

New Perspectives on Imagology

Studia Imagologica

Founding Editor

Hugo Dyserinck[†]

Series Editor

Joep Leerssen (*University of Amsterdam*)

VOLUME 30

The titles published in this series are listed at brill.com/imag

New Perspectives on Imagology

Edited by

Katharina Edtstadler, Sandra Folie and Gianna Zocco



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON



This is an open access title distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC 4.0 license, which permits any non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided no alterations are made and the original author(s) and source are credited. Further information and the complete license text can be found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

The terms of the CC license apply only to the original material. The use of material from other sources (indicated by a reference) such as diagrams, illustrations, photos and text samples may require further permission from the respective copyright holder.

FWF

Der Wissenschaftsfonds.

Published with the support of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): PUB 846-G

Cover illustration: Artwork by Olaf Osten, "Commuting 247 / Vienna, New World". Felt tip pen on pocket calendar, 2020.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Edtstadler, Katharina, editor. | Folie, Sandra, editor. | Zocco, Gianna, 1986- editor.

Title: New perspectives on imagology / edited by Katharina Edtstadler, Sandra Folie and Gianna Zocco.

Description: Leiden ; Boston : Brill, [2022] | Series: Studia imagologica, 0927-4065 ; volume 30 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022021269 (print) | LCCN 2022021270 (ebook) | ISBN 9789004450127 (hardback ; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9789004513150 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: National characteristics in literature. | Stereotypes (Social psychology) in literature. | Literature, Modern--History and criticism. | LCGFT: Literary criticism. | Essays.

Classification: LCC PN56.N188 N49 2022 (print) | LCC PN56.N188 (ebook) | DDC 809/.93353--dc23/eng/20221007

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022021269>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022021270>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 0927-4065

ISBN 978-90-04-45012-7 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-51315-0 (e-book)

Copyright 2022 by Katharina Edtstadler, Sandra Folie and Gianna Zocco. Published by Koninklijke Brill nv, Leiden, The Netherlands.

Koninklijke Brill nv incorporates the imprints Brill, Brill Nijhoff, Brill Hotei, Brill Schöningh, Brill Fink, Brill mentis, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Böhlau and V&R unipress.

Koninklijke Brill nv reserves the right to protect this publication against unauthorized use.

This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

Figures and Tables

Figures

- 2.1 *Leopold-Stich*, Augsburg, between 1719 and 1726. For a transcription and translation into English, see Table 2.1. 78
- 10.1 “Into Nagasaki, Japan” 入日本长崎图 222
- 10.2 “Washington, DC” 华盛顿图 230
- 10.3 “A man from ‘Wutu’ Nation (British colony)” 英属乌吐国人 232
- 10.4 “The chief of a native American tribe” 堙阵国酋长式 234
- 10.5 “A man from the mountain in ‘Mata’ (Dutch colony)” 吗挞山民 235
- 17.1 Presentation of Chokowakije according to encyclopaedia. Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 354
- 17.2 Menacing atmosphere in Chokowakije. Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 354
- 17.3 The average soldier of Chokowakije. Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 355
- 17.4 Auto-image: A peaceful Flemish countryside? Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 356
- 17.5 Exaggeration of clichés: The “Chinese” cow. Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 359
- 17.6a Between action and humility (str. 64). Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 362
- 17.6b Between action and humility (str. 65). Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 362
- 17.7 Opposing clichés of Japan: Tradition and high-tech side by side. Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 365
- 17.8a The camera projecting a stored, fictional image onto reality (str. 38). Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 367
- 17.8b The camera projecting a stored, fictional image onto reality (str. 39). Reproduction permitted by the copyright holder © 2019 Standaard Uitgeverij 367
- 19.1 Cover image of *Liederen voor het Vaderland*, 1792 393
- 19.2 Melody of *Mijn lief, zo schoon als ’t morgenlicht / Komt Orpheus, komt Amphion* 400
- 21.1 Friedrich Overbeck, *Italia und Germania* (1828) 425

Tables

- | | | |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1.1 | Non-English Other versus English Self | 60 |
| 1.2 | Non-Irish Other versus Irish Self | 64 |
| 2.1 | Text of the Leopold-Stich. Transcription: [Manuela M.] Reiter / [Franz K.] Stanzel. Source: Stanzel 1999, 40. English translation by Davor Dukić | 80 |
| 13.1 | Thirteen bipolar, hierarchical lines of difference (Lutz and Wenning 2001, 20) | 290 |
| 17.1 | <i>Suske en Wiske</i> albums set in the Far East | 358 |
| 20.1 | Gluck reviews in German-speaking areas (1768–1782) | 405 |

National Images in Visual Narratives: The (Re)Presentation of National Characters in the Flemish Comic Series *Suske en Wiske*

Christine Hermann

Abstract

In visual narratives such as comics, national *images* are actually depicted. While Franco-Belgian comics have been the subject of detailed studies regarding the national stereotypes they convey, Flemish comics have been largely ignored. This article focuses on three albums of the Flemish comic series *Suske en Wiske*, in which the heroes travel to a fictitious Eastern Bloc country, Japan, and China. It will examine how both hetero-images and auto-image are presented (visually, textually, and as part of the plot), and how comic characters may combine contradictory ethnotypes. As it will turn out, in the early album (1945) ethnotypes are perpetuated, whereas in later ones (1984, 2008) they are rather undermined.

Keywords

comic studies – Flemish comics – *Suske en Wiske* – national stereotypes – China – Japan – auto-image – hetero-image

The comic strip, as a visual medium, by definition produces images. The drawings or cartoons rely on simplification, and thus often resort to stereotypes in order to make the characters easily recognizable and to evoke common associations as images address the reader more directly than text. Many scholars actually consider stereotyping as inevitable in comic art: “the stereotype is a fact of life in the comics medium [...], an inescapable ingredient in most cartoons” (Eisner 2008, 11). In comics, “national images” are literally pictured. The comic, therefore, may seem especially prone to the dissemination of national stereotypes. As comics illustrate social discourse, both the transformation and the continuity of these stereotypes can be aptly studied using this medium

(Harbeck 2017, 257), and consequently, insights from comic analysis might prove useful for imagological research.

In a comic strip, national characters can be constructed both visually (setting, physical appearance, costume, physiognomy, and posture) and textually, through the narrator's voice in the block text, the kind of language used, and the manner of speaking (e.g. strong accent, faulty grammar). Based on Leerssen, who defines national character as a "temperamental or psychological predisposition motivating and explaining a specific behavioural profile" (2016, 17), it can also be part of the plot and determine the actantial roles assigned to foreign characters. As Leerssen (2000, 271, 275) points out, national characterization also takes shape in the polarity between Self and Other, in the interplay between an auto-image and a hetero-image. The relationship between Self and Other can be reflected in explicit statements about the Other made by the characters themselves or by the authorial voice in the block text. In a similar way, the auto-image can be either explicitly formulated in the statements of the heroes or the narrator's voice, be deduced from the contrast between protagonists and foreign characters, or referred to by means of allusions to national traditions or everyday life.

While Franco-Belgian comics (especially Hergé's *Tintin* series) have been the subject of numerous detailed studies regarding the national stereotypes they convey, Flemish comics (i.e. Belgian comics in the Dutch language) have been largely ignored by comics researchers. Whereas in the very first issues of *Tintin* (*Tintin au pays des Soviets*, 1929/1930; *Tintin au Congo*, 1931) national stereotypes are repeated and confirmed and the comic hero is clearly presented as a native of Brussels, in later comics (especially in *Le lotus bleu*, 1934/1935), a more nuanced image of China is drawn and Hergé starts to play with clichés. At the same time, the hero of the serial loses his "Belgishness" (cf. Baetens 2008, 115–119), for example due to the absence of Brussels as a recognizable setting and the removal of vernacular forms of French used in Belgium, thanks to which the comic could gain increased international popularity.

This article examines whether a similar development has taken place in Flemish comics, focusing on the most popular and longest running¹ Flemish comic series, namely *Suske en Wiske* (created in 1945 by Willy Vandersteen). It will investigate the use of national stereotypes in this series, considering the following questions: which hetero-images and which auto-images are conveyed, and by which techniques are they constructed? What is the relationship

¹ Four to five new albums are released per year, with more than 375 episodes published to date. The series is also popular in the Netherlands. In other countries, however, despite a substantial number of translations *Suske en Wiske* are considerably less well known.

between the Flemish “Self” (the Flemish heroes) and the foreign “Other” (members of other nations)? Are national stereotypes rather repeated and perpetuated, questioned and nuanced, or even subverted and undermined? Due to genre conventions, Suske and Wiske as the main heroes are always pictured as stronger, slimmer, and more valiant than others. Important areas of investigation beyond that are whether the various characters provide reciprocal help to each other and whether they have equal status. The analysis will take account of both visual and textual techniques of conveying hetero- and auto-images. In the following sections, these questions will be explored by focusing on the adventures of Suske and Wiske in an Eastern Bloc country and in the Far East.²

1 The *Suske en Wiske* Comics

Suske en Wiske is a humorous adventure comic in which two children travel to a wide variety of foreign countries. The comic series was created in 1945 by the Flemish comic artist Willy Vandersteen and continued successively by Paul Geerts (1974–2001), Marc Verhaegen (2001–2005), and afterward by a team led by Luc Morjaeu and Peter Van Gucht. It was first serialized in the Flemish daily *De Nieuwe Standaard*. From 1947 the comic appeared in the daily *De Standaard* before being published in album format by Standaard Uitgeverij. From 1948 to 1959, *Suske en Wiske* was also included in Hergé’s weekly comic magazine *Kuifje* (the Dutch-language sister publication of the Franco-Belgian comic magazine *Tintin*). As *Kuifje* was targeted to a more bourgeois youth and Hergé did not appreciate the earthy humour and vernacular speech, the drawing style had to be adapted to his *ligne claire* style,³ and the main characters had to be adapted as well and made less proletarian (cf. Standaard 2005, 9).

The main characters are a group of friends: the eponymous Suske and Wiske, her aunt Sidonia with whom they live, and their grown-up friends Lambik and Jerom. The young heroine Wiske (Flemish diminutive of Louise)

-
- 2 These destinations were chosen as they seem most appropriate for comparing the way in which national images are presented to the reader over the course of the years. On the one hand, the first adventure is considered (in which the heroes—similar to Tintin’s first adventure—travel to an Eastern Bloc country); on the other hand, the Far East (in fact, China and Japan), which forms the setting for several albums, thus offers an opportunity for a diachronic comparison across six decennia.
 - 3 Hergé’s *ligne claire* style features strong black lines and flat, saturated colours, without any hatching or shading, and combines cartoonish characters with realistic, detailed backgrounds.

is strong-headed, impulsive, and emotional. Suske (Flemish diminutive of Franciscus) is mostly calm, making him an emotional opposite to Wiske. The fact that the children do not live with their parents gives the authors more freedom for adventurous scenarios (cf. Welkom 1990, 7). They all live in Flanders, somewhere near Antwerp. It is there where most stories begin and end. As each episode is an adventure story, the plot follows the narrative structure identified by Vladimir Propp (21988) for folktales: after starting from a harmonic situation, a problem occurs, and the heroes leave home to solve the problem. Venturing into dangerous places and/or foreign countries, they are tested and meet helpers and opponents—finally, after various adventures they succeed in solving the problem and return home.⁴

To what extent is this series specifically “Flemish” (apart from the fact that it is produced and published in Flanders)? Firstly, some of the episodes are entirely set in Flanders, with realistically drawn locations and buildings. Occasionally Suske and Wiske also time travel into the history of their own country, e.g. visiting the famous Flemish painters. Elements of Flemish folklore also form the starting point of some stories. Secondly, in the early years, the strip often contained allusions to contemporary politics, sometimes in the serialized newspaper version only.⁵ With the Dutch market growing more important, the comic, however, was adapted to the Dutch audience (cf. e.g. Baetens 2005, 2008). Whereas in the early years, the characters spoke the Antwerp dialect, in the early 1960s they changed to standard Dutch (ABN, or Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands), while maintaining some characteristic features of the Flemish variety of the Dutch language, such as the diminutive on *-ke* (as in the names of Suske and Wiske) as well as other Flemish expressions, and sporadically one can still find references to contemporary affairs (as e.g. the cloning debate, or seasonal traditions).

The stories combine adventure, elements of comedy, fantasy, and science fiction. Furthermore, the series was also intended to convey knowledge about foreign countries and cultures (cf. Standaard 2005, 89). The comic is very humorous but often carries a somewhat moralizing undertone. Vandersteen promoted Christian values such as altruism, friendship, justice, and fairness. In his last will, he stipulated that the characters and atmosphere of the comic must be preserved (meaning no excessive violence, no racism, no sex, no drugs, no tobacco). These values and norms contribute to constructing the auto-image, with the travel plot further stressing the opposition of Self and Other. Among the countries that they visit are—alongside various countries

4 Cf. Screech (2005, 23) who identified Proppian structures in the *Adventures of Tintin*.

5 As Baetens (2005, 34) points out, Flemish comics in the period 1945–1960 typically engaged with topical social and political concerns, by contrast with French ones.

in Europe—Russia, North and South America, Africa, Australia, Nepal, Tibet, and India, as well as several countries in the Middle and Far East. Their first destination is, however, “Chokowakije.”

2 Suske and Wiske in an Eastern Bloc Country

The first comic, entitled *Rikki en Wiske in Chokowakije*⁶ and published between March and December 1945 in *De Nieuwe Standaard* (in 1946 it was released as an album), is set in a fictional country with seemingly Slavic features, apparently situated in the Eastern Bloc. The story reminds the (experienced) reader of *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* (*Tintin au pays des Soviets*, 1929/1930) by Hergé, which had served as inspiration for Vandersteen. This first adventure of Tintin had a clear moral message: to present the Soviet Union as negatively as possible, with the Soviets oppressing the people and manipulating elections and commonly practicing torture. A similar worldview is professed in *Rikki en Wiske in Chokowakije*. The story centres on the rocket tank, a fictional superweapon. Unfortunately, the plans for the rocket tank are stolen by the Chokowakian secret service, so Rikki is sent as a spy to Chokowakije to recover them. This story of espionage must be contextualized within the historical period shortly after World War II in Flanders and the growing tensions between East and West which eventually led to the Cold War.

The name Chokowakije probably alludes to Czechoslovakia (however, the country has a common border with Belgium, invoking perhaps Germany, nevertheless it was probably deemed safer to choose a Slavic country). The capital is called Kroko, derived from Cracow (in the newspaper edition the name of the capital was Praak, but this was considered too obvious of a reference). Proper names carry Slavic endings, for example mevrouw Kletsmeierski (Mrs. Gossipmonger). The characters speak “Chokowakian,” a fictional language with a certain resemblance to Slavic languages. Nouns and verbs carry endings such as -itska, -otchka, -osko, -owitz (e.g. “situatowitz,” situation, “telegramski,” telegram, etc.), laughter is transcribed as “hahanowitz,” and hiccups becomes “hik hikkowitz.” This “Chokowakian” recalls the fictional Syldavian language used by Hergé in *Le Sceptre d'Ottokar*.⁷

6 The male protagonist in the first issue is called Rikki. Rikki was clearly inspired by Tintin and resembles him very much; from the next issue on he was replaced by Suske.

7 Tintin's adventure *Le sceptre d'Ottokar* (*King Ottokar's Sceptre*), published between August 1938 and August 1939, was intended by Hergé as a satirical criticism of the expansionist policies of Nazi Germany.

The country is initially introduced by means of a page from an encyclopaedia. The book in which Rikki reads about Chokowakije calls the country a “kopperatifski” regime, but the accompanying illustration of a gun-toting soldier evokes a military dictatorship (see Figure 17.1).



FIGURE 17.1
Presentation of Chokowakije according to encyclopaedia.

© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

Chokowakije is portrayed as a rogue state with a totalitarian political system; the secret police and intelligence service control everything. In the panels, the Chokowakians are most often pictured as soldiers in uniform. Apart from military installations (numerous military tanks, watchtowers with searchlights, airplanes throwing bombs), the country is backward. The absence of major buildings or natural landscapes evokes a dull, grim ambience. The worm’s-eye view intensifies the menacing atmosphere by visual means (see Figure 17.2).



FIGURE 17.2 Menacing atmosphere in Chokowakije.

© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

The threatening picture is, however, softened through humour: Similar to the stereotype of the *Good Soldier Švejk*, the average soldier does not behave very respectfully toward his superiors (see Figure 17.3).



FIGURE 17.3 The average soldier of Chokowakije.
© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

As the figure shows, the inscription on the wall reads, “Hang the sergeantowitz.” The soldiers on duty are busy playing cards and determined to finish their game before starting to execute the alleged spies. Such a “go-slow” seems to be the only possible form of protest. Reijnen and Leerssen call the *Good Soldier Švejk* (a novel by Jaroslav Hašek, 1912) the “national hero symbolizing resilience, wit and surreptitious resistance of a subaltern and powerless nation” (2007, 137). That is exactly the way the Chokowakians are depicted. Their national character is presented as lazy and lacking any initiative; they are just oppressed subordinates waiting for orders (and, in fact, they do not have any other option). The only positive figure is a peasant, whom Wiske rescues from a wild bull and who shows gratitude and hospitality toward them. Furthermore, it is a bureaucratic system: the national emblem accordingly reads: “Meeroz stempelitz, minderoz werkitz”—the more rubber-stamping, the less working. The villain is not an individual person but rather the political regime itself and its military representatives, who are characterized as cowards, avoiding any danger for themselves. There are no strong individuals in the foreign nation. The Flemish heroes are in every respect superior, as is their home country, which they never tire of praising.

The auto-image is strongly marked as “Belgian”⁸ (again similarly to *Tintin au pays des Soviets*) and is revealed by explicit statements: when the

8 In this comic, the auto-image is still called “Belgian,” not “Flemish.”

Chokowakian president is trapped, he pleads: “Dear Belgians, you won’t kill us, will you?”⁹ Wiske replies: “Certainly not, the Belgians are not as bloodthirsty as that.”¹⁰ Rikki is constantly drawing comparisons with his home country where everything is better: “Concerning organization, you can learn a lot from us in Antwerp!”¹¹ Rikki and Wiske are convinced of the superiority of both their country and themselves. They appear ethnocentric and chauvinist, and are very happy to return to Belgium: “When we have passed the bridge, we are in our home country!”¹² “Hooray, we are in Belgium, we are safe!”¹³ Their words are, however, contradicted by the image, as in the next panel we see a brick fall on Wiske’s head. On the last page, they ride toward Antwerp through a peaceful Flemish countryside with peasants happily waving to them (see Figure 17.4). This rustic idyll forms a sharp contrast to the dreary Chokowakia they left behind.



FIGURE 17.4 Auto-image: A peaceful Flemish countryside?

© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

This comic stresses the differences; the Chokowakians are shown as having nothing in common with the Belgians. The comic relies on binaries, ascribing only negative characteristics to the Chokowakians and only positive ones to the Belgians. The opposition of Self/Other constitutes a clear-cut distinction between good and evil, reflecting a Europe divided by the Iron Curtain. Similarly to *Tintin au pays des Soviets*, the negative stereotypes of the (communist) Other are confirmed and presented as “fact,” with the plot following

-
- 9 All translations are mine. Original quote: “Lieve Belgenowitz! Jullie gaan ons toch niet vermoordenski?” (n.p.).
- 10 “Welnee hoor! Zo bloeddorstig zijn de Belgen niet!” (n.p.).
- 11 “Voor wat de organisatie betreft kun je bij ons in Antwerpen nog een lesje komen nemen!” (n.p.).
- 12 “Als we de brug gepasseerd hebben zijn we in het vaderland!” (n.p.).
- 13 “Hoera! [...] We zijn in België! We zijn veilig!” (n.p.).

Cold War ideology.¹⁴ The comic most probably serves national self-ascertainment—trying to stabilize a sense of national identity by denigrating the Other. It has a propagandist function, similarly to the first *Tintin* issue. In the case of Hergé, however, this attitude changes when it comes to the depiction of another national peoples, namely the Chinese.

3 Suske and Wiske in the Far East

Whereas in *Tintin au pays des Soviets*, Hergé presents an entirely negative image of the Chinese as brutal torturers with long pigtails, a completely different picture is drawn in *Le lotus bleu* (serialized in 1934/1935, published as an album in 1936). This is thanks to Hergé's friendship with a Chinese art student and his subsequent meticulous research, resulting in mimetic-realistic drawings of the setting. In *Le lotus bleu*, Tintin and his Chinese friend jointly laugh at the stereotypes that Westerners harbour toward China, namely that all Chinese are cruel and fond of torturing others, that all women have bound feet, and that female babies are drowned in the river. This demonstrates a clear advancement with regard to the use of national stereotypes (from an uncritical repetition of traditional clichés to explicitly mocking them), and Hergé's satirical use of stereotypes has often been pointed out in research literature.¹⁵ A closer look, however, reveals that it is only Tintin (the white European hero) who plays with the clichés cherished by his compatriots. He is the one who explains these prejudices to his friend and then they both laugh at them. The "Other" (the Chinese boy) does not get the opportunity to ponder the clichés from the Chinese perspective (he can only simply express his belief that all Europeans are evil, which Tintin denies). The white European explains the world and his superiority is once again underlined. At the same time another nation is presented as vicious, namely the Japanese. This negative national image is politically motivated (the comic was written during the Sino-Japanese war, when parts of China were occupied by Japan) and the Japanese Embassy in Brussels even entered a protest against the comic (Boudineau 1992, 27).

Apart from the depiction in early *Tintin* comics, the national image of the Chinese is, generally speaking, not too positive in the Western world. Schweiger (2007, 126–131) has listed a wide range of common stereotypes about China,

14 Leroy has pointed out the "anti-communist bend of Cold-War Belgian comics" (2010, 16). That the East/West binary was so strong as early as in Vandersteen's comic from 1945, still on the eve of the Cold War, is probably due to the influence of *Tintin's* adventure in Russia (1929).

15 Cf. e.g. Boudineau (1992, 25).

TABLE 17.1 *Suske en Wiske* albums set in the Far East

| Year ^a | Title | Author | Setting | Abbreviated hereafter as |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1948 | <i>De witte uil</i> (The white owl) | Vandersteen | China | <i>WU</i> |
| 1957 | <i>De stemmenrover</i> (The voice-robber) | Vandersteen | Japan | <i>SR</i> |
| 1960 | <i>De gouden cirkel</i> (The golden circle) | Vandersteen | China, Japan, other Asian countries | <i>GC</i> |
| 1963 | <i>De sissende sampan</i> (The hissing sampan) | Vandersteen | Hong Kong | <i>SS</i> |
| 1984 | <i>Het dreigende ding</i> (The ominous thingy) | Geerts | Japan ^b | <i>DrD</i> |
| 2008 | <i>De dartele draak</i> (The cheerful dragon) | Van Gucht and Morjau | China | <i>DaD</i> |

a This is the year of the first (journal) publication; the album was published either in the same or the following year.

b Strictly speaking, Japan is not the setting here, but the comic features Japanese characters as protagonists.

ranging from the polite Chinese, passing via treachery, greed, and absolutism to the “yellow peril,” inhuman practices, and oppression, which also had an impact on the depiction of Chinese people in cartoons. According to the pictorial tradition (studied mainly with regard to the image of Asians featured in US comics), Chinese characters are usually depicted with a bright yellow skin colour,¹⁶ slanting eyes, buckteeth, and a long queue (a braided pigtail, worn by Chinese men). They are dressed in a traditional costume, wearing either a coolie-garb with Chinese conical hats or richly embroidered gowns (cf. Kunka 2017; Song 2010).

As *Suske and Wiske* travel to the Far East (primarily to China and Japan) several times (see Table 17.1), it might be interesting to investigate whether (and if so, how) the national image of China and Japan varies over the course of time.

16 The bright yellow colouring might be due to the printing technique of that time. As Kunka (2017, 278) points out, comics used a limited four-colour plate that did not allow for realistic gradations of skin colour. Thus the skin of European characters was kind of bright pink, whereas Asians were bright yellow.

3.1 *Suske and Wiske in China*

In both *wu* and *ss* Lambik gets kidnapped by Chinese gangsters. In *wu* Suske and Wiske follow him to China, in search of the “Hidden Empire” of the Long-Queues, who oppress the Short-Queue people. In *gc* the Flemish friends travel through six Asian countries in search of a special medicine. *ss* is set in Hong Kong (at that time a British Crown colony, now part of the People’s Republic of China). Within this political context, another nationality comes into play, namely English/British: an agent of the British Intelligence Service is depicted as “very British” (“An umbrella and a bowler hat; that’s precisely the calling card of an Englishman”¹⁷), complemented by a cup of tea and a formal business suit with tie. The British officials in Hong Kong prove to be very helpful; this remarkably positive image of the British might be related to the UK’s application for EEC membership in 1963 (the year in which this comic was published), although the application was declined at that time. Hong Kong is depicted as an area of contrasts: enormous skyscrapers next to miserable huts, rickshaws and traffic jams, and a high level of absolute poverty in the slums where children are starving and the poor are opium addicts.

In these comics, all Chinese characters are portrayed with bright yellow skin, as slit-eyed and pigtailed, with their high cheekbones emphasized, most notably in *wu*, where all the Chinese depicted (except the princess) feature striking buckteeth. Even a mottled “Chinese cow” has slanting eyes, buckteeth, and yellow skin (Figure 17.5).

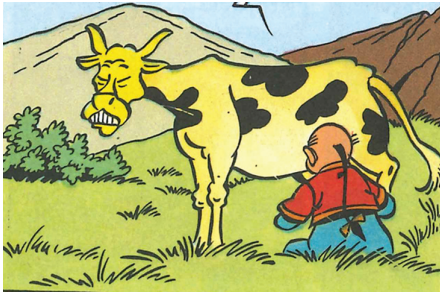


FIGURE 17.5
Exaggeration of clichés: The “Chinese” cow.
© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

Whereas the bright yellow skin of Chinese people is not unusual and conforms to the pictorial tradition, the yellow skin of a cow (combined with its Asian facial features) makes the mocking evident and undermines the cliché, as it is obvious that this cannot be true. The exaggeration functions as an ironical statement.

17 “Een regenscherm en een bolhoed, precies het visitekaartje van een Engelsman” (*ss* 1963, 9).

Chinese characters are marked as foreign not only visually but also in their speech: in the first speech balloon in *wu*, only Chinese letters are depicted, with the second one also featuring a Dutch translation. Later on, however, the Chinese speak simply Dutch without any accent. In *ss* the transcribed Chinese words are followed by a translation (e.g. “Ch-eng chaw! Zet u!” (Sit down!), *ss* 1963, 29), using phonetical spelling for genuine Chinese words.¹⁸ Apart from providing a *couleur locale* and marking the “foreignness” of a character, the Chinese language may also serve as comical element: when Lambik unintentionally smokes the “pipe of the fools” (*wu*), he grows a pigtail and speaks a kind of pseudo-Chinese, preceding each noun with “tsjing tsjang tsjoeng” or similar. Another humorous element is the frequent use of puns on names. Character names are made to sound “Chinese” and at the same time carry a meaning in Dutch or allude to real persons, such as the name “Sjam Foe-sjek” (*wu*) which sounds similar to “Chiang Kai-shek,” the leader of the Republic of China between 1928 and 1975.¹⁹ Sjam Foe-sjek is a double pun, as it also alludes to the Flemish dialect expression *sjamfoeter* (a good-for-nothing).

In the early comics, there are frequently clear-cut binaries among national characters, who conform to the opposing categories “good/bad,” “collective/individual.” In *wu* there are both good (Short-Queues) and bad people (Long-Queues) among the Chinese. At the end of the comic, the Long-Queues change to the good, caused by an external, miraculous intervention. A different approach is used to soften the negative image in *ss*: though Suske and Wiske are repeatedly attacked by Chinese gangsters, the instigator and principal villain turns out to be Krimson, the usual antagonist and supervillain of this comic series (who is of Flemish origin). In a similar vein, in *gc*, the Chinese villains work for a Western company. When they get rid of the foreign chief villain, they become friends. *wu*²⁰ features a high-ranking character (Princess Tsji Tsji) within the foreign nation who stands out as individual, who is active, smart, and takes the initiative, whereas the mass of the people act as group, and as passive followers. Her actions are an example of reciprocal help: Suske and Wiske help her to regain her throne and, vice versa, she is able to bail them out on several occasions. Crucially, however, even the outstanding individuals belong to their own “group” and act on their behalf.²¹

18 Zuòxià = “sit down,” according to the *Collins English to Chinese Dictionary*.

19 At the time of publication, a civil war raged in China between the nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek and the communists led by Mao Zedong. After their defeat, the nationalists retreated to Taiwan.

20 The same technique is used in the later comic *De dartele draak*.

21 Two further stories that take place in China (*De vlijtige vlinder*, The busy butterfly, 1975; *De klinkende klokken*, The ringing clock, 1992; both written by Geerts), are not included in this

The positive auto-image is most obvious in *WU*: Wiske is willing to sacrifice her life for the people, with the resigned sigh: “what can I do, either you are taught charity or you are not!”²² Similarly, in *SS* Lambik is afraid but decides nevertheless to help, arguing: “I am a human being, after all.”²³ His altruism provides a striking contrast to the cruel and either ruthless or helpless Chinese characters. But a more negative auto-image can also be found when in *WU* a police officer who is about to arrest Suske and Wiske suddenly notices that it is “Six o’clock! This is the end of my working hours! [...] How lucky I am to have noticed it just in time! Really, I had almost worked overtime!”²⁴ or when a dockworker puts down a heavy grain sack, saying: “I will first ask around whether there doesn’t happen to be a strike right now!”²⁵ The Flemish auto-image conveyed by these statements is certainly not that of the workaholic.

Forty-five years later, Suske and Wiske once again travel to China: in *DaD* Suske and Wiske go to ancient China and rescue a poor village from a band of robbers. They search for the Holy Temple, accompanied by Jung Ding, the daughter of the village leader. The Chinese people are again pictured according to the traditional visual stereotype, and the first Chinese man whom the friends meet, mixes up “r-” and “l-” sounds: “Gegloet, o eelbiedwaardige vleemdeling” (*DaD* 2008, str. 11;²⁶ approximately: Be gleeted, oh honourable foleignel). Lambik answers in what he thinks to be the same manner of speaking, but his patronizing (albeit well-meant) assimilation is not appreciated by the Chinese man who feels offended: “De eelbiedwaardige vleemdeling spot met mijn splaakgeblek” (*DaD* 2008, str. 12: the honourable foleignel makes fun of my speech defect). The well-known cliché is used here as comical element, but at the same time it is presented as being true. As Leerssen has noticed, any ironic, half-mocking use is by the same token also half-serious, and thus “acknowledge[s] and reinforce[s] the currency of the prejudice [it] claims to transcend” (2000, 275).

The posture of Jung Ding reflects another national stereotype: the Chinese girl always keeps her eyes cast down modestly and hides her hands in her

analysis since they largely conform to Vandersteen’s stereotypical depiction of Chinese characters. In these comics, the Flemish protagonists further reveal a rather dismissive attitude toward the Chinese characters, when repeatedly referring to them as “spleet-oogjes” (Chinks) or “rijstlikkers” (rice eaters).

22 “Wat wil je ook? Je bent in naastenliefde opgevoed of je bent het niet!” (*WU* 1948, 53).

23 “Ik ben toch een MENS” [emphasis in the original] (*SS* 1963, 45).

24 “Zes uur! Maar dan is mijn diensttijd om! [...] Wat een geluk dat ik dat nog nét zag! Ik zou waarachtig bijna overuren gemaakt hebben!” (*WU* 1948, 14).

25 “eens eerst gaan horen of er soms niet gestaakt wordt!” (*WU* 1948, 14).

26 This comic contains no page numbers, only the strokes are numbered.

sleeves. When noticing a potentially dangerous situation, however, she moves freely and vigorously to combat the threat. Once this has been done, she immediately returns to the modest posture of a humble, discrete Chinese woman (see Figures 17.6a and 17.6b).



FIGURE 17.6A
Between action and humility (str. 64).
© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

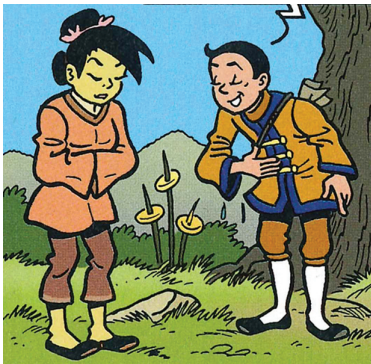


FIGURE 17.6B
Between action and humility (str. 65).
© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

Jung Ding thus combines the opposing clichés of the submissive, passive woman on the one hand *and* the active, fighting woman on the other. She, therefore, alternatively conforms to and contradicts the female national cliché.

The active role of Jung Ding and her selfless character emphasize more that which she has in common with Suske and Wiske than that which separates them. Their shared values are stressed and portrayed as more important than skin colour. Jung Ding saves Suske and Wiske repeatedly from death and, despite her humble appearance, matches them in bravery and altruism. While, however, it may at first appear that Flemish and Chinese characters are presented as equal, this is in fact not the case. Although the various cultural achievements of the Chinese people play a decisive role in the plot, they are

not presented as Chinese inventions. Instead, it seems as if the Flemish heroes had invented them: the list of ingredients for making gunpowder is dictated by Suske; acupuncture is invented by Wiske by chance; and the shadow play (by which they frighten and chase away the robbers) is also staged by Wiske. Thus practically no achievement (except kung fu and the art of rice cooking) is credited to Chinese culture; all inventions commonly perceived to be Chinese are initiated by the European heroes. The Flemish heroes appropriate the Chinese inventions as their own—and thus prove superior.

Whereas in *wu* stereotypes are repeated and clear-cut oppositions confirmed, and in *ss* all inhabitants of Hong Kong are presented as poor and helpless, in *DaD* one strong character fulfils in turn all the contradictory national clichés. While Jung Ding as individual is on a par with the Flemish heroes, the European heroes are clearly superior to the Chinese people, bringing all the Chinese inventions to them.

3.2 *Suske and Wiske in Japan*

The third case study is situated in Japan. The traditional national imagery comprises women in kimonos and gentle geisha's preparing tea but also high-tech electronics, commitment to one's company, and extreme industriousness. According to Littlewood (2007, 201), Japan is commonly seen as a nation of contrast, in which images of cherry blossoms and economic progress (accompanied by aggressive expansion) work in contradiction to each other.

Japan serves as the setting for two Vandersteen comics (*sR* and *GC*), as well as for one later album by Geerts (*DrD*).²⁷ In *sR* the Japanese astrologer Komikio robs Lambik's voice. In search of the missing voice, Suske and Wiske travel to Japan and arrive in the medieval kingdom of Princess Sholo-Fly. The narrator introduces the setting as: "Somewhere in Japan [...], separated from civilization by fierce mountains."²⁸ This evaluative block text constructs a sharp contrast with the civilized world. In the same vein, stressing the differences to Western behaviour, the first panel of the Japanese protagonist, which shows the princess in the temple respectfully bowing in front of a statue, makes fun of her devoutness in a direct address to the reader: "Give it a try yourself, in whatever position ... a statue made from stone does not speak!"²⁹

27 The short info-strip *Sony-San* (1986) set in the Sony factory, a special edition on the occasion of the twenty-five-year jubilee of Sony in the Netherlands, is not considered in this article.

28 "Ergens in Japan [...] door woeste bergen van de beschaving gescheiden" (*sR* 1957, 5).

29 "Probeer het zelf maar in welke houding ook ... Een stenen beeld praat niet!" (*sR* 1957, 5).

Characters are clear-cut in *SR*: the only villain is Japanese, namely the astrologer Komikio, whereas the princess (dressed in kimono, her black hair pinned up to a bun and fixed with two wooden sticks, with lemon-yellow skin and slit eyes) is always virtuous. She is good, but helpless, and constantly relies on the spirits of her ancestors (or the temple statue or her astrologer) for advice. Komikio's politeness is feigned, but his posture reveals his character: he walks with big steps and uses wide gestures, evoking aggressiveness, while the princess always keeps her arms near to her body in a submissive posture, representing a respectable Japanese woman.

Once again, the character names provide opportunities for word play: the name "Sholo-fly" evokes Madame Butterfly and, thereby, the cliché of the submissive Japanese woman. At the same time, it is a pun on "Solo," a well-known Belgian margarine brand. In the palace of the Princess, Lambik changes his name to "Lamoebikoe," thus adapting it to the Asian pronunciation habit of inserting a vowel between two adjacent consonants. Similarly, the names of Suske and Wiske are adapted to "Wisoeeka" and "Soesoeko."

In all the comics set in Japan, the generous use of polite phrases strikes the reader. Especially the adjective "honorabele" (honourable) can be added to any noun (not only used for persons). Frequently, it is used ironically, to exaggerate and mock the proverbial politeness that Japanese people are said to practice. In *SR*, for instance, a fisherman comments that "the honourable drowned person [...] is full of honourable water,"³⁰ while he is busy pumping an incredible amount of water out of Lambik after having saved him from drowning, and concludes: "If it were beer, I would think that he is an honourable Fleming!,"³¹ consistent with the reputation of the Flemings for drinking large amounts of beer. In the more recent album *DrD* (1984), the Japanese villain uses the same polite expression when he speaks of the "honourable camera," the "honourable brain" (i.e. the computer), and even the "honourable rope"—his politeness is just a verbal formulation, used to make the readers laugh. The exaggerated deployment of stereotypes of politeness simultaneously affirms and undercuts the polite effect through irony.

In this recent album, the setting is different. Here it is not Suske and Wiske who visit a foreign country, but rather a Japanese girl, Miako, comes to Flanders. Her sister is very ill and the only way to heal her is to provide pictures from her favourite book *A Dog of Flanders*, which tells the story of Nello and his dog

30 "de honorabele drenkeling [...] zit vol honorabel water" (*SR* 1957, 16).

31 "Als het bier was, zou ik denken dat hij een honorabele Vlaming is!" (*SR* 1957, 16).

Patrasche in nineteenth-century Flanders.³² She brings a robot-camera with her, which is able to take photographs from the past by first projecting them onsite. But Watanabe, an industrial spy paid for by her father's competitors, manages to steal all the pictures she has already taken. Suske and Wiske, together with Miako, use the time machine to travel back into Flanders' past, right into the period in which the story took place, so the camera can take pictures directly when the events occur. In the end, Nello and Patrasche die in front of Rubens's painting *The Descent of the Cross* in the cathedral of Antwerp. Through taking a picture of the dead friends, the camera fulfils its task and returns to the present, and Miako travels home to Japan.

Miako combines clichés of the old and of the new Japan: she is dressed in a kimono, is polite, humble, and at the same time active, self-assured and assertive, giving orders to the camera and possessing a considerable amount of IT knowledge. This combination of contradictory hetero-images is also reflected in Miako's house, where ikebana flower arrangements stand next to ultra-modern computer systems, linking tradition and technological progress (see Figure 17.7).

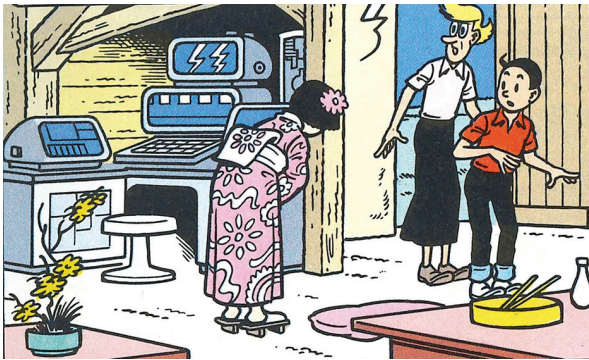


FIGURE 17.7 Oposing clichés of Japan: Tradition and high-tech side by side.

© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

Clichés are both presented and deconstructed: they hold true (kimono, politeness) and are at the same time subverted (Miako is not at all as submissive

32 The comic is based on *A Dog of Flanders*, a novel written by English author Marie Louise de la Ramée in 1872. The novel is extremely popular in Japan and South Korea (where it is considered a children's classic), and well known in the English-speaking countries as well. In Belgium, however, it is practically unknown. In 1975 it was adapted into an animated television series that aired on Japanese TV.

as she appears to be, Watanabe is not at all respectful). There is thus both a good and a bad Japanese character; but the bad one is able to change (out of his intrinsic motivation, not by force or magic, as in *wU*). When Watanabe attacks Miako, the camera protects the girl and Watanabe feels shame that an electronic device is more human than he is, begs her forgiveness, and they travel back to Japan as friends. Again, both the good and the bad characters are acting as members of a group (for Miako, family ties motivate her actions, while Watanabe is acting on behalf of his company). Miako as active traveler has an equal status to Suske and Wiske. Their shared common values such as loyalty, friendship, and altruism are seen to be more important than their differences, and thus unite the Flemish heroes with Miako. “Friendship and faithfulness will never die!”³³ Suske accordingly concludes in the last panel.

In this comic, the “image” per se becomes the topic. The protagonist in the main part of the comic is a camera, a high-tech device, invented and built in Japan. Electronic high-tech devices are certainly the kind of product most often associated with Japan. At the same time, the cliché of the constantly photographing Japanese tourists is evoked. Objects and events are only considered “real” if a photo has been taken to bring back home as evidence, so it is the “image” which makes the object or event “real.” Though it is in no way intended as a treatise on picture theory,³⁴ the comic is all about images: the image of Flanders (including the famous paintings) as conveyed by the novel the comic refers to; the image of Japan (in the form of the photograph received from Japan at the end); and the images as seen through the eyes of the camera, the image-producing device par excellence.

What is most notable is that the auto-image is primarily constructed through foreign eyes: it is not their own auto-image (how the Flemish heroes see themselves) but an “imported” one (how the Japanese—presumably—see them, according to the image propagated via the novel). The Flemings are looked upon by foreigners who bring their image of the Flemish along with them, in order to take it home again, unchanged. The authentication process is reversed, the “reality” has to match the image (they need their expectations confirmed), and so at the same time both the cliché and the reality are proven

33 “Vriendschap en trouw sterven nooit!” (*DrD* 1984, str. 219—this comic contains no page numbers, only the strokes are numbered).

34 Picture theory (*Bildtheorie* in German) is concerned with the nature of images and pictures. “Picture” is understood as the concrete form in which an image appears; according to Lambert Wiesing, a picture is characterized by its visibility (while images are not necessarily “visible”).

true. The Japanese image of Flanders is reflected back to its source, and the scene in the cathedral is quite illuminating in this respect (see Figures 17.8a and 17.8b): the camera literally projects a stored image (of the characters from the novel) onto the cathedral; in other words, it projects the image it brought along onto the reality, and then takes its photograph, as proof of the preconceived (mental) image. This is perhaps indicative of how processes of national stereotyping work.



FIGURE 17.8A The camera projecting a stored, fictional image onto reality (str. 38).
© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

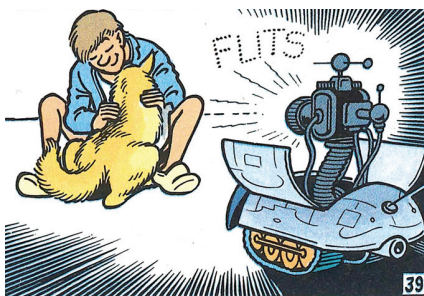


FIGURE 17.8B The camera projecting a stored, fictional image onto reality (str. 39).
© 2019 STANDAARD UITGEVERIJ

4 Conclusion

Whereas in the first issue of *Suske and Wiske*, stereotypes are uncritically repeated and perpetuated, in later issues they become more nuanced and are even undermined, without, however, being rejected completely. While a

certain amount of clichés are undoubtedly reproduced in all comics, *Suske en Wiske in Chokowakije* on the whole uncritically repeats, endorses, and perpetuates stereotypes, and a clear-cut Self/Other binary is aligned with that of good/evil. All the later comics are more nuanced, and the characters more ambivalent: the national images are shown as heterogeneous—there are good and bad persons among foreign nations (and most often the bad ones are finally converted to the good), and they become more active agents and helpers rather than passive victims or opponents. In the Vandersteen comics, however, the leadership clearly remains with the Flemish heroes. Stereotypes may even be subverted—confirmed *and* contradicted at the same time, when characters combine contradictory characteristics (traditional and innovative clichés coinciding in one character) or are shown to have more similarities than differences with one another. In stressing what people have in common rather than foregrounding their differences, the comic challenges the binary patterns of thoughts on which these clichés are based. While in the early comics, the auto-image is explicitly marked as Flemish (either seriously, as in *Suske en Wiske in Chokowakije*, or ironically as in *SR*), in the later ones (*DaD* and *DrD*), the “Flemish” identity gives way to universal human values.

The development in the use of stereotypes is obvious and similar to that observed in *Tintin* (from uncritically endorsing to questioning stereotypes), but it goes even a step further because in several (more recent) *Suske en Wiske* comics, foreign characters are depicted as being of equal status. Whether clichés are repeated, confirmed, nuanced, or deconstructed cannot, however, only be linked to the date of publication but relates even more significantly to the author. *DrD* (by Geerts) can be considered as the most advanced concerning the use of clichés³⁵ but was published as early as 1984. Van Gucht and Morjaeu in *DaD* (released in 2008), in contrast, despite the obvious ambivalence of the national characters, make the Flemish heroes again appear superior.

Bibliography

- Baetens, Jan. 2008. “North and South in Belgian Comics.” *European Comic Art* 1, no. 2: 111–122.
- Baetens, Jan. 2005. “De la bande dessinée franco-belge à la bande dessinée en Belgique.” In “Dossier thématique: La bande dessinée belge,” special issue, *Études francophones* 20, no. 1: 27–38.

35 This is true for his depiction of Japanese characters but not with regard to China, as the albums taking place in China mainly repeat the traditional stereotypes.

- Beller, Manfred, and Joep Leerssen. 2007. *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters; A Critical Survey*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi.
- Boudineau, Jean-Pierre. 1992. "Hergé, Extrême-Orient et bande dessinée." *Mappemonde* 4: 23–28.
- Collins English to Chinese Dictionary*. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-chinese/> [June 30, 2021].
- Eisner, Will. 2008. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*. New York: Norton.
- Harbeck, Matthias. 2017. "Comics als Gegenstand der historischen Stereotypenforschung." In *Geschichte im Comic. Befunde—Theorien—Erzählweisen*, edited by Bernd Dolle-Weinkauff, 253–272. Berlin: Bachmann.
- Kunka, Andrew J. 2017. "Comics, Race, and Ethnicity." In *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, edited by Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin, 275–284. New York/London: Routledge.
- Leerssen, Joep. 2016. "Imagology: On Using Ethnicity to Make Sense of the World." *Iberic@l / Revue d'études ibériques et ibéro-américaines* 10: 13–31. <http://iberical.paris-sorbonne.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Pages-from-Iberic@l-no10-automne-2016-Final-2.pdf>.
- Leerssen, Joep. 2007. "Honour/Shame." In *Imagology*, edited by Beller and Leerssen, 334–335.
- Leerssen, Joep. 2000. "The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey." *Poetics Today* 21, no. 2: 267–292.
- Leroy, Fabrice. 2010. "Yves Chaland and Luc Cornillon's Rewriting of Classical Belgian Comics in *Captivant*: From Graphic Homage to Implicit Criticism." *International Journal of Comic Art* 12, no. 2–3: 2–24.
- Littlewood, Ian. 2007. "Japan." In *Imagology*, edited by Beller and Leerssen, 200–202.
- Propp, Vladimir. 1988. *Morphology of the Folktale*. 2nd edition. Austin/London: University of Texas Press.
- Reijnen, Carlos, and Joep Leerssen. 2007. "Czechs." In *Imagology*, edited by Beller and Leerssen, 135–138.
- Schweiger, Army. 2007. "China." In *Imagology*, edited by Beller and Leerssen, 126–131.
- Screech, Matthew. 2005. "Constructing the Franco-Belgian Hero: Hergé's *Aventures de Tintin*." In *Masters of the Ninth Art: Bandes dessinées and Franco-Belgian Identity*, by Screech, 17–51. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vjkvf.6> [June 30, 2021].
- Song, Min Hyoung. 2010. "'How Good It Is to Be a Monkey': Comics, Racial Formation, and *American Born Chinese*." *Mosaic* 43, no. 1: 73–92.
- Standaard Uitgeverij, ed. 2005. *Suske en Wiske 60 jaar!* Antwerp: Standaard.
- Welkom in de wereld van Suske en Wise*. 1990. *Tentoonstelling Casino-Kursaal Oostende*, 2–6–90/2–9–90. Antwerp: Standaard.