

A BELGIAN (1870-1930) PASSAGE TO CHINA

Belgian-Chinese historical relations (1870-1930) and the construction of the railway and the tramway network based on the personal documents and pictures of François Nuyens and Philippe & Adolphe Spruyt.

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STERCK & DE VREESE



Compagnie
de Steamways et
d'Eclairage de Sientia



FOREWORD

When Dr. Johan Mattelaer asked me to write the foreword for his new book, initially I hesitated. As a diplomat, I had been active in Asia but was never posted to China, although I was Belgium's last consul general to Hong Kong under British rule (1993–1997).

However, my hesitation was only momentary. Johan Mattelaer has been a personal friend for almost 30 years. I first met him in Hanoi in 1992, when I was the Belgian ambassador to Vietnam. Johan was leading an eminent group of business leaders from West Flanders on a mission to the country, which, both then as now, was a bold undertaking.

After retiring as a urologist, Johan became a prolific writer of books, often on 'sensitive' (one might even say 'risqué') topics, such as *Roma Intima* or *For this Relief, Much Thanks! Peeing in Art*. His reputation in Flanders and beyond is based on thorough research, hard work, great determination and creative entrepreneurship.

With this latest book, *A Belgian Passage to China*, Dr. Mattelaer is once again breaking new ground in his writing career. He offers the reader a historical perspective of Belgium's involvement in China from the dying days of the Ming dynasty (17th century) to the modern China of today. Like his previous publications, the task for Johan and his collaborators was a daunting one, given the long historical time span, the linguistic and cultural intricacies, and the scarce availability of reliable sources.

The authors had a stroke of luck at the beginning of their project. Johan was fortunate in discovering the personal archives of François Nuyens and the brothers Philippe and Adolphe Spruyt, a Belgian engineer and two medical doctors

who were actively involved in the construction of Belgian railways and tramways in China at the turn of the 20th century. These three men were privileged observers of a China in the full throes of transformation, politically, socially and economically. Together, they left behind a myriad of authentic documents, private journals, and unedited photographs that display facets of the Middle Kingdom that are now largely forgotten.

The history of Belgian-Chinese relations is to a large extent the story of Belgians living and working in China. While some were undoubtedly more eccentric than others, all were equally motivated to share with China their know-how, their knowledge of technological advancements, and, even at times, their religious beliefs. In many ways, both great and small, they were true pioneers in international co-operation.

Selecting one of these figures as 'the most remarkable Belgian in China' is a challenging task. So many names deserve to be mentioned.

For Belgians who are interested in Chinese affairs, Father Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688) will need no introduction. Born in Pittem (West Flanders), he travelled to China as a Jesuit missionary during the Qing dynasty. However, he was also an accomplished mathematician and astronomer, who proved to the Chinese imperial court that European astronomy was more accurate than its Chinese counterpart: a controversial finding, both then and now.

Less well-known but equally extraordinary was the career of Paul Splingaerd (1842–1906), a Belgian foundling who became a mandarin in the late Qing government, but is perhaps now best remembered as the Belgian negotia-

tor who helped to pave the way for the building of the first major railway in China, the Beijing–Hankou railway, and as the founder of a Belgian–Chinese industrial complex in Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu province.

A more recent but no less worthy contender is Dr. Paul Baron Janssen (1926–2003), founder of Janssen Pharmaceutica. At a time when Deng Xiaoping, the People’s Republic of China’s paramount leader, began introducing economic reform and modernization in 1978, Dr. Janssen took the bold step of establishing the first Western pharmaceutical factory in China, in the old imperial city of Xi’an. This was the first major Belgian investment of any kind in the People’s Republic of China and was the harbinger of many more successful investments by other Belgian companies in the years that followed.

While Belgium’s engagement with China has at times been both spectacular and successful, it is important to ensure that the lessons of the past are learnt and that mistakes are not repeated. Since the reforms put in place by Deng Xiaoping, China’s role as a rising superpower is beyond dispute. In just a few decades, it has become an economic and technological powerhouse, a transformation that has caused significant disruption to the established global economic order. One only has to look at the current relationship between China and the United States to see the truth of this

assertion and to gain some idea of its potential consequences.

Europe is in a rare position of strength to further engage with China in the fields of politics, economics, trade, investment and, perhaps most notably, social development. Europe stands to benefit greatly through a consistent focus on ‘people-to-people’ contacts, acting as a partner for China in key areas such as education, joint research, cultural exchanges, tourism, disability programming, sports and so much more. Belgium, in its role as a well-recognized international facilitator, is willing and able to serve as a principal point of liaison in a growing, multi-faceted relationship between Europe and China.

Over the course of its 4,000 years of recorded history, China has repeatedly proven itself to be a force for progress, advancement and culture, as well as a strong partner for its allies and friends. Europe must respond to this fundamental truth with confidence, enthusiasm and in a spirit of solidarity and co-operation, rather than one of suspicion and apprehension. As one of America’s greatest presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, once said: ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.’

Piet Steel

Ambassador (Ret.) of Belgium

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SEPTENTRIO.



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nempe: Tarenate, Tidore,
Morir, Macil et Bacha

NOVA GVINEA
quam Andreas Corsalius Ter-
rum Picinaculi appellare vi-
detur. An insula sit, an pars
continentis Australis incer-
tum est.

Cum Privilegio.



BEACH, pars
continentis Australis.



PREFACE

*De. 24^{de} Juni 1905 vertrok ik uit Gent, met den
trein van 10 uren s'morgens, Verscheidene
vrienden waren reeds in de statie, onde
anderen De Bruyn Jules, Praet. Van Hecke
alook den heer Antoine J.B. welke 2
maanden later insgelijks naar China
vertrok.*

'On 24 June 1905, I left Ghent by train at 10 o'clock in the morning. Some of my friends were already at the station, like De Bruyn Jules, Praet, Van Hecke and also Mr. Antoine J.B., who would likewise leave for China two months later.'

*Study the past if
you would define
the future.*

Confucius

These are the first few lines of a travel diary that was written by François Nuyens, a Ghent-born engineer who sojourned in China between 1905 and 1908. Nuyens was commissioned by the Belgian railway authorities to assist in the development of an electric power plant in the northern city of Tianjin and the construction of the city's tramway network. This undertaking formed part of a wave of infrastructure works that would alter the face of China forever and would catapult the Chinese into the Industrial Era.

From 1870 to 1914, the Belgians financed, built, equipped and exploited hundreds of kilometres of railways and tramways over all five continents. In China, the first project with Belgian involvement was the creation of the Shanghai tramway network, but the most impressive undertaking master-minded by Belgian entrepreneurs, investors (mainly the Empain group) and engineers – some famous and some not so famous – was the construction of the railway connection

between Beijing and Hankou and the building of the tramway network in Tianjin. Until relatively recently, François Nuyens remained one of the many anonymous figures who nonetheless played important roles in the development of this network. For more than a century, the story of the engineer, craftsman and entrepreneur remained under the radar of academic scholars and history enthusiasts alike.

During and after his trip to China, François Nuyens wrote a travel diary, which remained in the possession of his descendants after his death in 1956. In the 1980s, the diary emerged from oblivion when a master dissertation was devoted to the subject. However, the importance of Nuyens and the unique character of his travel diary have not yet been fully recognized. By chance, we were fortunate enough to rediscover the manuscript, kept by yet another generation of Nuyens descendants.

The diary offers us a panorama of China, as seen through the eyes of a Belgian engineer. It not only gives a detailed description of his voyage to the Orient and the return journey along the Trans-Siberian railway, but tells us much about the way of life in China during the chaotic period after the Boxer Rebellion and the relative lull that finally came to an end with the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, just a handful of years after his departure from the country. François Nuyens' account needs to be read through the socio-economic prism

◀ *Indiae Orientalis, Insularumque
Adiacentium Typus*, from: *Theatrum
Orbis Terrarum*, a map by Abraham
Ortelius, 1603, Latin edition.

of the world of his day, a bygone era that had not yet witnessed two devastating world wars. As a result, the story as Nuyens tells it is bathed in an atmosphere of Western superiority. The colonialist point of view is never far away. Indeed, in 1900 China was not the country it is today and Nuyens was merely a witness of his time, writing with a colonial attitude and a mixture of amazement and disdain about the traditions and mores of the local people. Nuyens' diary is also unique in other respects. The vast majority of detailed reports and other writings by Belgians about China were accounts and letters produced by missionaries or diplomats. In contrast, Nuyens' diary was written by a layman and an engineer, who initially possessed no expertise whatsoever in Chinese matters. Even more unusual is the fact that he wrote his account in Dutch, and not in French. While Flanders (the northern part of Belgium) was an area with an overwhelmingly Flemish (Dutch-speaking) population, the language of the ruling bourgeois classes was still French. This seeming anomaly can in part be explained by the fact that Nuyens did not have concrete ambitions to publish his manuscript. He merely wrote his diary as a memoir for his children and grandchildren. Interestingly, the manuscript is accompanied by three comprehensive albums containing unique and original photographs documenting his work, as well as scenes of everyday life in Tianjin and Beijing at the beginning of the 20th century.

But that is not all. It now appears that Nuyens was just one of a larger group of Belgian citizens, including several from Ghent, who went or were sent to China around that time. During our research into Nuyens' diary, we discovered that two brothers by the name of Philippe and Adolphe Spruyt also joined the growing number of Belgian technicians and engineers in China, in order to take charge of the medical services of the railway construction companies. Both men returned to Belgium with a collection of more than 1,200 Chinese antiquities and hundreds of photographs on glass plates, which represent a unique testimony

to life as it was in the final years of the Chinese Empire. All these documents are of interest, not only to historians, who will discover a window into Chinese society and the day-to-day existence of Belgian expatriates under the failing Qing dynasty, but also to anyone who takes a lively interest in China and its connections with the wider world. The diary of François Nuyens not only provides a fantastic account of an early 20th century travel experience by land and sea, but also paints a fascinating picture of many aspects of life in China, as seen through the eyes of an ordinary person. Thanks to this book, the reader will also discover unexplored chapters and obtain fresh insights into the modern history of Sino-Belgian relations.

To set the time frame for the book, we opted for the period 1870–1930. It was in 1873 that the Qing government officially allowed the first Belgian consul, Edmond Serruys, to take up his position in Beijing, while 1929 marks the relinquishment of the Belgian concession in Tianjin. During this period, it is possible to distinguish two broad groups of Belgians who went to China: the missionaries and the industrialists. Both groups had very different intentions. The missionaries attempted to develop contacts with people from the poorest social strata, with the goal of converting them to Christianity. The industrialists viewed China with the mentality of imperialists and colonialists, hoping to make a profit from the huge emerging market they thought China would become.

The aim of this book is to highlight the dynamism, commitment and perseverance of the enterprising Belgian community at that time, without losing sight of the darker sides of the Western presence in China at the turn of the 20th century. Self-evidently, the group of Belgians is larger than can be covered in this book alone and, consequently, a selection needed to be made. While historical figures such as Paul Splingaerd and Vincent Lebbe will be touched upon intermittently, we have chosen to place the main focus on François Nuyens and the Spruyt brothers, since we were



▲ Frontispiece of the book *Le Livre de Jehan de Mandeville*, an imaginary travel story from 1356, in which an English knight supposedly undertakes a journey lasting 34 years from the Holy Land through the lands of the Far East until he reaches China.

able to discover a lot of unknown and fascinating material about their travels to and assignments in China.

Of course, contacts between China and the nation which from 1830 onwards became known as the independent kingdom of Belgium have a much longer history. As a result, some

degree of historical background is essential. However, when it comes to historical personalities and their exploits before 1830, this task is far from easy. Inevitably, the question arises about what Belgium was and who the Belgians were before this date. We are aware of the historical artificiality of highlighting the exploits of ‘Belgians’ before the Kingdom of Belgium was ever established, although the term ‘Belgium’ had been circulating amongst geographers and cartographers for centuries. In defining our approach, we have adopted Alban Van der Straten’s approach in his work on Belgian explorers. In other words, to ensure that our scope is not too narrow, we have focused on people from Flanders (including French Flanders), Wallonia and Brussels who have played interesting roles in the context of Sino-Western relations.¹

In order to better situate Francois Nuyens’ diary and the peregrinations of the Spruyt brothers in their historical, political and economic context, we will therefore review historical milestones that have influenced Sino-Belgian relations through the centuries. To begin with, we will highlight in general terms the early relations and exchanges between China and the West, such as the first encounters between (pre-Belgium) Belgians and the Chinese and the transfer of knowledge and technology, mainly channelled through the missionary orders.

Subsequently, the focus will be turned toward the events of the 19th and 20th centuries, which form the context for the endeavours of Nuyens and his peers. This section will deal with the forced opening of China during the 19th century as a result of the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion, the Russo-Japanese War and the role of King Leopold II and his desire for colonial expansion, as well as looking at the impact of some Chinese personalities on Sino-Belgian relations.

This book attempts to move beyond emotional attachment to painful episodes in the modern history of interaction between China and the West. Instead, the insights that we attempt to provide, both through the personal histories of



◀ Tianjin Museum of Modern History is located at the centre of the city's Five Great Avenues. Amongst other things, its review of the urban history of Tianjin tells the story of expatriates in the early modern era, as well as highlighting the city's first steps in modernization a century ago. The renovation of the museum was completed in 2015.

individuals and the major lines of history in general, are intended to serve as a record of times gone by, which may help readers of all ages to discover, remember and, above all, understand how the past can shape the present and the

future, so that the peoples of the world can learn from their common heritage in order to acquire a better understanding of each other as that future unfolds.

The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949 and

it took a further 22 years before Belgium and China re-established normal diplomatic relations on 25 October 1971. In 2021, the 50th anniversary of this renewal of relations will be celebrated. Our book, which will also appear in a Chinese version, is dedicated to this anniversary.

By bringing an almost forgotten chapter of shared Sino-Belgian history into the limelight, we hope to show that the boom in relations between China and Belgium that we have witnessed during the past few decades has its antecedents in both the recent and the more distant past. Perhaps more importantly, we wish to emphasize the need for knowledge of that past when looking towards the future. The times of Francois Nuyens and the Spruyt brothers are long gone and their world has changed forever. The era of unequal treaties and the concessions lies far behind us. China and Belgium (within the context of the EU) have become equal partners that engage with each other on many different levels and in many different areas. The writings of Nuyens and other documents provide us with valuable insights that can not only help us to understand the vicissitudes of the past, but also add perspective to the common pathway that China

and Belgium, in spite of inevitable differences, may need to follow in response to the challenges of the future. For this reason, we end the book with a chapter on the future of relations and cooperation between the two countries, a vision written by a young Belgian entrepreneur.

More than two thousand years ago, an increasingly intricate network of trade routes, commonly called the Silk Road, slowly but surely connected China with the rest of Asia and eventually, albeit indirectly, with Europe. Modern trade between both ends of the Eurasian landmass has been further developed through improved air connections and sea-lanes. With the opening of a direct railway link between Tianjin and Antwerp, a new chapter has been added to the history of Sino-Belgian relations. It can truly be considered as a modern Silk Road!

We wish the reader a pleasant journey!

*Johan Mattelaer, Mathieu Torck,
Charles Lagrange, Roland Dussart-Desart*