

An Analysis of Hergé's Portrayal of Various Racial Groups in *The Adventures of Tintin:*

*The Blue Lotus*

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One of the most controversial comic book authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is George Remi, otherwise known as Hergé. Hergé was author of the world-loved comic book series *The Adventures of Tintin*. Since its start in 1929, *Tintin* has sold over 120 million books in more than 50 languages. Originally published in French, the series follows the young reporter Tintin and his dog Snowy on their adventures throughout the world fighting crime and corruption. Much of the controversy surrounding the series is due to questions concerning the influence of extreme right-wing ideologies in a number of *Tintin* comics. *Tintin au Pays Soviets* and *Tintin au Congo* are the largest testaments for Hergé's conservatism. The very first *Tintin* released, *Tintin au Pays Soviets*, was largely a work of anti-Communist propaganda and right-wing rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> The second installment in the series, *Tintin au Congo*, was no less controversial due to the pro-colonial attitudes of the comic and the highly racist depictions of African natives in the Belgian Congo.<sup>2</sup> Hergé denounced these two comics as youthful follies.<sup>3</sup> But the primary concern of most scholars and fans today is whether or not the devices used to promote right-wing agendas can be traced throughout the series.<sup>4</sup> This paper will explore the basic techniques by which Hergé promotes his political attitudes towards various groups in the fifth *Tintin* comic book, *The Blue Lotus*.

By taking a brief look at Hergé's career as a cartoonist, we can see the influence of political propaganda in his work. As previously mentioned, the first *Tintin* comic, *Tintin au Pays Soviets*, was largely a work of anti-communist propaganda. The comic

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<sup>1</sup> Hugo Frey, "Tintin: the Extreme Right-Wing and the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Debates," *Modern & Contemporary France* 7, no. 3 (1999): 361.

<sup>2</sup> William Cook, "Picture Post", *New Statesman* 133, no. 4672 (2004): 38.

<sup>3</sup> William Cook, "Picture Post", *New Statesman*: 38.

<sup>4</sup> Hugo Frey, "Tintin: the Extreme Right-Wing", *Modern & Contemporary France*: 361.

first appeared in 1929 as a serial in the Belgian Catholic newspaper *Le Petit Vingtième*.<sup>5</sup> Written initially as a children's comic, *Tintin au Pays Soviets*, took a strong right-of-center view against Stalinist Russia, denouncing Communism's absurdities and wrongdoings.<sup>6</sup> The comic was a hit, giving the *Tintin* series its start.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that the popularity of *Tintin au Pays Soviets* taught Hergé the influence of propaganda comics in the public, a lesson that may have influenced his later writing in *The Blue Lotus*. In the meantime, Hergé's involvement in creating propaganda continued through the 1930s, during which time he illustrated political pamphlets for the Belgian fascist Léon Degrelle.<sup>8</sup> The degree to which Hergé's relation with Degrelle was strictly commercial is still in question.<sup>9</sup> However, it is clear that by the time Hergé set out in making *The Blue Lotus*, he was already well-learned in the art of making propaganda.

It was the influence of Hergé's friend Chang Chong-Jen that inspired him to write *The Blue Lotus*. Chang was a fellow artist studying at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels.<sup>10</sup> Hergé was introduced to Chang by a Belgian priest who, having read *Tintin au Congo*, hoped the meeting of the two would open Hergé's eyes to the reality of race and cultural misconceptions.<sup>11</sup> Their encounter was a success beyond the priest's grandest predictions. Hergé and Chang became fast friends, and Hergé was soon captivated by Chinese culture.<sup>12</sup> As he took inspiration from Chinese pen and ink drawings, his drawing style began to evolve. Known among European comic book artists

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<sup>5</sup> Hugo Frey, "Tintin: the Extreme Right-Wing", *Modern & Contemporary France*: 361.

<sup>6</sup> William Cook, "Picture Post", *New Statesman*: 38.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Martinez, "Tintin's Final Fling with Fate," *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2004, sec. C, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Hugo Frey, "Contagious Colonial Diseases in Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin*", *Modern & Contemporary France*, 12, no. 2 (2004): 177.

<sup>9</sup> Hugo Frey, "Tintin: the Extreme Right-Wing", *Modern & Contemporary France*: 361.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Riding, "Chang Chong-Jen, 93, Model for Character in Tintin Comic [Obituary (Obit)]," *The New York Times*, 10 October 1998, sec. A, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Riding, "Chang Chong-Jen", *The New York Times*, sec. A, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Riding, "Chang Chong-Jen", *The New York Times*, sec. A, p. 13.

as “clear-line” drawing, the Eastern influenced style would become Hergé’s trademark.<sup>13</sup> The friendship not only inspired the art of Hergé’s comics but their subject matter as well. Before Chang returned to China, Hergé began to work on a new *Tintin* comic based on the events that were taking place in China at the time.<sup>14</sup> During the 1930s, China was under rule by Japanese and Western colonial powers. The city of Shanghai was carved into two heavily fortified military sectors, one occupied by the Japanese and the other an International Settlement occupied by both British and American troops.<sup>15</sup> While the colonial powers used Shanghai like a tactical chess board, the city ran rampant with corruption and poverty.<sup>16</sup> The people of Shanghai suffered heavily. Hergé was deeply moved by the situation.<sup>17</sup> *The Blue Lotus* was written to inform the European public about the oppression suffered by the Chinese under colonial rule, while attempting to convey deep messages about the error of cultural stereotypes.<sup>18</sup> This important background demonstrates the human factor that went into the making of *The Blue Lotus*. Hergé’s friendship with Chang was a driving force behind the political message in the book. Their friendship inspired his sympathy for the Chinese and was critical in influencing the book’s portrayal of Chinese.<sup>19</sup>

The next step in analyzing *The Blue Lotus* is to understand the different techniques by which Hergé attempts to advocate particular viewpoints within the comic book format. The book *Comics and Sequential Art*, by Will Eisner will be used here to define the basic techniques comic books use to create their effect. Eisner lists these

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<sup>13</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 42.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Riding, “Chang Chong-Jen”, *The New York Times*, sec. A, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Hergé, American ed., “Historical Note”, *The Blue Lotus*, translated by Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper and Michael Turner, Boston: Little, Brown and Company (Inc.), 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Hergé, American ed., “Historical Note”, *The Blue Lotus*.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Riding, “Chang Chong-Jen”, *The New York Times*, sec. A, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Hergé, American ed., “Historical Note”, *The Blue Lotus*.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Riding, “Chang Chong-Jen”, *The New York Times*, sec. A, p. 13.

techniques as imagery, framing, expression, timing, and writing.<sup>20</sup> For the remainder of this essay, we will use Eisner's basic definition as guidelines for classifying Hergé's depictions of different groups in *The Blue Lotus*.

The images of *The Blue Lotus* can be divided into the two different, but inseparable, categories—realistic and iconic. Hergé was famous for his ability to seamlessly switch between the two styles within the comic book narrative, at some points even overlapping iconic characters with realistic backgrounds.<sup>21</sup> He applies this technique to *The Blue Lotus* to help convey the interactions between the politically engaged real world and the fictionalized happenings of characters in Tintin's world.

Hergé's pen is put to work creating detailed images from the streets of Shanghai in *The Blue Lotus*. One of the most striking scenes from the book is the image of Chinese peasants passing through the heavily barricaded gateway out of Shanghai.<sup>22</sup> As the newly turned page settles we are submerged in the first panel. Occupying over two-thirds of the page, this behemoth panel hits the eye with an emotive palette of color and detail. The window into Tintin's world of the past is thrown wide open and we are more inside the story than ever. A line of Chinese peasants stand slouched under the weight of back-strapped parcels, while a single Japanese officer examines their papers with unhurried scrutiny. Brackets of barbed wire, bayonets, and semi-automatics crowd the peasants as they wait their turn to pass through the gates. The bold pointed strokes of Chinese lettering add to the visual intensity. The combined effect is one of blistering unease. The city has been torn to shreds by the hand of imperialism. The gate which stands towering in the background, clearly once a work of Chinese architectural beauty,

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<sup>20</sup> Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 26.

has been turned by the Japanese into a trap as they slowly suffocate the people of Shanghai.

Through a single highly detailed panel, Hergé has conveyed an entire perspective into the Chinese situation. One cannot help but feel sympathy for the Chinese people, even when looking back on the events from a historical perspective. This panel represents the realism that is a part of Hergé's style. His detailed image would not have the same effect if it were redrawn by a more cartoonish hand. It is the reality of this scene that makes it so stirring. The viewer understands that he is seeing is not just a fictionalized construction, but a historical snapshot of the reality of oppression.

The other half of Hergé's drawing style, the iconic image, is used more frequently in *The Blue Lotus*; it is one of the more prominent ways Hergé conveys his political attitudes. Characters in *The Blue Lotus* almost always fall under the iconic category. By comparing characters of different political and racial groupings in *The Blue Lotus*, we can see the extent to which Hergé manipulates their images to portray his attitudes towards them. We will use Tintin as the ultimate example of neutral depiction for comparison. As we can see in Figure 1, Tintin's features are relatively indistinct and alone do not convey much about him. This neutrality, in combination with his role as hero of the piece, makes him the ideal Western character for comparison.

If we can assume that racism can be defined by the identification or disengagement from a group of peoples, then we can begin to see in *The Blue Lotus* the deasianization of the Chinese versus the hyperasianization of the Japanese. By comparison to the Japanese, the Chinese are drawn relatively neutral, and in certain cases can almost pass for Westerners. For example, in the beginning of the book, Tintin meets

a representative from a Shanghai secret society who is calling for his assistance.<sup>23</sup> The man is dressed entirely in Western-style clothing. He is comfortably fitted in a paper brown business suit and slacks with a streak of blue tie against his white collard shirt. The man holds gently in his hand a tan rimmed cap removed from his head and leans forward on a wooden cane as he bows to greet Tintin. The cherry roundness of his face—not much unlike Tintin’s—is disrupted only by the dashed wrinkles on his forehead and the faint lines of his cheekbones. The man does not look out of place standing next to Tintin and could easily walk down a street in Europe without turning heads. He is distinguished from Tintin only by the squint of his eyes and the darkness of his combed black hair. Hergé has drawn the man in such a way that he is identifiable with a Westerner like Tintin, but in selecting certain details, he has resisted placing the man on an entirely Western level.

The squinted eye feature is an interesting distinction from the character Chang, a Chinese boy whom Tintin befriends much later in the story.<sup>24</sup> Chang is based on Chang Chong-Jen, Hergé’s friends,<sup>25</sup> and he is by far one of the most sympathetic characters of the story. Unlike the earlier man, Chang lacks the squinted eye feature. In fact, he possesses the same watermelon seed eyes that Tintin and the other Western characters possess. Standing next to each other, the two hardly look distinguishable except for the strokes of black hair across Chang’s brow. Even Chang’s Chinese-style clothes don’t draw away much from his Tintin-like appearance. By identifying him with the hero of the piece, Hergé has solidified Chang in the audience’s sympathies.

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<sup>23</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 43.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Riding, “Chang Chong-Jen”, *The New York Times*, sec. A, p. 13.

The difference between the man in the business suit and Chang, in spite of their same racial orientation, demonstrates the extent to which manipulation of facial features or style of dress plays a role in our perception of them. It is clear that Hergé's use of clothing is secondary to his use of facial features in associating or disassociating the audience from a group of peoples. The fact that the man in the business suit earlier did not appear so completely Western, in spite of his Western dress, imposes on the audience a higher level of detachment to the man. He is only Western-looking because of his business suit. Thus, the audience ironically has adopted a more "strictly business" relation to the man. Chang's Chinese-style dress, on the other hand, does not take away from his sympathetic associations with the Western audience; his facial features bind him too directly to the Western hero of the piece. The emphasis of facial features over dress is indicated, too, by the fact that throughout the later half of the story, Tintin adopts Eastern-style dress to disguise himself, yet this change does not significantly alter his appearance as the sympathetic Westerner.<sup>26</sup> This reveals the power of manipulation of the human face in portraying an attitude to a group of individuals. As we will see, this is particularly relevant to Hergé's portrayal of the Japanese.

It is important to mention that most of the Chinese characters Tintin encounters have the facial features more in common with the man in the business suit than with Chang. As Tintin walks the streets of Shanghai, the Chinese people whom he passes more commonly have squinted eyes and bonier faces.<sup>27</sup> There is even more of a sense of exoticism in their appearance because of their Eastern-style dress. From this distinction, Hergé has left it clear that Tintin is just a passing traveler in their world and is not fully

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<sup>26</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 6.

engrossed in it—a comfortable level of involvement for a Westerner of Hergé’s time to be in such a foreign country.

Hergé’s depictions of the Chinese may not always seem completely free of stereotypes by any modern standards; however, there is no point at which one could claim that Hergé’s images of the Chinese are by any means racist. It should be noted, though, that there are times when Hergé slips into more stereotypical portrayals of the Chinese. Generally, however, these stereotypes are used for a positive effect to contribute to the persona of a character. The best example of this is the character Mr. Wang, the leader of the secret society, and a fatherly character who watches after Tintin during his stay in China.<sup>28</sup> Mr. Wang possesses the traits of the Western stereotype of the Chinese wise man figure. His full-moon spectacles rest on his button nose above a snow-white beard which drapes down his lantern yellow robe. His tranquil eyes peer on the reader with the depth and calm of an ocean. From the visual clues alone, one immediately associates Mr. Wang with the stereotype of the gentle soft-spoken, wise-talking sage figure. This demonstrates that despite its cultural inaccuracies, Hergé’s use of stereotyping can positively effect the audience’s perception of a character.

Hergé makes vehement use of stereotyping to portray the Japanese of *The Blue Lotus*, but unlike Mr. Wang the stereotypes are by no means positive. Hergé’s approach to depicting the Japanese is one of the cruder instances of racism in the book. The Japanese Tintin encounters look more like living breathing propaganda posters than real people. We will use Mr. Mitsuhiro, a Japanese secret agent and the main villain of the piece, as the prime example.<sup>29</sup> Mr. Mitsuhiro demonstrates the characteristics that apply

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<sup>28</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 8.

to nearly all the Japanese characters in the book. Looking at Mr. Mitsuhirato, we see his stretched open mouth is frozen in a constant sneer that attempts to contain his jutting buck teeth. His nose protrudes like a pig's snout, pressing his glasses into his deeply furrowed brow. A thorny mustache juts off his upper lip, and his black hair is spiked back like porcupine quills. He looks nothing like a Westerner, and hardly like a human being at that. Mr. Mitsuhirato is so caricaturized that he seems almost out of place in the Tintin narrative. When we compare him to anti-Japanese war propaganda of the time, the influence for Hergé's depiction becomes clearer. In Figure 2, we see one such wartime propaganda poster, encouraging people to "Slap a Jap." If we compare this to Figure 3, we see that the cartoon in the poster is almost a mirror image of Mr. Mitsuhirato.

Hergé's racist depictions of the Japanese serve to reinforce the idea that the Japanese colonists are evil by nature. Nancy Break and John R. Pavia explain in the article "Racism in Japanese and U.S. Wartime Propaganda" that racist propaganda during and before WWII were bent on dehumanizing the enemy.<sup>30</sup> The primary fuel behind such propaganda was the notion of racial superiority. Anti-Japanese propaganda advocated the idea that the Japanese were "animals" who "don't fear death as much as white men do."<sup>31</sup> By dehumanizing the enemy group one's own racial standing is heightened and one becomes disassociated from any feelings of human sympathy for that group.<sup>32</sup> Hergé's depictions of the Japanese are similar enough to war propaganda of the time as to suggest that he was directly employing the same techniques as propaganda artists of the time. Hergé certainly succeeds in depicting the Japanese as monsters. By

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<sup>30</sup> Nancy Break and John Pavia, "Racism in Japanese and U.S. Wartime Propaganda," *Historian* 56, no. 4 (1994): 671.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Break and John Pavia, "Racism in Japanese and U.S. Wartime Propaganda" *Historian*, 673.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy Break and John Pavia, "Racism in Japanese and U.S. Wartime Propaganda" *Historian*, 673.

enforcing the notion of the Japanese as being less than human, we begin to see their colonial behaviors as animalistic and heartless. Thus, the Chinese are elevated as the victims of a cruel and wicked institution. The fact that no Japanese character in the book escapes this portrayal makes it clear that Hergé was attempting to suggest to his readers that all Japanese were equally evil by nature. Thus, the intended effect is that even when the reader walks away from the comic, he will maintain the attitude that all Japanese are villains by nature. Hergé has ferociously condemned the Japanese in the minds of his audience.

The influence of propaganda in Hergé's portrayal of the Japanese is not limited to imagery alone. Hergé makes use of the technique of framing to ensure that his depiction of the Japanese sinks deep into the consciousness of the reader. The frame of a comic book is by far the most basic element of a comic. The frame is what sets images apart on a page, and is also what allows narrative to ensue. Thus, repetition of images is often used over the course of many panels in order to maintain the flow of narrative. Using Mr. Mitsuhirato as an example, we can see the way in which Hergé employs this repetition to subconsciously reinforce Mr. Mitsuhirato's image in the mind of his audience. Within the narrative of *The Blue Lotus*, Mr. Mitsuhirato looks odd at first, but as the story continues, the audience becomes more and more accustomed to his appearance. The reason for this is the repetition of images used in comic books. Mr. Mitsuhirato's image can occupy a single page in over ten different frames at once.<sup>33</sup> In a sense, the audience is being repeatedly bombarded with his image without even realizing it. As one reads along, one becomes more and more accustomed to Mr. Mitsuhirato's image until he no longer looks out of place. One has fully accepted Mr. Mitsuhirato's

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<sup>33</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 23.

appearance and all the racial implications associated with it. Even resisting this is impossible because one must accept him as a valid character in order for the narrative to continue. Through repetition of imagery, Hergé has succeeded in infiltrating the minds of the viewer. In the words of social analyst Jason Edward Black, “the scariest of racial stereotypes and prejudices arise when the public cannot recognize such ills.”<sup>34</sup> Because of the unassuming nature of comic books, one does not even suspect that one is being molded to such attitudes.

We will now turn to the second group of colonists within *The Blue Lotus*, the Europeans. For the most part, Hergé’s images of the European colonists are in and of themselves relatively neutral, but there are some subtle details that should be noted. In one scene, Hergé shows us a group of Westerners sitting in a café.<sup>35</sup> All are very lavishly dressed. The one named Gibbons wears a pair of pistachio-colored driving gloves on his hands and glossy shined shoes on his feet. His outfit is that of a clearly wealthy man, from his single-breasted tuxedo jacket and bowtie to his cuff links and creased pants. The pleasures of his wealth are lost on him though as we can see throughout the panels that his mouth is constantly fixated downwards in a tight frown. The other two sit at the table, enjoying tall glasses of scotch on the rocks. One leans back leisurely with a pipe between his teeth and a sneering grin reminiscent of Groucho Marx. The other puffs intently on a cigar, his olive green britches, beneath the table, tucked into his swanky argyle socks. The affluence of the three men makes them look especially out of place in the middle of Shanghai, surrounded by the humbly dressed peasants and laborers. From

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<sup>34</sup> Jason Black, “The ‘Mascotting’ of Native America”, *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2002): 607.

<sup>35</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 7.

imagery alone, one can only make assumptions. As we shall see, it is Hergé's use of the element expression which puts their clothing and character into context.

Eisner defines expression as the expressive anatomy of comic book characters.<sup>36</sup> Such expressions are used by comic artists to create a “non-verbal vocabulary of gesture” through the “stylization” of the human body and the “codifying of its emotionally produced gestures and expressive postures.”<sup>37</sup> Expressive anatomy is a characteristic of cartoons and comic characters whose body language can sometimes speak louder than imagery alone. In order to see Hergé's use of expressive anatomy to characterize the colonists in the café, we need to put this scene in context by looking at the scene that preceded it. In the scene before, Gibbons accidentally steps in front of a rickshaw runner carrying Tintin down the street.<sup>38</sup> The rickshaw man is unable to stop in time and goes plowing into Gibbons. Although the occurrence was an accident, Gibbons explodes onto the defenseless rickshaw man in a furious rage of body expression. We can see Hergé begin to put expressive anatomy to work. Gibbon's great feet lift off the ground in a tornado swirl. His left hand furiously clutches a newspaper which crumples weakly under the tight pressure of his gloved fist. Sweat marks shoot from Gibbon's heavily flushed and rippled face. He waves his cane over his head like a caveman bearing a club, threatening to bring it down on the rickshaw man who cowers with a weak and shuttering hand raised to defend himself from the blow. Gibbons barks at the rickshaw boy, “Dirty little Chinaman! To barge into a white man!”<sup>39</sup> Before Gibbons can strike, Tintin intervenes by grabbing his cane and snapping it in half. But this only sends Gibbons into

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<sup>36</sup> Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 100.

<sup>37</sup> Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 6-7.

<sup>39</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 6.

a second rage. He begins to jump up and down like a toddler throwing a tantrum. He shakes his fists at Tintin and pounds the ground with his heavy feet. We finally see Gibbons storm off to the café where he meets the European colonists previously described. At the café, Gibbon's friends lean forward intently to hear his story like hawks circling prey, with eyebrows raised in appall.<sup>40</sup> The expressiveness of the colonists' body language in these two scenes speaks pages about Hergé's view of the Western colonists in China. Their expressiveness puts the wealth of their clothes into perspective. One begins to see these men as the colonial bullies and exploitative leeches partially responsible for draining Shanghai and the Chinese people.

Hergé's portrayal of the Westerners is unflattering but hardly racist. Unlike the Japanese of the book, the Westerners in the café are not made to look so unreasonably outrageous in appearance. It would be hard to imagine a European like Hergé wanting to depict Westerners as a bunch of scrawny blond and blue-eyed figures with pale skin. His primarily Western audience would likely not be too pleased by such a stereotypical depiction of themselves. Hergé is primarily concerned with gaining sympathy for the Chinese by whichever means possible. Manipulated imagery being the most direct and dehumanizing method at his disposal, for an artist of Hergé's time, naturally fell on the more foreign Japanese. As conscientious commentator on the situation in China, though, Hergé likely realized that Western colonists were at least in part responsible for bringing harm to the Chinese people. In being daring enough to frontally challenge the behavior and actions of Western colonists, Hergé administers an indirect warning to Europeans that they are not free from blame of the mess that is colonialism.

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<sup>40</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 7.

We will now examine Hergé's portrayal of the Japanese through Eisner's fourth element of comics, timing. Eisner defines timing as the human conception of duration within or between comic frames. As so, the frame and dialog of comics often play a critical role in the audience's perception of time. For the most part, *The Blue Lotus* follows a regular pace. Dialogs are often limited to several sentences, and frames are often medium-sized squares with relatively thin lines of space between them. But there is one particular scene of *The Blue Lotus* in which Hergé alters the pace of the to amplify the brutality of the Japanese military invasion of China. This scene follows Mr. Mitsuhiro's sabotage of the South Manchurian railway line.<sup>41</sup> As we enter the scene, we are assailed with the sporadic onslaught of images. The frames shrink to help facilitate the accelerated timing. With the minimized size of the frames, the reader's eye spends only limited time in each panel. As a result, the scene is intense with energy. We are first presented with the image of a Japanese radio broadcaster bellowing the breaking news of the railway into a microphone. His dialog cuts across a series of even more compact panels depicting different listeners tuning in from across the globe. In the subsequent panel, a newspaper boy announces the headlines on the streets beneath Tokyo high-rises. But before the boy can sell another paper, the reader is thrown into a sea of Japanese flags and pennants as a Japanese nationalist proclaims Japanese glory. In the next row of panels we see the Japanese advancing on China beneath the moonlight in troves of troops and armed vehicles. In the final image of the scene, the frame returns to a normal size. In the pale pink light of the rising sun, a pair of Japanese troops stands guard over the sabotaged train line. Behind them, Chinese peasants toil to repair the broken track beneath a raised Japanese flag. The return to normal frame size indicates

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<sup>41</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 22.

that the rapid timing has slowed to a halt, and provides closure to this episode. Hergé's technique of rapidly changing scenes is similar to the film technique of "fast cutting," or rapid scene change, which is used by directors to create a sense of energy and urgency.<sup>42</sup> Hergé's depiction of the Japanese military advancement gives a sense of the imposing nature of the Japanese military and adds further to his portrayal of them as war mongers. One can taste the imminent rise of Japanese fascism in the air.

We will now examine the element of writing, the final of Eisner's comic books techniques, in its application to *The Blue Lotus*. The dialog of *The Blue Lotus* is the one method in which Hergé is most expressive of his sympathies for the Chinese and is most forthcoming in his views on the error of racial misconceptions. It is through writing that Hergé directly addresses his Western audience. The first example of this is the scene in which Gibbons attempts to attack the rickshaw man. After breaking Gibbons' cane Tintin exclaims, "Brute! Your conduct is disgraceful, sir!"<sup>43</sup> By having Tintin publicly reprimand a fellow Westerner face-to-face on a busy Shanghai street, Hergé defiantly addresses the behavior of his fellow Europeans, though he is at risk of isolating colonial-minded members of his audience. During the café scene that follows, Hergé delves further into the absurdities of notions of racial superiority. In the café, Gibbons spouts supremacist ideologies to his friends. He refers to Chinese as "yellow rabble" and "savages," and explains, "Look what we've done for them, all the benefits of our superb western civilization. Yes, our superb western civilization."<sup>44</sup> As Gibbons' blathers this, his hand goes flying into the tray of the Chinese waiter serving him. The dishes crash to

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<sup>42</sup> "Video Glossary," *Project Based Learning with Multimedia*, 2002, <[http://pblmm.k12.ca.us/TechHelp/VideoHelp/aGoodStuffToKnow/Video\\_Glossary.html](http://pblmm.k12.ca.us/TechHelp/VideoHelp/aGoodStuffToKnow/Video_Glossary.html)> (12 December 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 7.

the floor, and Gibbons turns around to grab the waiter by the collar. Gibbons screams into his face, “You did that on purpose, yellow scum! I’ll teach you respect for your betters!” When he returns to the table, flushed, sitting down he repeats himself, “Where was I? Oh, yes, our superb Western civilization...”<sup>45</sup> In contrasting Gibbons’ assuredness of his own racial superiority with his atrocious behavior, Hergé is making the assertion that the idea of racial supremacy is inherently contradictory. Gibbons’ behavior is hypocritical to the point of being humorous. In communicating to his audience through the universal language of comedy, Hergé understands at least open-minded Europeans will be sensible enough to see the laughable absurdity of Gibbons’ arguments.

Another scene in which Hergé directly explains his views on racial misconceptions is when Tintin meets Chang. In this scene, Tintin spots Chang drowning in the river and dives in to save him.<sup>46</sup> When Chang regains consciousness on shore, he asks Tintin, “Why did you save my life?” Tintin looks surprised and Chang elaborates,

I thought all white devils were wicked, like those who killed my grandfather and grandmother long ago. During the War of Righteous Harmonious Fists [Boxer Rebellion], my father said.<sup>47</sup>

To this Tintin responds,

But Chang, all white men aren’t wicked. You see, different peoples don’t know enough about each other. Lots of Europeans still believe that all Chinese are cunning and cruel and wear pigtails, are always inventing tortures, and eating rotten eggs and swallows’ nests. The same stupid Europeans are quite convinced that all Chinese have tiny feet, and even

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<sup>45</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 43.

now little Chinese girls suffer agonies with bandages designed to prevent their feet developing normally. They're even convinced that Chinese rivers are full of unwanted babies thrown in when they are born. So you see Chang, that's what lots of people believe about China!<sup>48</sup>

The two sit on the shore rolling with laughter, and Chang exclaims, "They must be crazy people in your country!!"<sup>49</sup> In this touching scene, Hergé demonstrates that ultimately the human act of compassion transcends all the barriers put in place by cultural misconceptions. In a time of globally escalating tension leading up to WWII, Hergé may have felt that the world could use more compassion and tolerance. There is a sense of firmness in Hergé's message. By referring to the "same stupid Europeans," he administers a wagging finger in the direction of his audience and directly asserts that stereotyping is wrong. At the same time, there is the more cheerful implication that if we sit down and discuss stereotypes, we can see how easily the shaky structure of racism really is.

Based on what we know about Hergé's relationship with the real Chang Chong-Jen, we can assume that Hergé's sympathy for the Chinese in *The Blue Lotus* is genuine. However, we are faced with the undeniable fact that *The Blue Lotus* itself is laden with racist convictions of another Asian group, the Japanese. This contradiction is difficult to overlook and makes Hergé's message seem confused and unconvincing in a modern context. Hergé's sudden change of heart from the narrow-mindedness in previous *Tintin* comics suggests that this shift in attitude may have been the work of a guilty conscience. The "same stupid" European that Hergé is referring to in the scene with Chang may be

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<sup>48</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 43.

<sup>49</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 43.

none other than himself. Hergé's wish to change his thinking on race may have been genuine, but he clearly not completely worked out all the kinks of his new mindset during the writing of *The Blue Lotus*. Hergé may have been fully aware of this, but either for publication reasons or out of his sense of urgency at the events in China felt it was more important to support the Chinese by any means possible, regardless of the inconsistencies it may have produced in his message.

Hergé's motivation to depict the inhumanity of colonial oppression in *The Blue Lotus* is offset by his dehumanizing characterization of the Japanese. Through manipulation and repetition of comic imagery, heightened impact through timing, expressive gesture, and reflective writing, he built a message that was bold but ultimately shortsighted. Hergé's benevolent concern for the Chinese was earnest, but he proves to be a much more of an effective propagandist than a social commentator. He utilized the capabilities of the comic book medium to the fullest, even when this produced inconsistencies in his message. Hergé's *The Blue Lotus* is a work of comic beauty nonetheless, and should be regarded as such. However, as this essay has attempted to draw attention to, it should be read with caution and awareness towards the underlying problems of its depiction.

Appendix of Images



Figure 1. An image Tintin<sup>50</sup>

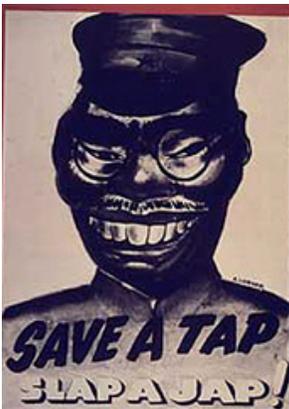


Figure 2. An example of Anti-Japanese WWII propaganda<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Hergé. *The Blue Lotus*, 1

<sup>51</sup> "Racist Propaganda," *Rotten*. <<http://www.rotten.com/library/imagery/propaganda/racist-propaganda/>>.

<sup>52</sup> Hergé, *The Blue Lotus*, 8.

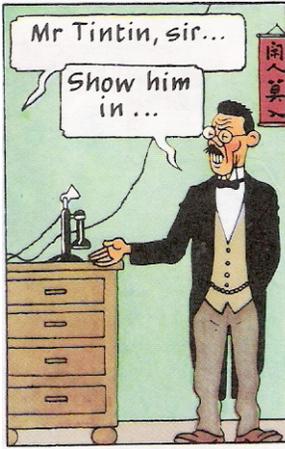


Figure 3. An image of Mr. Mitsuhirato<sup>52</sup>