoples firmly believed in the law of the jungle. In their eyes, he argued, might and right are synonymous. This perception of Oriental mentality was widely spread, if not general, and translated into the notorious principle of gunboat diplomacy, a means that was to be tested so often in Asian waters during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. It was a common conviction in those days that Orientals could be gunned into submission. Mouttet still had another point to underscore his argument: Japan was, he contended, the only country left in the world where the natural resources had been left untapped. His arguments did not really impress the government in Brussels, however, and his report was not followed up. The country did not have the resources nor the manpower to equip an expedition, and moreover, Belgium's neutrality stood in the way of such a military project.

In general, there was very little Belgian interest in Japan in the first half of the nineteenth century. Until 1854, it appears that only the Revue Britannique, a digest of articles from the English periodical press translated into French for a Belgian readership, carried any articles on Japan. By contrast, China, India and even the Philippines featured regularly in the national press.

The Opening of Japan (1854-1866)

After more than two centuries of isolation, Japan was at last faced with the modern world, when in 1853 a navy squadron from the United States under the command of Commodore Matthew Perry makes its appearance in the Bay of Uraga, close to Edo, the seat of the bakufu, the military government. Because the American ships were painted black, they have come down in Japanese history as the "Black ships." Their arrival sounded the beginning of the end for the military regime that had ruled Japan uninterruptedly for two centuries and half. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century the country had experienced increasing economic strains. Notwithstanding fundamental changes in the world economy the regime had held on to its policy of isolation. Voices clamoring for a return of power to the emperor in order to give the country a new start were being heard ever louder and could not be muffled by repressive measures. At the same time the

[4] Truong 1955, pp. 17-22.
[5] Kiernan 1986, pp. 165-166; 314-315. Medzini 1971, p. 63.

Western powers, including Great Britain, Russia, France and the United States, were stepping up their efforts for the opening of Japan's borders and an end to its isolationist policy.

In 1854 the "Black ships" return to the bay of Edo and force the bakufu to sign a treaty, known in history as the Treaty of Kanagawa (signed on 31 March 1854), thus ushering in a new era. News of the treaty was carried by all Belgian newspapers and in some cases even elicited editorial comments.[6] The treaty also awakened hopes for Belgian opportunities in Japan.

The power base of the bakufu was severely shaken by what was generally felt by the Japanese to be a defeat at the hands of the Western "barbarians." But Kanagawa was only a start. The Western capitalist nations took advantage of the weakness of the Japanese government to impose a whole series of so-called unequal treaties on the country. In 1858 Japan concluded such treaties with the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia and the Netherlands. These so-called Ansei period treaties set the pattern for all subsequent treaties that would follow until the fall of the bakufu at the end of 1867. They included the principle of extraterritoriality and the denial to Japan of the right to set import tariffs autonomously. In 1866 Belgium would become the ninth nation to conclude such treaty.

The Treaty of Kanagawa also sparked hopes for a missionary revival in Japan. Reflecting this renewed hope, P. de Charlevoix's L'histoire du christianisme au Japon was republished in 1855. The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs too was awakened to the new possibilities. In addition a new mood seemed to prevail in the government. The Liberal politician H.J.W. Frère-Orban began to exert his influence in Belgian politics, and wanted to give full scope to a policy of promoting free trade. He did not accept protectionist policy as a good option for a small country and was resolutely in favor of the conclusion of trade treaties. On 8 April 1854, Walkinshaw, the Belgian consul in Guangzhou (China) filed a report about the opportunities of the Japanese market, and asked to be charged with negotiating a treaty with Japan on behalf of the Belgian government. Foreign Affairs acceded and sent precise instructions. Walkinshaw had to stress the fact that Belgium was a neighboring country of the Netherlands. Brussels even considered the possibility of opening a consulate in Japan and the Foreign Minister asked Walkinshaw to propose a candidate. The government hoped that it could profit from the momentum created by the Treaty of Kanagawa and soon secure a favorable treaty for Belgium. But in the end the plan went awry, and Walkinshaw could not even travel to Japan.[7] Neither politically nor commercially were there any prospects of negotiating a treaty any time soon. Japan would indeed do everything in its power to prevent or stall the conclusion of new treaties.

The British and the Americans were not making the headway in Japan they had hoped for, while in Europe the political and economic situation was improving, so that the opening of new overseas markets became less urgent. When in June 1858 the Belgian consul in Singapore made a new proposal to open negotiations with Japan, he received the reply from Brussels that the government preferred to wait. In December 1858 Crown Prince Leopold held a speech in the Senate about the importance of the Chinese and Japanese markets, and the necessity of concluding treaties and setting up diplomatic representations in those countries. It is probable that the drift of his speech had been suggested to him by Foreign Affairs, because the Minister responded at once by announcing the dispatch of a mission to the Far East, which would be entrusted with both economic and diplomatic instructions. The mission would take samples of Belgian products with it and would include diplomats to negotiate treaties.

In the meantime Brussels had found a willing ear in The Hague: the Dutch would take the Belgian negotiators under their wing to get them into Japan, for the country was still closed to subjects of any country

[6] Truong 1955, pp. 44-45.
[7] Truong 1955, pp. 41-43.

and products of any states with which it had not concluded a treaty.[8]

Crown Prince Leopold had an outspoken interest in the Far East, although it must be added that it was China rather than Japan that was in the forefront of his preoccupations. In his later words and actions he clearly demonstrated that his prime ambition was to somewhere carve out a colony, and from this perspective Japan evidently offered fewer opportunities than China, which was in a process of slow disintegration. Among those whose concerns were primarily commercial, some felt that Japan held more opportunities than China. In China Belgian products were already preceded by the British, and this was a severe handicap for newcomers. The then head of the consular section in Foreign Affairs, Lambermont, was convinced that it was too late for China but that Japan still offered a level playing field, and that Belgium had to act quickly before the Japanese taste too would grow accustomed to any British products.[9]

In one of the efforts to jumpstart trade with Japan, Foreign Affairs sounded out Sieburgh, the Belgian consul in Amsterdam, about the possibility of carrying Belgian products on Dutch ships sailing to Japan. The consul responded positively and proposed to charter a ship to carry Belgian products. In August and September of 1859 he made a tour of major industrial centers to collect cargo for this sailing, but the efforts failed in the end. There may have been some resistance against having Dutch as middlemen for trade,[10] but in general at that time few in Belgium were sanguine about the trading opportunities Japan could offer.

In this overall rather lackluster picture one figure stands out for his panache: Count Charles Descantons de Montblanc. Although formally having French nationality, he was also Baron of Ingelmunster in West Flanders. He was probably the first traveler with Belgian connections, if not Belgian citizenship, to enter Japan. Since France had already concluded a treaty with Japan in 1858, he was able to enter the country, whereas persons with Belgian passports could not. He is claimed to have gone to Japan for the first time in 1858 or 1859, when he also visited the Philippines as member of a scientific mission commissioned by the French government. At any rate, he certainly visited Japan in the early 1860s and on that occasion he also learned Japanese. From around 1865 he published a number of articles and booklets about Japan in Paris.

Other Belgians also made it to Japan in the 1860s, including the Belgian consul in Shanghai Louis Bols, who appears to have visited Nagasaki for a while in 1863. His secretary Joseph Keymeulen followed suit the following year and even tried to set up an import company in Japan. In 1865 a certain Ladouce from Antwerp traveled to Japan intending to settle in the country and work in the import business.[11]

In mid-1859 Foreign Affairs had found the British prepared to insist with the Japanese that they should conclude a treaty with Belgium. About the same time it laid out plans to open a consulate-general in China, whose jurisdiction would include Japan, and whose incumbent would have to negotiate a treaty with Japan.[12] In 1862 a Japanese embassy (headed by Lord Takeuchi) visited Europe and Foreign Affairs saw a window of opportunity to establish contact with the Japanese government. When the embassy was in Holland, the Belgian embassy in The Hague threw a party to woo the Japanese, but they could not be convinced to make a detour to Belgium.[13] When the Shibata mission was staying in Paris in 1864, Foreign Affairs wanted to invite them to Belgium, but the king was absent and by the time he could be reached to sign the invitation, the embassy had departed.[14] In the fall of 1865 a mission from Satsuma, a powerful domain in the south of

[8] Truong 1955, pp. 48-53; Parliamentary Transactions of the Belgian Senate 1858-1859, 24.12.1858, p. 60.
[9] Truong 1955, pp. 56; 58.
[10] Truong 1955, pp. 54-58; Frochisse 1936, pp. 58-61.
[11] Keymeulen to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26.2.1867; Foreign Ministry Archives 4115.
[12] Truong 1955, p. 82.
[13] Truong 1955, pp. 97-100.
[14] Truong 1955, pp. 110-112.

Japan which sought to escape the stifling control of the bakufu, visited England without the bakufu's knowledge. Count de Montblanc succeeded in establishing contacts with them and inviting them to Belgium. They were the first Japanese to visit Belgium. Montblanc arranged a meeting with then Crown Prince Leopold (15 October 1865), and showed them around the fortifications of Antwerp and industrial sites in Liège. In Liège they purchased cannon and grenades from the Fonderie Royale.[15]

Right after signing the treaty with China, t'Kint de Roodenbeek sailed to Japan in December 1865 to start negotiations with the Japanese authorities. Assisted by the British, and more especially by the Dutch representative Van Polsbroeck, he started the negotiations in March 1866. In the meantime Leopold I had passed away and technically speaking his letter of credence had lost validity. He simply carried on negotiations and was able to sign a treaty on 1 August 1866. In October a supplementary convention was signed. Both accorded most favored nation status to Belgium, which in actual practice meant extraterritoriality for Belgians and access to the open ports of Hakodate, Yokohama, and Nagasaki, and import tariff set at 5%.[16]

The Belgian Parliament ratified the treaty unanimously. There was a little incident, when the Brussels deputy Delaet contested clause 21 of the treaty. This stipulated that French would be the only language of diplomatic correspondence between the two countries. His protest was based on the consideration that the diplomatic language of the bakufu was Dutch, incidentally the language of a part of the Belgian population. By explicitly excluding Dutch for diplomatic correspondence and stipulating French as the only language, Belgium associated itself with France, a country that had used gunboat diplomacy to secure entry into Japan, he contended. There followed a long exchange of arguments and replies by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, but in the end, since it appeared that unilaterally changing one article was impossible, the vote was passed unanimously.[17]

Students and Missions (1866-1914)

In December 1866 the Belgian representation in Japan was reinforced. t'Kint, who was consul-general both in China and Japan, traveled back and forth between the two countries, which was not a good arrangement. Henceforth there would be a vice-consul in Yokohama and a consul in Nagasaki. t'Kint recommended resident Dutchmen for both positions. For Yokohama he proposed Maurice Lejeune, who had studied in Belgium and ran a trading company in Yokohama, for Nagasaki he recommended a Dutchman named Adrian.[18]

In February 1867 news came of the impending arrival of a mission from the king of the Ryukyus, carrying a personal letter from the king to Leopold II and having full power of attorney to conclude a treaty. This so-called king of the Ryukyus was in fact the lord of Satsuma, whom the actual king of the Ryukyus recognized as suzerain. The main reason for the sending of the mission was to represent the domain of Satsuma at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867. The visit to Brussels has to be seen as the follow-up to the passage through Belgium of the Satsuma mission in 1865, which had been invited by Montblanc. The idea of concluding a treaty with Belgium was again suggested by Montblanc. Now that the Belgian government had

[15] Foreign Minister to Min. Maison du Roi, 10.10.1865; Foreign Minister to de Montblanc, 13.10.1865; War Minister to Foreign Minister, 18.10.1865; War Minister to Foreign Minister, 18.10.1865; Foreign Ministry Archives 10. 819/15. (The Fonderie Royale is not in Gaier 1977; Koen Janssens therefore surmises that it must be the Manufacture d'Armes de l'Etat, Janssens 1988, p. 50).
[16] Truong 1955, pp. 119-125.
[17] Parliamentary Transactions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives 1866-1867, 21.12.1866, pp. 217-219.
[18] Truong 1955, p. 132; Truong 1957, p. 172.

a formal treaty with the bakufu, the announced visit of the Satsuma envoy caused much apprehension in government circles, and they must have felt relieved when the envoy cancelled his visit to Brussels.[19]
The presence of the representatives of Satsuma, posing as an independent kingdom at the Paris Exposition, caused much embarrassment to the bakufu, but in the end a compromise was found and the Satsuma display was made a subsidiary to the Japanese section. The bakufu was represented by a high-profile mission, formally led by Tokugawa Akitake, the younger brother of the Shogun Yoshinobu. While in Europe the mission availed itself of the opportunity to make an official tour of the countries who had concluded a treaty with the bakufu. Belgium naturally became one of the stages in this tour and the mission visited Belgium from 24 September to 8 October 1867.

At the insistence of t'Kint, the new Meiji government had agreed to send a few students to Belgium for study. The first Japanese students arrived in June 1871.[20] Foreign Affairs appointed two officials to act as supervisors for the students. They found a tutor for each of the four among the teachers of the Athénée royal de Bruxelles. The Japanese students boarded at the homes of their tutors and received daily instruction in French. At the Athénée royal de Bruxelles they were assigned special curriculums in accordance with their progress and their fields of interest. They returned to Japan in October 1874. In the eighties and the early nineties some Japanese came to Belgium to enroll at universities, but their number was limited. The Université Libre de Bruxelles had the highest number of Japanese. Its enrollment registers include the names of twelve Japanese before 1895. Other institutes seem to have attracted almost none, with the exception of the Institut Supérieur de Commerce in Antwerp. In total there were only 19 Japanese students before 1895.[21] This is a very small number indeed. By far the biggest group of Japanese studying abroad went to Germany, which was becoming the leading European nation in science and technology.

A number of Japanese with a special assignment visited and stayed in Belgium. In 1873 Inoue Kowashi came to study the Belgian constitution. In the early eighties Yamazaki Naotane had consultations with the legal specialist J. Thonissen, who was a professor of Law at the University of Leuven and later even became a minister of state. Katō Susumu studied the system of the Central Bank of Belgium and was instrumental in founding the Bank of Japan. In the 1880s the country received a number of Japanese to study one or other aspect of Belgium's industrial fabric or institutional setup, training them to be engineers, financial and legal experts, officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, etc. One of the missions of the Ministry of Agriculture studied the flax industry in the Kortrijk area. Flax growing and linen manufacture started in Hokkaido with the help of a few experts from the Kortrijk area.

Since the opening of Japan the Belgian government granted a few scholarships for travel to Belgians. Their mission was commercial exploration. Up to 1895 in total five persons were given such a scholarship for a total period of 35 years. The number of Belgians residing in Japan was very low. Between 1876 and 1886 their number vacillated between 10 and 16. In August 1888 there were 19 Belgians, and by the end of 1889 they numbered 26, including three women and five children. The majority was active in the commercial sector, often in the employ of French or German trading companies. The foreigners lived in specially designated quarters in the open ports, which offered good amenities. The streets were broad, paved and lit. The houses of the foreigners were spacious and often had big gardens. Social life was fairly intense, at least in Yokohama. Travel inside the country was subject to permission by the authorities, but from 1877 getting such permission had become a mere formality. One attractive feature of Japanese cities was the

[19] Truong 1955, pp. 186-191.
[20] t'Kint to Lambermont, 23.3.1871; M. Delfosse [Belgian diplomat in the US] to the Foreign Ministry, 1.5 and 5.5 1871, note of 7.8.1871 Foreign Ministry Archives cl. B74.4 (number unclear).
[21] Janssens 1988, p. 100.

absence of horse dung in the streets, an omnipresent feature of Western cities. Foreigners were not subject to Japanese law but to their own. Especially Yokohama was a place where life for the foreigners was rather pleasant.

Treaty Revision and Imperialism

When the Meiji emperor came to the throne in the beginning of 1868, the new government honored the unequal treaties it inherited from the previous régime. For the better part of the Meiji period, successive foreign ministers would devote most of their energy to the revision of these treaties. The first effort in that direction was the Iwakura Embassy, which toured all treaty countries to sound out willingness for treaty revision. The letters of credence that Ambassador Iwakura carried show an interesting rhetoric. These personal letters from the emperor addressed to the heads of state are written in the grandiloquent style to be expected from such documents. They are long on verbiage and short on content. Yet they must have presented their writers with something of a conundrum, since they had to use wording that was not unprecedented. In the traditional Confucian scheme of things a sovereign was a suzerain and in all cases he addressed himself to a subordinate. This time round the emperor was addressing himself to his equals. The rhetoric therefore strikes a delicate balance between the pose of the pupil who is intent on learning whatever may be useful, and that of the head of state who addresses other heads of state on an equal footing. He therefore uses words like "wish" (kibō suru 希望する, nozomu 望む), which do not imply any hierarchy between the speaker and the addressee.

By the end of his reign the Meiji emperor would witness how his country achieved real parity with the Western Powers. In the course of his reign Japan consolidated its frontiers, formally incorporating the Ogasawara islands (Bonin islands, 1876) and the Ryukyu archipelago (1879). In the North, Russia threatened. Japan stepped up its colonization of the northern island of Hokkaido. It concluded the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1875) exchanging the Kuriles for the island of Sakhalin, in a bid to avert any possible invasion or armed conflict with Russia. In 1871 Japan concluded a Trade and Amity Treaty with China, in which the two countries recognized each other as equals.

The government was divided over the question whether to invade Korea or not. The government members who had been on the Iwakura Embassy (1871-1873) realized that Japan was too weak for any international venture and stressed that the consolidation of the regime and internal institutional reform must have priority. They prevailed and the pro-invasion faction was ousted from the inner circle of the government. In 1876 Japan concluded a treaty with Korea, which laid the foundation for increased Japanese influence on the peninsula. Korea was proclaimed an independent state and abrogated its status of tribute state of China.

Next Japan cast its greedy eyes on neighboring Asia: after defeating China in the Sino-Japanese War, it annexed Taiwan and the Pescadores as the outcome of the successful peace negotiations with China and the conclusion of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Japan's determined action in quelling the Boxer Rebellion in China (1899-1900) added to its international prestige.

In 1902 it finally achieved parity when it concluded the first British-Japanese Alliance. The alliance made the country confident enough to take on Czarist Russia in a showdown over influence in Manchuria and Korea. After its victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) it moved to annex Korea as a colony in 1910.

In 1904 Korea becomes a protectorate of Japan, in 1910 follows formal annexation. In 1908 Japan raises the status of its foreign legations in Great Britain, the United States of America, Germany, France, Italy, Austria and Russia to the level of embassy, reflecting its growing importance. Japan and Russia conclude

several treaties recognizing each other's interests in Asia. It also concludes a treaty with France. In 1905 and 1911 the British Japanese Alliance Treaty is renewed. The First World War creates new opportunities for Japan. It is bound by the British Japanese Alliance to support Britain in case of war, so when the war erupts it joins the allies. On the grounds of this alliance it impounds German ships and occupies German possessions in Asia, including the German concessions in China. In 1915 it forces China to sign the program of Twenty-One Demands, which is tantamount to an unequal treaty. Japan reinforces its grip on the continent, but it starts losing the goodwill of the international community. Japan's victories first over an Asian giant and next a European giant tremendously boosted its international prestige, and earned the country the status of a regional power. Yet its drive for expansion set Japan on a collision course with China.

During this period Japan's foreign policy was fully geared to that of the Western Great Powers, and it managed to avoid any collision or confrontation with them. After the return of the Iwakura Embassy several foreign ministers endeavor to negotiate a revision of the unequal treaties. Initially they lose a lot of time due to a lack of familiarity with diplomatic practice and usage. At one point the abrogation of extraterritoriality was the bone of contention, at another the restoration of tariff autonomy. In 1894 Japan finally succeeds in concluding the Japanese British Commercial and Navigation Treaty, which abolishes extraterritoriality. This is a major victory in the quest for parity. Once Great Britain had given in, the other nations quickly followed suit. Great Britain was finally found prepared to relinquish this privileged status because it feared the growing power of Russia in northern China and wanted Japan as an ally. In 1911 Japan recovers tariff autonomy. It thus took Japan the whole duration of the Meiji period to recover full sovereign status.

Exoticism, Symbolism and Art Nouveau

The period of the second half of the nineteenth century leading up the First World War is an extremely important period in world history. Japan's transformation into a modern nation-state coincided with that period. It acquired its first constitution in 1889, its first code of civil law in 1898 and its first government based on a parliamentary majority in 1903. In Europe too these were seminal years, a time when the foundations of our modern society and economy, based on petroleum, electricity and the chemical industry, were laid. It is the period that witnesses the advent of the automobile (1885-86), the introduction of standard time (1884-1912), ragtime and jazz (c.1890 and 1900), the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, the quantum physics of Max Planck and Niels Bohr. These incisive changes in the material environment and in the social context had deep repercussions on styles of life. In the arts, movements like Symbolism, Jugendstil and Art Nouveau gave new directions to the creative impulse, and drew inspiration from Japanese fine and applied arts.

This was a period when the bourgeoisie was at the height of its power and wealth, when Europe had hegemony over the world and Western values appeared paramount. The monarchies of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia were still in power, and the belief in progress and the future was still unshaken. Eurocentrism and the optimistic belief in progress naturally colored the way Europeans looked at Japan. On the one hand Japan, as a country that assiduously strove to adopt Western civilization, simply confirmed their belief in the universal value of Western civilization and culture, but at the same time it also showed many facets that seemed puzzling, anomalous or disconcerting. The relationship between Belgium and Japan, however, was not limited to economic and commercial exchanges but also involved the field of cultural influence and artistic inspiration. Japan exerted a formative influence on artistic creation, and its presence was probably never more visible than in the artistic movement known as japonisme.

From 1885 onwards Europe witnessed the advent of Symbolism as the expression of a new sensibility. It was a reaction to the Second Industrial Revolution, to bourgeois and industrial society, to positivism, naturalism and impressionism. Symbolism is part of a bigger movement which is often referred to as Fin de Siècle. This movement was receptive to other worlds, to exotic cultures. It is no surprise therefore that Oriental cultures exerted a strong attraction. Artists looked for alternatives to stuffy bourgeois art, and discovered Japanese woodcut prints. They embodied simplicity, love of nature, freshness of design. There was little interest in Japanese philosophy and religion, however. Although far less than China or the Arabic world, Japan figured as a motif or a source of inspiration in some literary and poetical work. Eventails exotiques by Max Waller (1888 or a little earlier), and the poem Ecran japonais by Auguste Vierset are examples. The two most important expressions of japonisme in the literary arts are L'Eventail japonais (written in 1884, published in 1886) by Max Elskamp and Imagerie japonaise (1888) by Jules Destrée. In both cases Japanese prints play an important role. Destrée's work is unique in the fact that the poet endeavors to duplicate in words the contents or the ambiance of the prints. This is a more profound approach than that found in most other works affiliated to japonisme. Most artists, whether literary or pictorial, limit themselves to some decorative elements of allegedly Japanese origin. Even Ensor or Khnopff hardly get beyond this exoticism. In 1885 Ensor painted Squelette regardant des chinoiseries, which includes a Japanese print, and in 1891 he painted Nature morte aux chinoiseries, which equally includes a Japanese print. In some of his other paintings he depicted a Japanese folding screen. Other examples by less innovative artists include the painting Ombrelle japonaise by Theodore Hannon (1887) and a considerable number of japonaiseries by Alfred Stevens. One of his paintings is entitled La Parisienne japonaise. In 1886 he published a booklet entitled Impressions sur la peinture, in which he praises Japanese art. It must be noted that when artists dabble in japonaiseries, they often hardly make a distinction with chinoiserie. We have already mentioned two of Ensor's paintings whose titles include the word chinoiserie, but in both cases also include a Japanese print. The same goes for the literary production of Elskamp.

Japanese prints featuring as one of the objects represented in a painting is obviously a very superficial form of inspiration. In some cases however, it went deeper. Japanese print artists had a predilection for pastel colors and bright tonalities; they stressed drawing over painting, and favored simple compositions. Clear contour lines, homogeneous color planes, absence of shading within one color plane, weak perspective, and sometimes spectacular viewpoints or compositions were typical of these prints and many of these characteristics posed a challenge to the traditionalist paintings of classicist and academy painting.

Japanese prints engendered the commercial poster and revived the woodcut print. This is not surprising, for Japanese prints had a lot in common with these two genres. It is not hard to recognize the influence of Japanese techniques and/or motifs on the posters of that period: unusual postures, diagonal compositions, the absence of background and depth, simplified forms, black coloring, clear contour lines, floral motives and texts interspersed in the drawing. The decorator Adolphe Crespin decorated verandas with magnified Japanese prints in 1881 and drew Japanese masks. One of the most excellent works is the poster he made for his friend Hankar in 1894. In 1896 Armand Rassenfosse copied a Japanese theater poster for the cover of an anthology of illustrated posters published in Paris in 1897 under the title Les affiches étrangères illustrées.

The paintings of Khnopff, one of the most prominent Belgian symbolists, particularly demonstrate Japanese influence in their formats. He has a particular love for narrow and tall canvasses. Japanese nature became an important motif in European art of the Fin de Siècle. Floral motives, often stylized would also play an important role in the Jugendstil and Art Nouveau movement. No element of Japanese nature would be

more compelling than the wave, notably the world famous, quintessential wave by Hokusai. In 1901 Gisbert Combaz drew a wave that was Japanese both in topic and in style. The little boat menaced by an overarching wave seemed so inspiring that even Ensor's canvas Le Christ apaisant la tempête must have been inspired by it. In the work of Henry Van de Velde the wave assumed paramount importance.

The Interwar Period (1918-1941)

At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 Japan is one of the five victors of the war. The conference assigned the German islands in the Pacific as mandate territories to Japan and gave Japan the opportunity to take over the German concessions in China. Japan's increasing influence in China alarmed the United States of America. This country, itself lacking concessions in China, advocated an open-door policy with equal opportunities for all foreign nations. The American Foreign Secretary was also alarmed about the increasing strength of the Japanese fleet. In 1921 and 1922 the United States, Great Britain, France and Japan convene in Washington to find a solution for the issue of respective fleet strengths. At the end of the conference the British-Japanese Alliance ceases to exist and is replaced by a Four Power treaty. Subsequently in 1923 the respective fleet strengths of the United States, Great Britain and Japan are determined.

In 1925, in a bid to prevent a possible alliance between China and the Soviet Union, Japan recognizes the Communist regime and concludes several commercial contracts with the Soviets. It can thus keep its hands free in China. In the early thirties Japan increases its grip on Manchuria. China appeals to the League of Nations, accusing Japan of usurpation. This does not prevent Japan in March 1932 from putting the deposed Chinese emperor Puyi on the throne of the "independent" state of Manchukuo. The Lytton Commission is sent to the Far East to investigate the situation and files a negative report about Japan's actions. Condemnation by the League of Nation follows, but no country is prepared to back up its vocal protests with actions. In the meantime the army increases its grip on the political decision-making process in Japan. The successive cabinets and ministers of Foreign Affairs can only idly stand by and watch how the Manchuria crisis escalates, unable to do anything other than justify the actions of the Japanese Army abroad. In 1934 Japan walked out the conference of London, whose aim was to determine anew the respective strengths of the fleet. In 1935 Japan left the League of Nations.

In the first half of the twentieth century Japan develops into a world power. Reinforced by its alliance with the British Empire it vigorously pursues its territorial ambitions. China's protests are to no avail. In the years following the First World War Japan goes through a phase of industrial expansion. Economic development and industrialization go hand-in-hand with the rise of militarism. The Japanese industrialists tend to support or at least condone this evolution, because they believe that the military will secure economic resources and markets. This tendency becomes irreversible in the 1930s. When former Minister of Foreign Affairs Shidehara Kijurō retired from political life in 1935 he wrote bitterly that Miyakezaka had taken over from Kasumigaseki and Nagata-chō, meaning that the general staff of the army (based in Miyakezaka) was now calling the shots, entirely eclipsing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (located in Kasumigaseki) and the office of the Prime Minister (located at Nagata-chō).

In 1936 Japan, Germany and Italy conclude the Anti-Comintern Pact, directed against the danger of communism. In 1937 the second Sino-Japanese War erupts. In the meantime the relationship with the United States comes under increasing strain. In September 1940 the Tripartite Alliance is formed between the members of the Anti-Comintern Pact. This strengthens the bond between the three Axis nations and they pledge to support one another in the event of America joining the war. In July 1941 America freezes all Japanese assets. Negotiations stall. While negotiations with the United States drag on, the Japanese fleet is

heading for Hawaii to launch a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The Pacific War has started.

The First World War marks a turning point in the history of Belgium's foreign relations as it does in that of Japan's. Consequently it also marks a watershed in the history of their bilateral relations. The First World War created the opportunity for Japan to move center stage onto the international political and economic scene, while Europe came out of the war a weakened continent. As a result the relationship between Belgium and Japan was equally transformed. Before the First World War, Belgium was more or less in the senior position, on the grounds of its status as a highly modernized and industrialized nation. After the end of the First World War Japan had clearly moved beyond its junior position and was now by far the more powerful of the two.

The need to secure entry into foreign markets on the one hand, and the necessity to maintain friendly relations with all other nations in order to avoid being dragged into a war, have always been the twin guiding principles of Belgium's foreign policy. The country singularly lacked military power, but in the course of the nineteenth century it developed into a first-rate economic power. Having no significant impact on the course of events in the world, it concentrated its efforts on building friendly relations, thus acquiring a position of arbiter, go-between, broker, or facilitator when international frictions or conflicts arose. That is why Belgium scrupulously stuck to its neutrality. Small country though it was, it was mandatory that it be respected as a sovereign nation, and not treated as a satellite of a big neighbor.

From its foundation Belgium was held by international treaty to maintain strict neutrality in international relations. This imposed neutrality lasted from 1830 to 1914. During this period Belgium consolidated itself as an independent nation, established diplomatic relations with foreign nations, including Japan, and thanks to this neutrality managed to become a prominent economic power. The most important task of Belgian diplomacy was the promotion and expansion of export. Starting in 1849 Belgium concluded a number of commercial treaties. Emile Banning called the imposed neutrality a blessing in disguise for Belgium.[22] Facts seemed to support his thesis, for Belgium steered clear of the Franco-German war in 1870-1871. It did however not keep Belgium from being implicated in the imbroglio over Luxembourg, and on several occasions it had to fend off French attempts to encroach upon its territory. By the end of the nineteenth century Belgium had become an economic superpower: financial center; home base for industrial activities reaching as far as Russia, Egypt, China and India; and as of 20 August 1908 even the metropolis of a huge colony, the Congo. In less than a century Belgium had developed into one of the major industrial economic powers in the world in spite of its limited territory.

The outbreak of the First World War signaled the end of its neutrality. In a sense it was only at this point that Belgium acquired unconditional sovereignty. This new situation forced the country into a quest for independence, a position where Belgium was completely free of exclusive bonds with any other nation. Although at first it had this bond with France in the Franco-Belgian Military Alliance, it adopted in the end a course of deliberate neutrality within the framework of the League of Nations. After the Second World War the idea of neutrality was abandoned altogether and Belgium sought integration into international organizations and Western block frameworks. This marked the beginning of a period of economic and military dependence. The experience of the past had clearly shown that neutrality was not enough to stay clear of international conflict. Therefore active membership of a homogeneous alliance seemed by far the safer solution. A string of foreign ministers after the Second World War greatly contributed to Belgium's integration into the major international organizations such as the European Union and NATO, and even play a fairly prominent role considering its size. Belgium was a founding member of NATO and of the various

[22] Coolsaet 1987, p. 13.

organizations that went to make up the EU, and Paul-Henri Spaak in particular was an important international figure.

The Postwar Period

During the 1980s Japan seemed to be in the process of taking center stage in the world. There was much talk about the Japanese style of management and Japanese dominance of the world economy. Every self-respecting bookshop had a shelf devoted to management Japanese style. More than anything else Japanese-made cars, cameras and household electronics became an omnipresent feature of daily life. But also in the more ethereal areas of life, such as fashion, literature and cinema, Japan was in the ascendant. Japanese fashion designers stole the show on European catwalks, numerous Japanese novelists were being translated into the major European languages and found avid readers, while Japanese films became something of cult. Even a Japanese soap opera by the name of Oshin お信 garnered a huge success on Belgian television.

In those heady 1980s, pundits prophesied the Japanese ascendance and world leadership in many areas of cutting-edge technology and design. They predicted, following a Pax Brittanica and a Pax Americana, the advent of a Pax Japonica. Nissan built an automotive factory in England, and Japanese investors were lured to Europe with an array of incentives. In the 1990s, however, what was the dream of many Japanese and the nightmare of many Westerners went awry. The "bubble" burst and Japan's economy fell into a slump, which would last ten years, and from which even today as we write the country has not fully recovered yet.

Although Japan has thus lost some of its high profile and its luster, it still remains the most advanced economy in Asia, the third largest in the world, and also the most reliable partner for the future. After coming of age as an economic power, it now seeks recognition as a major player on the political scene and is slowly but steadily working towards that end. It wants to become a "normal" country respected for its value and its real weight and tries to realize this ambition within the framework of international organizations and alliances.

Today, Japan is still the only full Asian member of the G-8, the club of most industrialized nations, and this simple fact testifies to its unique position within the Asian context. It was the first Asian country to achieve the transition into a modernized, industrialized nation-state. It achieved this transformation in less than a century. For this unique feat Japan occupies a special place in the European consciousness. In this process it sought contacts and exchanges with those nations which ranked among the most advanced in the nineteenth century, and these included Belgium. There was some similarity between the two countries in the sense that Belgium too was a kind of newcomer. In the middle of the nineteenth century Belgium was a newly founded state, which in a fairly short period had risen to the status of one of the most modernized and industrialized nations on the European continent. It was therefore not surprising that potentially Belgium could present a model for Japan's rapid modernization. It did indeed contribute to the modernization process in other countries such as China, Russia and several countries in South America.

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