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The First World War as the Precondition to the Japanese Donation to the University of Louvain

Without the First World War there would have been no Japanese donation to the University of Louvain, the ancestor of today’s KU Leuven and UCLouvain, in the 1920s. What might initially seem to state the obvious, though, merits further elaboration, since the war in many ways created factors that would lead to the donation.

In the first place, of course, it was the destruction of the university library and large parts of the city – not to mention the indiscriminate killing of more than two hundred citizens of Leuven by German troops in August 1914 – that had led to an international outcry. The Empire of Japan, which had declared war on Germany on 23 August, just two days before Leuven was put to the torch, was no exception: news of the city’s destruction reached Japanese newspapers soon after, and even cinemas were quick to put images presenting the destruction onto the screen. The news was met with many expressions of pity and solidarity from the Japanese public for the plight of Belgium, which had just become a wartime ally of Japan, both being part of the Entente war coalition against the Central Powers. Moreover, certainly a favorable feeling toward Belgium had built up already in the decades long before the war, in combination with genuine expressions of anger about violence against civilians and the destruction of the centuries-old university library. Such sentiments were important factors in the favorable reception by the elite Japanese politicians and businessmen of an originally French proposal to rebuild the university library. That initiative soon grew into an international effort, which Willy Vande Walle explains in more detail in his essay in this volume.

Yet aside from these circumstances, the complex impact of the First World War on Japan itself also provided other important structural preconditions for the 1920s donation by Japan to the University of Louvain. The following essay will discuss several of these antecedent conditions in order to further contextualize the Japanese donation. As will become evident below, it was inherently and to a large extent a complex product resulting both from the impact of the First World War and from more long-term developments within the modern history of Japan, which had first arisen in the late nineteenth century.

The First World War and Belgium in the Shifting World Perception among Japanese Mass Media

In Japan, as the historian Yamamuro Shin’ichi has argued convincingly, the First World War accelerated a paradigm shift in the perception of the wider world and Japan’s relation to it. This change has to be seen as the result of three currents that had started in the last decades of the nineteenth century: the first trend built on an already high level of literacy compared to the international standard, which had resulted from the ubiquitous temple schools (terakoya), merchant schools, and schools for the offspring of the samurai in the early modern era (roughly late sixteenth to mid-nineteenth century). With the introduction of compulsory elementary school education in Japan in 1872, along with the steady growth of institutions of secondary and tertiary education, not only did the number of students and teachers on all levels continuously rise, but, parallel to it, the number of readers for newspapers and magazines rose as well. The ever burgeoning market and readership for these media, as well as for books, introduced the wider world to a public...
growing larger than ever, while building on the vibrant book printing culture of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries (various examples of which can be found in this publication). With the development of a modern book market in the wake of the Meiji Restoration of 1867/68 came numerous translations of an enormous variety of Western fiction and non-fiction books. This larger world came to be keenly interpreted, moreover, by many Japanese authors, possibly best represented by intellectuals – like Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901) – associated with the “Civilization and Enlightenment” (bunmei kaika) movement of the 1870s. Not unlike the mass media in Europe and many other parts of the world, Japanese newspapers and magazines quickly started to diversify. From around the turn of the twentieth century, these media included more sensationalist journalism catering to a broader audience, with elements such as serialized novels, crime stories, and also more pages exclusively targeting a female readership.

A major boost to the circulation of newspapers and magazines were the modern wars in which Japan was directly involved: the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). The widespread and popular coverage of both wars also accelerated the use of drawings and maps as well as increasingly numerous photographs to convey current events. The Japanese mass media therefore had already developed a certain routine in covering wars when the First World War broke out in 1914. At the time, Japan’s direct military participation was limited to occupying the German-leased territory around the port city of Qingdao in China and the German island colonies in Micronesia, in addition to sending Japanese war ships to the Mediterranean. Even so, the Japanese mass media covered the war in all its aspects continuously, including many lengthy, elaborate commentaries by Japanese journalists, politicians, businessmen, and academics.

In 1914, all major national daily newspapers sold in the hundreds of thousands, in both their morning and evening editions. More recent research by the media historian Ariyama Teruo has shown, furthermore, that even in remote rural villages at least around half of the households frequently purchased one, in many cases two newspapers – a national and a regional publication – and occasionally also popular “general magazines” (sōgō zasshi), such as Taiyō (The Sun). In addition, coinciding with the beginning of the First World War, a wave of illustrated photo magazines flooded the market – the predecessors of the big graphic magazines with their rich photo collages of the 1920s. One of these was the Rekishi shashin (History in Photos), which aspired to document ‘history’ in the making. By conveying photographs from Japan and from the entire world, it provided information about political events; celebrities; catastrophes, such as wars, large accidents, and natural disasters; trends in consumption and technology; and sports. Within the extensive coverage given to the First World War, the fate of Belgium during the war was discussed widely, and the magazine “History in Photos” proved no exception. As can be seen in the pages reproduced here, very often it was the plight of the Belgian civilians that was the focus of attention: Belgian refugees leaving Ostend shortly before the arrival of the German troops, depicted in the February 1915 issue of the magazine, for instance, and Belgian war orphans in Calais about to be sent to Britain for shelter, in the March 1916 issue.

Already in late 1914 and in early 1915, the destruction in Belgium was being shown in “actuality films” in Japanese cinemas as well. According to film historian Peter B. High, these
documentary portrayals evoked much solidarity amongst the cinema-goers, leaving many in tears. This observation in itself is interesting, since it alludes to an emotionality in which the pictures of despairing civilians with their houses destroyed were perceived as part of a world that, despite being thousands of kilometers away, felt “utterly real” and contemporaneous, as Yamamura Shin’ichi wrote.

Throughout the war, the Japanese public was consuming fictional films, too, such as the US silent movie *The Belgian* (1918). Directed by Sidney Olcott, it depicted the tragic situation of Belgium in the war through the perspective of two lovers who for the good of Belgium must work together against wily German spies, while waiting to be liberated by US troops. As can be seen on a film program flyer for the cinema Patē-kan in Tokyo, Europe was perceived to be under attack by German militarism, while the “Belgian Spirit” (as the Japanese translation of the film title, *Berugidamashii*, went) was hailed for withstanding such brutal violence.

It was further said that an expression of “worldwide sympathy” had allegedly led to full cinemas in 9,740 venues across the twenty-one allied countries where the film was screened.

Similar to other countries, in Japanese mass media, too, the Belgian King Albert I became a popular figure, often depicted in military uniform as a fighting king. It is therefore not a coincidence that it was not the Japanese state but, rather, the newspaper companies Osaka asahi shinbunsha and the Tōkyō asahi shinbunsha that donated a precious Japanese sword to King Albert I in January 1915. This move proved to cause an even larger spike in circulation once the gift was announced in their newspapers. Both newspapers designed a *laterna magica* show that projected images depicting the plight of the Belgian population, which was connected to relief fundraising organized by them. The sword was
4. Page of the illustrated magazine *Rekishi shashin* (History in Photos), February 1915, p. 22, depicting the "last refugee" from Belgium, a baby, leaving Ostend for Britain. Source: private collection Jan Schmidt.

5. Page of the illustrated magazine *Rekishi shashin* (History in Photos), March 1916, p. 2 (verso), depicting Belgian orphans waiting in Calais to be shipped to Britain. Source: private collection Jan Schmidt.
handed to the king by the Japanese journalist Sugimura Sojinkan (1872-1945), who had been reporting directly from Belgium and later from France during the first months of the war. Sugimura was one of the many Japanese war correspondents sent by Japanese newspapers at great cost throughout the years 1914 to 1918. Their reporting, together with the propaganda by Japan’s allies, often put German war crimes and the very real hardships of the occupation in Belgium at the forefront, thus further fueling several additional donation campaigns in Japan for disabled veterans in Belgium and other Entente allies.16

For Japan, participating in humanitarian relief in this way was also a means to demonstrate the stature of the Japanese Empire vis-à-vis the Western powers. The symbolic character of such campaigns for Belgium or, for instance, for Polish orphans – not to mention the dispatch of seventy-five Japanese Red Cross nurses to London, St. Petersburg, and Paris, as covered widely in the Japanese mass media – cannot be overestimated.17

When tracing these gestures of solidarity, it should not be forgotten that only a few decades earlier, in the 1850s and 1860s, Japan had been forced at gunpoint to open its ports to Western powers and to accept ‘unequal treaties’ infringing upon its sovereignty. The aforementioned humanitarian acts during the First World War were – in visual terms, too, particularly in an age of ever accelerating mediatization – important also in light of rampant anti-Asian racism. Photos of Japanese nurses tending to the maimed bodies of gravely wounded Western soldiers, or of a Japanese sword handed to a Western king, depicted watershed moments in the emancipation from the Eurocentric world order of the ‘long nineteenth century’, with all its future consequences. They came about at a historical moment when what historian Sandra Wilson has called “the discourse of national greatness” reached an early peak in the pre-1945 history of Japan.18 This atmosphere of lending support to its Western allies during the First World War, as well as the mass media coverage of such actions, very plausibly influenced the idea of supporting international efforts to rebuild the library of the University of Louvain in the form of a book donation – an initiative that would be readily adopted by the Japanese elites in the direct aftermath of the war.

The First World War Economic Boom in Japan and Its Consequences

The war led to an unprecedented economic boom in Japan between mid-1915 and early 1920, in particular because of the demand for supplies by its allies. As markets in China and South-East Asia, for instance, were temporarily vacated by the European competition, the state – and the Japanese Empire in toto, as well as the Japanese business world – was able to acquire a budget surplus that could be used for more than just immediate necessities and reinvestment.19 This development was crucial for gaining the financial means and fostering the willingness of political and business elites to engage in cultural diplomacy and philanthropy inside and outside Japan. The modern Japanese state, for the first time in its existence since 1868, shifted from being a debtor nation to becoming a creditor on the financial markets. Aside from funding major infrastructure projects, the sharply rising tax revenue meant that considerable funding could be provided domestically to cultural endeavors such as the compilation of multi-volume local histories of prefectures and cities. These projects helped support an ongoing process of creating new local historical identities in the wake of long decades of turbulent change, during which the numerous feudal fiefdoms evolved into the modern administrative units created in the 1870s.20 Similarly, Japanese industrialists engaged in large-scale domestic philanthropy throughout the war, an era that was called the age of the narikin, the nouveaux riches.21

The acceleration of socio-economic change due to the wartime boom also gave a major boost to academic institutions, as the demand for higher education was rising. The last year of the war witnessed the “University ordinance” (Daigaku-rei), which elevated many institutions of higher learning, including state- or prefecture-level colleges, to university status. Likewise, the already established, prestigious Imperial Universities also saw major expansion. The Japanese state actively and intentionally reinvested part of the high tax revenue that the wartime economic boom had created into the expansion of higher education, especially in natural sciences, technology, medicine, and social sciences.22 The war had powerfully demonstrated the value and rising necessity of these fields for the Japanese ministerial bureaucracy and the military, both of which had studied the wartime mobilization of academia closely.23
Japanese universities – similar to their counterparts all over the world – eagerly used this recognition to attract state funding for expanding their faculties or creating new ones. In that respect, almost the entire, steadily growing corps of university professors had studied at European universities and thus they were part of transnational networks in their respective fields. It is therefore not surprising that the leading academic institutions – represented by the members of the Imperial Academy as well as the rectors of several Imperial universities and of the most prestigious private universities – became involved after the war in the National Committee to support the international effort to rebuild the library of the University of Louvain, one of the oldest and most prestigious European universities.

Enabled by the wartime gains, several state-run or privately financed research institutes were founded, many of which belong to the leading institutions in their field worldwide to this very day. The arguably most renowned is the Rikagaku kenkyūjo, nowadays known to the world as RIKEN, the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research, founded in 1917. Another example would be the Ōhara shakai mondai kenkyūjo, the Ōhara Institute for Social Research, founded in 1919 by the entrepreneur and philanthropist Ōhara Magosaburō (1880-1943) from Kurashiki, a city close to Okayama in western Japan. Ōhara had made a fortune with the production of silk fabric, as a banker, and as the head of a major electric company, all of which saw major expansion during the First World War. Since its creation, the institute has been distinguished for having been home to or been supported by many of the most renowned sociologists and economists of modern Japan. Its research on labor and society, social movements, and economics, as well as its sophisticated statistics regarding aspects of labor in modern society, are internationally famous. Nowadays, it is part of Hōsei University in Tokyo and an important archive for the documentation of social movements, including rare materials such as political posters, several of which can be found in this catalogue (see pp. 254-271).

As part of Japan’s new self-confidence and financial possibilities in the wake of the First World War, many other successful businessmen and their families started to engage in philanthropy outside of Japan as well. In the early 1920s, as Willy Vande Walle mentions in his
essay, substantial financial support from the Iwasaki family (behind the Mitsubishi conglomerate), the Mitsui family, the Sumitomo family, the Furukawa family, and others for the Japanese book donation to the University of Louvain needs to be seen in the context of the aforementioned substantial economic gains during the First World War. Of course, they had already engaged in philanthropic acts before, but it was in the direct wake of the First World War that the scale significantly changed. In this regard, other representative examples would be the donation of a “Chaire d’Histoire de la Civilisation Japonaise” by “Baron Mitsui et autres notables Japonais” to the Université de Paris, Sorbonne in 1920; later on, the same decade also saw the donation of a “Maison du Japon” to the Cité internationale universitaire de Paris (built 1927-1929) as well as the chair for Japanese Studies to the University of Louvain, both donated by Satsuma Jirōhachi, the heir to another industrial fortune residing in Paris.25

The actual manner chosen for contributing to the reconstruction of the university library – a donation of almost 14,000 volumes of Japanese books, the majority of which were premodern titles – is discussed in greater detail in Willy Vande Walle’s essay. In connection to the First World War, it should be briefly mentioned that the war – at least within the political, economic, and cultural elites – catalyzed a shift in perception of Japan’s own historical and cultural identity, one that had
been in the making for decades. This argument is difficult to prove empirically, to be sure, for there never was and almost certainly never will be a homogenous collective ‘cultural identity’. One should be careful even trying to frame such a – constructed – thing, since it usually comes as a set with central elements of national ideology often imposed by a tiny fragment of the population without being at all contested. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that at least Japan’s conservative elites in politics, business, and academia – and very likely also a growing middle class – underwent a fundamental change in early twentieth-century Japan in their collective perception and ideological use of national history and cultural heritage.

It is therefore no coincidence that most of the books donated to the University of Louvain stem from the Edo period (1600-1868). At the beginning of the modern nation-state in the late nineteenth century, the Edo period had been denounced as a feudal past that had to be overcome, in order to be on a par with European ‘civilization’. However, in the early twentieth century, the Edo period experienced a renaissance and became perceived as part of the essence of Japanese ‘culture’ (bunka) in the years before the First World War. This re-evaluation was to an extent also indebted to the trend of ‘Japonisme’ in European art in the late nineteenth century, not to mention the successful creation of the image of ‘samurai values’. As the alleged core of Japanese premodern culture, these qualities were depicted as exerting their influence into modern times in publications such as Nitobe Inazō’s book Bushido: The Soul of Japan, first published in English in 1899, which also proved successful in its later Japanese version.26 Elements of the cultural production of the Edo period such as the ukiyo-e and nishiki-e prints – discussed here in the essay by Freya Terryn – became a prized item for collectors all over the world, and were more and more seen as the epitome of Japanese culture. That more than ninety percent of the Japanese population in the Edo period had not been part of the warrior class, and that the selection of Edo period cultural production that became so appreciated in modern times was very eclectic, is not surprising. It serves, rather, as a mechanism that can be observed in many modern nation-states, one that historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have pointed out as part of their concept of the “invention of tradition”.27 In her classic text on “The Invention of Edo”, the renowned historian of modern Japan Carol Gluck has argued that one of the most prevalent appearances of the bygone Edo period in modern times can be seen in its consumption in popular culture. That cultural production included, for instance, the hundreds of chanbara eiga, sword-fighting films enacting the Edo period which were produced by Japanese film companies in the 1910s and 1920s.28 For the Japanese National Committee that created the donation to the University of Louvain and whose members were recruited from the political, academic, and economic elite, however, the Edo period books donated had the purpose of “transmitting Japanese culture (Nihon bunka) to the West”, as their official final report from 1926 stated.29

The enormous economic gains of the First World War years had helped to facilitate this paradigm shift by enabling not only private connoisseurs, but also the state and the regional governments of Japan to invest in ambitious publication projects and collections as part of a drive to redefine Japanese ‘culture’. In that sense, the First World War was essential as a major facilitator for (re)forming a Japanese cultural identity. At the same time, however, the socio-economic changes accelerated by the war propelled a modern way of life, of urban mass culture, and of mass consumption that was detrimental to highly elitist projects such as the donation to the University of Louvain. The latter development and the following disruptive period of the Asian-Pacific War (1931-1945) are crucial in understanding why the donation was almost forgotten afterwards.

Mutual Belgian-Japanese Relief Efforts as Part of the Legacy of the First World War

In many ways the First World War years had a fundamental influence on the international nature of the Interwar Period. To be sure, diverging interests among the former wartime coalition of the Entente and Associated Powers led to tensions between Japan and Great Britain, for instance, and between Japan and the USA. By and large, however, the so-called Versailles-Washington System – building on the treaties concluded in Paris in 1919 and, for the Asia-Pacific region, in Washington 1921/22 – ushered in an atmosphere of international cooperation with the newly created League of Nations at the center of expectations.
As explained in this volume by Lieven Sommen, cultural diplomacy became more important for Japan, too. In many countries that had been its wartime allies, Japan could advance foreign relations with favorable recent memories of the support given by Japan and the Japanese people, and Belgium was no exception. It is noteworthy that in Japan as well as among its wartime allies the perception of this wartime alliance can also be traced to material culture. It may seem ephemeral at first, but on many objects the flags of Japan, Britain, France, Italy, the US, and also of Belgium were displayed together, with Japan as the only non-Western member among the ‘Five Great Powers’ (whereas Russia’s status was unclear after the Bolshevik Revolution, with the emerging Soviet Union thus excluded from being embedded in such commemorative culture). Objects like the commemorative plate on display in the exhibition and shown here were common, while in the Royal Library in Brussels a rare

9. First World War commemorative pin in the form of an airplane with allied flags including Japan. Source: Royal Library of Belgium (KBR), Inv. II, 2189.

collection of commemorative pins also shows that Japan was seen in Belgium as an integral part of the coalition during the war and in its immediate aftermath.

The fact that the Imperial Seal of Japan can be seen together with the flags of Britain, France, Italy, and the US on the façade of the new library building of the University of Louvain at its inauguration in 1928, resulted not only from the Japanese book donation but also from the integral part Japan played in the commemoration of the First World War alliance in more general terms.

As Willy Vande Walle lays out in his essay, it was deemed to be only logical that Japanese Crown Prince Hirohito (1901-1989), the later Shōwa emperor (r. 1926-1989), when travelling through the countries of the wartime alliance, would visit not only battlefields of the First World War in Ieper/Ypres and in Luik/Liège, but also Leuven/Louvain, which was still in the process of reconstruction. Guiding the young Crown Prince through the ruins of the old university library were Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier (1851-1926) – a popular figure of resistance against the German occupation in the Japanese mass media during the war – and Rector Paulin Ladeuze (1870-1940). Many documents and objects related to his visit remain in Belgian and Japanese archives. The Crown Prince was received by the King of Belgium and Belgian notables in Brussels at a gala dinner, and the meticulous preparations for his itinerary in Belgium show once more the traces of the First World War. The visit to the destroyed landscapes of Ieper/Ypres and to a panorama painting in Brussels of the drearily muddy IJzer/Yser front seems to have left a genuinely strong impression on Hirohito and his entourage, and soon after his return to Japan the Imperial Household Ministry donated 10,000 yen, a sizeable sum at that time, to the effort of the National Committee. This sum became the core of other financial donations from affluent Japanese families, which then were used to purchase the book donation to the University of Louvain, which arrived between 1924 and 1926. The visit by the Crown Prince was also an immensely popular topic with the Japanese public, covered by the Japanese mass media in great detail.

Even the arguably most critical situation in the process of the preparation of the donation and the way it unfolded can be attributed partially to the First World War. Namely, on September 1, 1923, the Great Kantō Earthquake hit the Tokyo-Yokohama region. Along with the subsequent ubiquitous fires, this massive earthquake destroyed large parts of the Japanese capital region and killed about 100,000 of its inhabitants. Many contemporary Japanese observers immediately commented in the mass media that the flattened, charred landscape of Tokyo resembled the images of the battlefields of Ieper/Ypres, the Somme, or Verdun. These were well known.
to the Japanese public through the many photos and films that had been in the media during the war, not to mention the images conveyed to the Japanese audience from Crown Prince Hirohito’s visit in 1921. Several “actuality films” that were shot by Japanese media companies or by British and French film companies also had shown the Crown Prince walking over the moonscapes of the former battlefields. They proved to be very popular, with movie-goers in the millions and, thus, with several screenings a day lasting into the night even at smaller, local cinemas in Japan. Very likely, then, images of that kind had become such a part of the collective memory that the idea (mentioned above) could be voiced that now Japan had its own Ieper/Ypres. The Japanese capital region, it was said, needed a complete reconstruction modeled after the postwar reconstruction in West Flanders or other sites of wartime destruction.31 Internationally, the news – and the images – of the destroyed Tokyo-Yokohama landscape and of the hundreds of thousands of domestic refugees displaced from their dwellings evoked immediate willingness for a donation campaign, coordinated in Belgium by the Belgian Red Cross. Part of this campaign was a “Japanse Dag te Antwerpen”/“Journée Japonaise à Anvers”, and it is not a coincidence that it took place on November 11, 1923, that is, on Armistice Day. A rare two-minute, forty-nine-second film of the event – in the possession of the Antwerp City Archives and stored in the Royal Film Archive of Belgium – shows citizens of Antwerp dressed as Japanese at the head of a solidarity parade, carrying a banner of the Union amicale d’Anvers launching a “Hulp aan Japan”–“Aide au Japon” campaign. Another material trace of this can be found in the Royal Library in Brussels, where a voluminous album contains the signatures of about 15,000 pupils from schools in Tokyo and Yokohama expressing their gratitude for the considerable financial donations made by Belgians as part of the international relief effort after the earthquake.

The University of Louvain, where the new university library was not yet even built, also participated by sending books to Tokyo Imperial University, which had lost its library to the fires after the earthquake. It was this atmosphere of mutual Belgian-Japanese relief efforts, interwoven in the commemoration of the alliance of the First World War, that caused the National Committee in Japan to decide to continue the preparations for the book donations to Belgium, regardless of the enormous loss of books in Tokyo in 1923.

**Conclusion**

The First World War provided, in several ways, structural preconditions for the 1920s Japanese donation to the University of Louvain. It transformed the way the Japanese public viewed the world in an age of ever intensifying mediatization, including the perception of Belgium. The Japanese mass media followed the development of the war closely and actively provided extensive commentary, often highlighting humanitarian and symbolic acts of solidarity such as the dispatch of seventy-five Japanese Red Cross

![12. Still from the film ‘Japanse Dag te Antwerpen’ of parts of a parade with citizens of Antwerp dressed as Japanese as part of a Red Cross charity event on Armistice Day (11 November) 1923, to collect money for the victims of the Great Kantō Earthquake in Japan of 1 September 1923. Source: Felixarchive, Stadsarchief Antwerpen.](image1)

![13. Still from the film ‘Japanse Dag te Antwerpen’ of citizens of Antwerp dressed as geisha. Source: Felixarchive, Stadsarchief Antwerpen.](image2)
14. “Letter of Gratitude to the Belgian People” in French in a register with signatures of pupils of schools in Tokyo expressing their gratitude for the Belgian aid in the aftermath of the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake, 1924, KBR, Manuscripts Department, Ms. II 5974.

15. Signatures of pupils of schools in Tokyo arranged as a Japanese flag, KBR, Manuscripts Department, Ms. II 5974.
nurses to Britain, France, and Russia, as well as the donation of a Japanese sword to King Albert I of Belgium by Japanese newspaper companies. By at least symbolically reversing the originally Eurocentric world order of the nineteenth century, these acts were part of a process of emancipation, as the Empire of Japan now supported its besieged European allies.

The economic boom of the war years in Japan also served as a precondition for the 1920s donation: firstly in a very direct, material way, by allowing the creation of surplus earnings that could be invested in cultural diplomacy by the state and in philanthropy by private entrepreneurs; secondly, by strengthening Japanese universities and research institutes, which elevated the standing and self-confidence of these institutions, many of which became supporters of the donation by joining into a public-private partnership with the aforementioned philanthropic entrepreneurs. Although empirically somewhat hard to prove, it can also be argued that the economic gains and the accompanying socio-economic changes, in addition to the elevated international standing of the Empire of Japan in the postwar order, also might have catalyzed an already ongoing shift in collective ‘cultural identity’ - at least within the elites - leading to the impulse to “transmit Japanese culture” actively outside of Japan and to represent it abroad in the form of such donations.

Moreover, several concrete Belgian-Japanese relief efforts can be seen as part of the legacy of the First World War. They were embedded in an atmosphere commemorating the wartime alliance, with symbols such as the national flags visible in the material culture of both countries in the early 1920s. Crown Prince Hirohito’s visit to Belgium - and, as part of it, to the sites of wartime destruction in Ieper/Ypres, Luik/Liège, and Leuven/Louvain - also is a direct outcome of the First World War. In the case of his visit to Leuven, this led to the contribution of a considerable sum by the Imperial Household Ministry to the Japanese donation as part of the international effort to rebuild the library of the University of Louvain, thereby encouraging affluent Japanese entrepreneurs to follow suit. The visit also had a deeper impact on the visual collective memory in Japan, given the many photographs and the films of Crown Prince Hirohito’s visit to the former battlefields of the First World War. These representations cemented the image of large-scale wartime destruction of cities and entire landscapes that had already been previously conveyed by the Japanese mass media during the war. This image was subsequently turned to when the Great Kantō Earthquake devastated large parts of the Tokyo-Yokohama area in September 1923. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the Belgian contribution to international relief efforts through financial donations by citizens and of books by the University of Louvain further strengthened the wartime atmosphere of mutual support and led to the decision by the National Committee coordinating the Japanese donation not to abandon the project, despite the fact that the earthquake had destroyed many major libraries in Tokyo, including the one at Tokyo Imperial University. The structural nexus between the First World War and the 1920s Japanese donation to the University of Louvain was made all the more manifest in the fact that major fundraising events in Belgium to participate in the disaster relief after the 1923 earthquake in Japan were staged on November 11, 1923, on Armistice Day. These traces of an ongoing commemoration of wartime alliances, of which the Japanese book donation is a part, faded towards the end of the 1920s when new global challenges appeared. Only too soon afterward would the Japanese donation become a – nearly – forgotten chapter in the legacy of the First World War.