

KAWAGUCHI'S *ZIPANG*, AN ALTERNATE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Science-fiction is not necessarily about the future but it can deal with history as well. Since the publication of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) time travel has become a popular feature of various SF-stories. Time travel has proven not only a fantastic device for imagining "what if" – stories, but also an intriguing means to revise past events from a contemporary perspective. A very interesting and recent example is Kaiji Kawaguchi's ongoing manga series *Zipangu* (translated as *Zipang* in English and French), which has met since its start in 2001, in the popular Kodansha manga magazine *Weekly Morning*, both popular and critical success¹ (Masanao, 2004: 184-187). By August 2008 some 400 episodes were collected in 36 volumes² of the Japanese edition, and 21 volumes were translated into French³ – which will be the ones analysed in this article (the number of the volume will appear in Latin numbers, and the number of the episode in arabic numbers: followed by page number after a colon). While the English translation was suspended⁴, the French edition seems a lot more succesful, at least from a critical point of view – see Bastide (2006, 218-219) or Finet (2008: 272-273), and a nomination at the Angoulême comics festival in 2007). *Zipang* is not only a fairly skillfully manga for young males ("seinen"), but it adresses also a number of current political debates of Japan's recent history and near future. The story is about a vessel of the

¹ For instance Kawaguchi received the 2002 Kodansha Manga Award (Kodansha Manga Sho) in the category "general". Due to the success of the manga also 26 anime episodes were made for Japanese television (2004-2005) and a computer game.

² Each volume collects 9 to 11 episodes (mostly about 20 or 22 pages), so in total more than 8700 pages have already been published and the series is still going on.

³ Since 2005 Kana of the Dargaud-Lombard group has been publishing *Zipang* at a rate of 6 volumes a year. The French volumes (II, III, VI, IX, X, XII, XIII, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX) include also pages with further details on the historical context or the production of *Zipang*.

⁴ The suspension of the American translation may be not so surprising, because in this manga series the American fleet is continually loosing from only one Japanese battle ship, the *Mirai*.

Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force that is transported mysteriously during a heavy storm from the first decade of the 21st century to a day before the battle of Midway in June 1942. Gradually the 21st century crew is drawn into the maelstrom of this “alternative WW2” and all kinds of political and moral debates surface. Though my reading will foremost focuss on this “political content” of *Zipang*, I will also pay some attention to the formal aspects of this work, because like Bordwell & Thompson (2001: 39) I do also believe that the formal aspects of visual works are essential in the creation of meaning and as Berndt (2008: 315-317) has shown war manga can engage readers in various, even distinct, ways.

To grasp the relevance of *Zipang* Japan’s recent history has to be taken into account. As one of the defeated Axis nations of WW2 this archipelago has a peculiar and ambiguous stance to war. The introduction of the Constitution of Japan, written by the Americans and voted by the Japanese parliament in 1947, consecrated the spirit of ultimate non-violence. Article 9 stated explicitly that the Japanese people renounced war forever as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. The clause postulated too that land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, would never be maintained. Nevertheless these constitutionally formulated war-renouncing and peaceful aims, Japan has turned, in fact, from a shattered, occupied, and disarmed country after WW2 into one of the world’s strongest military powers (Lind, 2003: 39). Japan may spend each year about 43 billion US dollars on the military, but this is a comparatively small defense allocation of only 1% of the Gross Domestic Product (source *The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2008, CIA World Fact Book 2008*). Though postwar Japanese culture has nurtured a strong popular yearning for peace and aversion to war⁵, after the collapse of the Cold War system Japan’s media and public opinion transformed to one that supported a new policy of active national security (Shinoda 2007). For Akaha (2005: 15-16) this shift is a result of three factors: first, the changing nature of the U.S.-Japan alliance into

⁵ After the imperial propaganda manga of WW2, the few war manga of the fifties had all an anti-war bend (largely due to American censorship), but from the early 1960s on pro-war views began to creep back into the media and manga, others responded to this new trend with an anti-war viewpoint (eg. Nakazawa’s *Hadashi no Gen / Barefoot Gen*) but also romanticized war stories were created (Thompson, 2007: 217). All by all, the American type of invincible soldier (eg. *Sgt. Furry, Sgt. Rock*) is absent in Japanese comics, but, states an American specialist of Japanese comics Schodt (1989: 75-76): “This does not mean that Japanese men and boys do not fantasize about the romance of combat. It means that there are different standards of acceptability. Japanese comics may be among the most violent in world, but when World War II is portrayed romantically the emphasis is usually on the bonds formed between men under stress; on death, not of the enemy but of Japanese troops (tragic death has a romantic overtone to it); or on the machinery of war – the planes, ships, and weapons. The enemy is rarely portrayed in a racist light”.

an organisation for regional and global stability, second, the political need to transform Japan into a “normal state”, third, concerns about the military built up in North Korea and China. On the terrain this has resulted, for the first time since WW2, in the dispatchment of the Japanese army, called Self-Defense Forces, in overseas UN peacekeeping operations in 1990s. More recently special legislation was voted so that SDF could support the American “War on Terror” in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless this new more self confident policy has met also some setbacks: in July 2008 the Japanese government, reacting to rising violence in Afghanistan, decided against the deployment its SDF on land, but the refueling mission by the Maritime Self-Defense Force in the Indian Ocean was allowed to continue (UPI, July 18, 2008).

Japanese popular culture has reflected also the new developments (Shimazu, 2003). The military is for instance collaborating on various recent film projects, including *I Go To Die For You* (*Ore wa, kimi no tame ni koso shini ni iku*, Taku Shinjo, 2007) on the kamikaze pilots of WW2. For the Japan correspondent of the *Telegraph* Colin Joyce (2007) the release of this film confirmed a growing nostalgia in Japan about its wartime generation, even among the majority who accept the cause was wrong. Some manga authors are dealing with similar issues (see Contrari and Zaccagnino, 2007; Berndt, 2008). Kaiji Kawaguchi's first long running series *Silent Service* (*Chinmoku no Kantai*, 1988-1996) was one of the rare popular Japanese comics that dealt with international affairs and stimulated discussion about political issues rarely mentioned, appealing to a latent nationalism (Schodt, 1996: 166-167). For Kinsella (2000: 87) *Silent Service* reflected the experimental fusion of left-wing and right-wing ideas and symbols in a new political era. Kawaguchi's new series *Zipang* resembles somehow *Silent Service*: again it is about a unit of contemporary Japan SDF, which plays an important role in global politics; but while *Silent Service* was created and set against the background of the (end of) the Cold War (late 1980s and early 1990s), the new *Zipang* series is situated during the wartime, shortly after Pearl Harbor. Kaiji Kawaguchi is, of course, not the only manga author whose work refers to current debates in Japanese society, but he is one of the few who does it rather explicitly. In the very first pages, when four MDSF vessels leave the harbour of Yokosuka, demonstrators claim that the war-renouncing constitution is violated and a television reporter says that public opinion is widely divided about this mission (together with the US Navy, the Japanese vessels sail to the republic of Ecuador to protect civilians in a local war). But during their trip on the Pacific a heavy storm transports one of the destroyers, the “*Mirai*” (Japanese for “the Future”) back in time to 1942. At first captain Saburo Umezu orders not to change the original destination for Pearl Harbor (I, 2: 66), but – for unclear reasons – he changes course back to

their original point of depart, Yokosuka harbour (I, 3: 94)⁶. On its way home the *Mirai* sails into a crashed plane, Executive Officer and second in command, Yosuke Kadomatsu rescues an Imperial Japanese Navy officer, Takumi Kusaka from drowning. This is the real start of the adventure because this rescued officer will eventually turn out as an oponent to the *Mirai* officers who do not want to intermingle with the events of WW2. Moreover, in the mean time, an American submarine tries to torpedo the *Mirai*, which obliges the 21st century crew to effectively interact with the events of 1942. Once the crew learns that a quick return to their own time is out of question, a debate about their destiny splits them up : contrary to some crew members who would rather prefer to return to 1942 Japan than to keep roaming about the ocean, Yosuke Kadomatsu declares that the vessel itself is the last piece of their country, which can not be handed over to strange hands (II, 11: 40-41). Before he had already clearly distinguished himself from Imperial Japan, when he deplored all the lives lost in the war because of this “strategy thought by arrogant, pretentious people” (I, 3: 90). However, the plot thickens and when during a reconnaissance flight for the first time a crew member (co-pilot Mori) is killed, the discussion heats up on board of the *Mirai*. With historial knowledge about the coming events and the superior equipment⁷ of the *Mirai*, captain Umezu decides that they should try to limit the number of war casualties, which implies that they will actively try to bend the historical course of events. Consequently the events of the story disgress increasingly from the actual events of WW2 and the situation becomes even more complex and dubious. Often reluctantly the officers have to make difficult choices⁸: saving many lives may imply also the loss of some other lives, and how to deal with Imperial Japan⁹. Taking part in real combat for the first time influences the moral of the crew¹⁰. Later even the very basic

⁶ In fact the change in course is probably motivated by the narrative possibilities: if they continued to Pearl Harbor and gave in to the Americans, the story would have rather quickly come to an end.

⁷ Like the real JMSDF destroyers the *Mirai* is equipped with one of the most advanced and most capable defense systems currently in use, namely the Aegis combat system. AEGIS is a fully integrated waepon system (missilelaunching system, radar, computer programs and displays) built to defend against air, surface and subsurface threats (retrieved from *Jane's*, 12 August 2008 <http://www.janes.com/defence/naval_forces/news/misc/aegis010425.shtml>).

⁸ Kadomatsu (III, 27: 135): “Nous ne sommes pas des politiciens, ni des philosophes, nous sommes des officiers de la force de défense!”.

⁹ The officers of the *Mirai* are asked wear the Imperial Army uniforms when they get in direct contact with the Imperial soldiers (X,101).

¹⁰ Even Yosuke Kadomatsu, asking himself about the consequences of killing other people, is bewildered by the experience that he does not experience more guilt feelings than killing some flies (VI, 60: 143-144): “Et lorsque l’on tue autant d’hommes comme ça, que crois-tu qu’il nous arrive? Je ne parle pas des héros de l’histoire mais de types ordinaires comme moi eh bien on

foundations of postwar Japan and the SDF are questioned by the rescued Imperial officer Kusaka (VIII, 78: 47): “You don’t protect sovereignty or the people. You’re nothing but some pawns for the interests of the United States. SDF... what are you in fact? The reasons of your existence are nothing but lies: you’re simply an army that wags its tail for other countries...¹¹”.

Though Kusaka is seemingly the antipode of the main protagonist, Kadomatsu, this rogue and extreme figure seems to be a character with whom many (Japanese) readers can sympathise in one way or another¹². His words may strike various chords, especially when he tackles explicitly some postwar Japanese taboos. For a rational figure Kusaka seems quite courageous and extremely convinced of his own beliefs: he does, for instance, not hesitate to play Russian Roulette to convince the German scientist to hand over the uranium to him (XII, 128 & 129). While Kadomatsu keeps trying to hinder the actions of Kusaka to alter history (especially by giving Japan an atom bomb earlier than the Americans), more and more crew members of the *Mirai* become infatuated by the idea that they should join forces with the Imperial Army – especially after pilot Satake’s altruistic death (XIV, 150: 120-124). Navigation Officer Kouhei Oguri fears that the crew no longer fights with their heads but with their heart (XIV, 151: 142). Gunnery Officer Masayuki Kikuchi complots with an officer of the Imperial Army (Taki) and stages a mutiny aboard *Mirai*. By then Kikuchi’s metamorphosis is complete: in the beginning he was very hesitant intermingling with WW2 events¹³, but after the battle with US aircraft carrier *Wasp* Kikuchi changes his stance on attacking enemy targets and becomes convinced that it is in the best interest of the *Mirai* crew and Japan to help the Imperial Army to win the war (XIV, 150: 124). His

devient probablement fou... pourtant ...je suis là debout, sans plus de culpabilité que si j’avis tué des mouches POURQUOI ?”.

¹¹ The French translation of the Japanese text reads: “Vous ne protégez ni la souveraineté, ni le peuple. Vous n’êtes que des pions servant les intérêts des Etats-Uni/ La force d’autodéfense qui êtes-vous, finalement ? Les raisons de votre existence ne sont que mensonges : vous n’êtes qu’une force armée qui remue la queue devant les autres pays”.

¹² Quite often in popular fiction the antagonist or “bad guy” becomes the most fascinating figure, think of Rorschach in *Watchmen* – which was according to Alan Moore, the script writer not his goal (van Oudheusden, 1991: 66-67).

¹³ Kikuchi (I: 9, 210) : “Pour tous les hommes, c’est le premier combat réel. Ils ne sont pas très chaud. Non seulement on n’a que des zéros dans notre camp mais en plus, il y a cette incertitude sur la possibilité d’un retour chez nous... Si on doit connaître un nouvel affrontement avec un tel stress ambiant, les risques seront très grands...”.

friend and superior Kadomatsu can not agree with Kikuchi but finds himself outnumbered and has to leave the ship with a few loyalists (XV, 166)¹⁴.

The storyline of *Zipang* combines sensational, thrillerlike action scenes with lengthy discussion scenes between the major players and lots of background information about the technological, economical, political situation. All these data and discussions help the reader to have a clue about the complexities of a world war: especially the various internal political debates about strategic choices may surprise comics readers, used to clear-cut characters and manichean stories¹⁵. Via though balloons and flash back scenes the characters get a rich background and the human drama is enhanced. While the focus is dominantly on Japanese characters (especially Kadomatsu and Kusaka), the reader gets to know also some non-Japanese characters, (foremost American officers but also for instance an Indian pilot of Indian Air Force). In fact, scores of figures play important role in this story, among them also widely known historical figures as Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong and various Japanese figures as fleet admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, general Kanji Ishiwara, or politician Mitsumasa Yonai. When the author stages such historical figures, he tries to stay as closely as possible to their actual behaviour and stance; but since the circumstances are digressing from the actual accounts, he has to imagine how these characters could have reacted in such hypothetical circumstances. In that Kawaguchi does not differ very much from military historians who wrote “what if” – hypotheses (see eg. Cowley, 1999). In contrast to most historians who do not accept thought experiments as appropriate tools for historical research, various philosophers (Bulhof, 1999; De Mey & Weber, 2003) believe that counterfactuals are a legitimate part of the most serious historical studies. Bulhof (1999: 168) argues through counterfactuals historians can investigate responsibility, historical causes, and discover the importance of key events. Rosenfeld (2002: 103) in his study of American alternate histories concludes that they come in different varieties in order to accommodate different views towards the contemporary world: Nightmare scenarios have most often been used to validate the present, while fantasy scenarios have been utilized in order to criticize it. By tracing how a given theme has been portrayed over time, we can learn a great deal about any society’s views of its past.

¹⁴ Including the clumsy, fat Yanagi, a military-history geek who knows all the details of the War of the Pacific and can be seen as the representation of an otaku, fan of manga (Berndt, 2008: 288).

¹⁵ For instance the causes of Japan’s imperialistic war are debated: for Kusaka (II, 12: 46) the control over energy sources was one of the main reasons, for Kadomatsu the high command of the Army was responsible but minister Kito says that is the public opinion, stirred by the media, who supported the Army (VIII, 85: 196-198).

Regarding the American context Rosenfeld (2002: 103) finds that periods of time perceived as ascendant have tended to elicit allohistories that validate the present by imagining an inferior past, and vice versa. Even after more than 4000 pages of the French edition it is not possible to make out if *Zipang* is rather a critique or a celebration of Japan's Imperial past. While *Zipang* gives attention to the casualties of war, it takes also great pleasure in showing almost heroic sea battles. Main characters as pilot Satake or captain Umezu may die, but always as an altruistic heroic gesture: they give their lives for others – there is a certain kamikaze ring to it. Though the author addresses various important issues (including torture by Japanese “special” police), he avoids conveniently the most tricky and touchy parts of Imperial Japan, as the use of biological weapons on civilians¹⁶. Manga as *Zipang* could be seen as strategically ambiguous about politics, offering various ways of interpretation. Such manga resemble therefore the political ambiguity of Hollywood movies, which helpfully disarms criticisms from interest groups and also gives the productions an air of moral seriousness (Bordwell, 2008). In *Zipang* also lot of ideas are questioned and quite contrasting opinions are uttered, but there a dominant point of view seems lacking. This manga shows for instance very well the tension between a personal opinion and acting upon it: some important decision makers on the Japanese side oppose war but comply out of loyalty to the nation. To succeed in one's goals various strategies are possible, but not all are effective and there are no guarantees to have made the “right choice”. One of the themes of *Zipang* is indeed the very existence of destiny and the question if can one escape from it. This manga aspires to be “multifocal” because, as Gervereau (2003: 85) claims, there is not one right image of a war, every war should be seen from diverse and complementary viewpoints.

Though the characters and backgrounds may look quite realistic by Kawaguchi academic style¹⁷, various plot turns not always very believable: for instance the episodes located in Germany (with the murder attempt on Hitler and the robbery of the German uranium) are not very convincing. Nevertheless the series is heavily documented and the author intermingles very well historical realism and proper imagination. The destroyer *Mirai* is, for instance, an improved version of the real JMSDF Kongo class destroyers¹⁸, but in reality they do not carry aircrafts on board as the *Mirai*, which carries in

¹⁶ Contrary to the experimenting Nazi camp doctors, the Japanese scientists of Unit 731 were never held accountable for their crimes (Williams & Wallace, 1989).

¹⁷ Kawaguchi's drawing may be suited for a rather technical depiction of ships and planes, but is quite limited in the suggestion of bodily motion (eg. II, 18: 186). Consequently the pages of *Zipang* are mainly populated by talking heads – just like most manga for adults.

¹⁸ The Kongo class destroyers is already a modification of the US Navy Arleigh Burke class.

its hangar a Seahawk helicopter and a fictional VTOL (Vertical Take-Off and Landing) armed reconnaissance aircraft, Umidori (Seagull). The presence of aircrafts on board offers, of course, more possibilities for the script writer. So there is always an interesting interplay between fact and fiction.

Kawaguchi's strong fascination for the Japanese Navy can probably be explained by his family situation. His father served during WW2 on a minesweeper and afterwards as a captain on an oil tanker. Together with his twin brother the young Kaiji collected ships' models, and he was an avid fan of the manga series *Submarine 707R* (1963-65) by Satoru Ozawa (Edomondo, 2008: 190-191). The basic inspiration for *Zipang* comes nevertheless from the American SF film *The Final Countdown* (Don Taylor, 1980) about a modern aircraft carrier that travels through time to just before the attack on Pearl Harbor, but as Horn (2007: 408) rightly remarks, the cultural differences between Japan's Navy of early 21st century and that of the Japanese Imperial Navy of WW2 are much greater. Furthermore the idea of a technologically advanced ship lonely in a hostile world, far removed from their own, is also the basic concept behind the *Star Trek Voyager* television series (1995-2001): like the crew on Voyager spaceship the Mirai crew is limited by the stringent rules of non-intervention and self-restraint of their organisation, respectively the Federation and the SDF. Moreover and more importantly is the tradition in Japan of "simulation stories", not only in manga (like in the monthly magazine *Combat Comic*) but also in games or novels. For Schodt (1996: 188-189) this simulation genre is so popular because Japan has lost the war:

This makes for painful reading, as one's favorite characters often wind up dead; it is certainly a reason that many war comics until recently have been tragic in tone, if not antiwar. In manga, most war comics still exist outside a political context and hardly seem to indicate a revival of militarism. Interestingly, at Nippon Shuppansha, nearly half of the stories star not Japanese, but foreign armies.

So, unlike that kind of war comics, Kawaguchi's *Zipang* is strongly linked to the current political situation. As Shimazu (2003: 115-116) claims there is a close correlation in Japan between politics and culture, especially in relation to politically sensitive themes as war:

Representations of the past directly reflect the concerns of the present. [...] the representations of the past in the literature, film and television of postwar Japan tended to reflect the conservative political environment created by the post-Occupation Japanese polity. [...] Assuming the role of victim allowed the Japanese to shy away from the unpleasant truth that they were also

aggressors, whose victims in Asia and elsewhere still demand an apology and compensation. Moreover, there is the added complication that the widely-shared victim mentality and pacifism rest uneasily on the bed of political conservatism. Therefore, the constructed identity of the postwar Japanese is inherently unbalanced, reflecting the yet unresolved nature of their past. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the single most important problem of “postwar” Japan is this inability to come to terms, once and for all, with the pre-1945 past.

Though Kaiji Kawaguchi's *Zipang* is a skillfully demonstration of how a war manga may appeal to readers of different backgrounds, this series is in the first place meant for its Japanese readers, who may differ in opinion in regard to Japan's past of WW2 and today's position in the world. Since the series has yet not concluded only a tentative analysis could be proposed. Up to now Kawaguchi has played many chords, pleasing both readers who like the action of war stories as those who enjoy more the human drama. Paradoxically for a war comic most pages are devoted to people discussing. Though the pace of the narration is quite low, this character-oriented war comic seems to captivate the reader by its thrillerlike and fantastic intrigue. Its constitutive moral ambiguity (nor explicitly pro or anti war) may be helpful in not perturbing the majority of the readers. By blending fantastical and historical elements Kawaguchi delivers an interesting revision of Japan's WW2 and current international affairs. Though its visual realism and almost educational didacticism, this manga is as “fantastic” as SF can be.

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