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Review Essay

Dutch Sinologists, Chinese Annals, and Other Stories

Two Ground-Breaking Contributions to Chinese-Indonesian Historiography

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Leonard Blussé & Nie Dening (eds.), *The Chinese Annals of Batavia, The Kai Ba Lidai Shiji and Other Stories (1610–1795)*. Leiden: Brill, 2018, xviii + 322 pp. ISBN: 9789004355392, price: EUR 99.00 (hardback), 9789004356702, EUR 99.00 (e-book).

Koos Kuiper, *The Early Dutch Sinologists (1854–1900): Training in Holland and China, Functions in the Netherlands Indies*. Leiden: Brill, 2017, xxii (volume 1), xiii (volume 2) + 1184 pp. ISBN: 9789004228870, price: EUR 226.00 (hardback, set), 9789004339637, EUR 226.00 (e-book).

Dutch Sinology is a rather odd point in the constellation of Area Studies. Few today realize that the University of Leiden largely owes its department of Chinese Studies to the history of southern Chinese migration to the Netherlands Indies. In the early days, scholarship on China and Southeast Asia was indeed as interconnected as the regions themselves. Sinologists provided key insights into Indonesia's past by making Chinese accounts on the "South Seas" available to European and later international audiences. A prominent example are the *Notes on the Malay Archipelago and Malacca*, published in 1880 by Willem Pieter Groeneveldt, which became such a useful compan-

ion to the study of premodern Indonesia that its (Indonesian) translation was published as recently as 2009.

Quite extraordinarily, two additional standard works have now appeared in quick succession. The two books under review here—both published by Brill—can be seen as connected histories of China, Indonesia, and the Netherlands. They complement each other in terms of chronological coverage. *The Chinese Annals of Batavia, The Kai Ba Lidai Shiji and Other Stories (1610–1795)*, edited by Leonard Blussé and Nie Dening, focuses on early-modern Jakarta/Batavia as described in Chinese sources. Koos Kuiper's *The Early Dutch Sinologists (1854–1900): Training in Holland and China, Functions in the Netherlands Indies* does what its title promises; in two volumes totalling 1184 pages, it traces the lives, careers, and legacies of Holland's late nineteenth-century pioneers of Sinology. Both studies are the product of meticulous archival research and enviable linguistic proficiencies. They also connect on a deeper level, as I will demonstrate in what follows.

The three authors of the two works are best described as “overseas sinologists”—to use Blussé's own term (p. xiv)—not in the banal sense of sinologists from overseas, but experts on overseas Chinese history. Their academic activities have intersected at several junctures. Blussé and Nie previously worked together on the fifteen-volume records of the Chinese Council in Batavia (*gong'anbu*), while Kuiper played a crucial role in the editing process of their present collaboration. Conversely, Kuiper's monograph—based on his dissertation—was supervised by Blussé. The resultant two studies—each in their own way—make for highly enriching reading for Indonesianists, scholars of Chinese diasporas, and historians of colonialism, among others.

The first book aims “to make available to the reader some very interesting eighteenth-century Chinese sources and let them speak largely for themselves” (p. xii). Its centerpiece is an eruditely annotated English translation of the *Chinese Annals of Batavia*, an anonymous work of historical reconstruction written in the late 1790s. This text has previously been published in the original Chinese (Xu 1953), yet the new version includes two previously neglected manuscripts kept at Leiden University. In essence, it is a history of Dutch-ruled Batavia from the perspective of one of its Chinese inhabitants, enlivened with anecdotes and portrayals of its urban population. The volume also includes a number of other Chinese descriptions of Batavia from the same century: Chen Xunwu's *Brief Account of Galaba* (1741), selections from Wang Dahai's *Anecdotes about the Sea Islands* (1791), and Gu Sen's *Jialaba* (ante 1795).

The second book examines the history of Dutch Sinology, from the perceived need in the Netherlands Indies to study Chinese languages down to the estab-

lishment of a department in Leiden, successive generations of scholars, and the accomplishments and failures of their training programs. The monograph contains a wealth of primary sources taken from the archive of the former Ministry of Colonies (in the National Archives in The Hague), letters, diaries, and publications by the sinologists themselves, and Dutch newspapers from the Indies and the Netherlands (p. 5). It offers detailed vistas into the lives of Holland's sinologists, whose career paths typically consisted of preparatory education in Leiden, a lengthy stay in China's southern provinces for "immersion," and eventually employment in the Netherlands Indies.

A recurring topic of debate among Dutch sinologists was the "dialect issue." The Chinese of Java, Padang, and Makassar predominantly spoke *Minnan-hua*, a Chinese variety known in Southeast Asia as *Hokkien*. Gustaaf Schlegel compiled his monumental four-volume Dutch-Chinese dictionary (1882–1891)—which, I hasten to add, deserves to be made freely available in digital format—in the Zhangzhou dialect of this variety. In addition, knowledge of Hakka, Cantonese, and Teochew became increasingly important in Sumatra and Borneo, where new immigrants from southern China had begun to settle in unprecedented numbers during the second half of the nineteenth century. All four varieties were studied by nineteenth-century Dutch sinologists. Mandarin always loomed in shadows of Dutch Sinology, but historically played a relatively minor role as it was not used in nineteenth-century Indonesia. Like many of his colleagues, Schlegel was unable to converse in it (p. 431). Next to Chinese, Dutch sinologists also needed to learn Malay.

Most Chinese sources on Indonesia are remarkably plurilingual and therefore hard to interpret. When professor Xu Yunqiao first published the *Chinese Annals of Batavia*, he had great difficulties with the numerous Dutch words and names in the text, all transcribed with Chinese characters (p. xiii). Its eventual translation into English is the result of impressive language skills, which are also palpably manifest in *The Early Dutch Sinologists*. All authors are aware of the importance of Hokkien, but only Kuiper represents it consistently. The unsuspecting reader might therefore be perplexed to encounter in the *Chinese Annals of Batavia* such ostensibly far-fetched glosses as *liangjiao* 'notary' (Dutch: *notaris*), *mazai* 'tax' (Malay: *bea*), *meisege* 'public prosecutor' (Malay: *piskal*, Dutch: *fiscaal*), and *pu* 'tax-farming' (Malay: *pak*, Dutch: *pacht*). Yet they all stand confirmed by *The Early Dutch Sinologists*, which gives their Hokkien pronunciations: *nió-ta* (梁礁), *bé-á* (碼仔), *bí-sik-koah* (美色葛), and *pák* (驛).

The inclusion of Hokkien pronunciations of words, names, and toponyms throughout the *Chinese Annals of Batavia* would have made them more recog-

nizable. Consider, for example, *ko-chhia* (高奢) ‘people from the Coromandel Coast’ (Malay: *koja*), *lô-kun* (老君) ‘doctor’ (Malay: *dukun*), *jiá-gâ* (喺牙) ‘guard’ (Malay: *jaga*), and *báng-ka-lōa* (蚊茭賴) ‘Mangga Dua’ (Malay: *mangga dua*), rather than “*gaoshe*,” “*laojun*,” “*reya*,” and “*wenjialai*.” I make this point not to find fault in a work that principally merits praise, but because of the additional insights one may glean by foregrounding Hokkien. Take, for instance, the fascinating passage in the *Brief Account of Galaba* about Batavia’s “rentable” slave girls (p. 214). The word used for them is *guili* (龜李), which, if pronounced in Hokkien (*kun-lí*), can be safely identified as Malay *gundik* ‘concubine, mistress.’ The island identified as “Pulau Lambat” (浮羅南抹) could equally well be Pulau Rambut (Hokkien: *phû-lô lâm-boát*). I suspect the loanword *sáp-hóang* (卅鈔) ‘business tax’ is derived not from *syahbandar* (p. 291), but from Malay *sawang* ‘ten-cent coin;’ Batavia’s hawkers had to pay a daily fee of ten cents (*pak sawang*) to legitimize their activities (de Haan 1922/2:22).

“Re-Hokkienization” thus enables the identification of places, people, and products in eighteenth-century Chinese sources. The names of the indigenous leaders *jū-lô-gán a-bāng* (裕嘮眼亞望), *jit-lô-nî* (日嘮咩), and *sú-lâ-ní-nâ-tà* (史勞爾藍罩) can be tentatively reconstructed as Juragan Abang, Jilani, and Suradinata. The ill-fated dignitaries described in the *Chinese Annals of Batavia* as *sian-tát-lí* (仙達裡)—men who were ordered by the sadistic Malay captain Wandoellah to eat pork (pp. 110–1)—must have been *santeri* ‘strict Muslims.’ The transcription *jiâu-sī pa-tit-lí* (饒氏巴直裡) presumably reflects *Joodse padri* ‘Jewish preacher;’ in a different spelling, the word *pa-tit-lí* (巴得女) was also used for a Dutch pastor. The Chinese name for Mookervaat, *kha-lêng káng* (腳寧港), resembles the Malay term *Gang Keling* ‘Indian neighbourhood.’ Indonesianists may also be interested to know that “kyara wood” (p. 206) equals *kelembak*, a highly valued variety of agarwood. The “elixir of life flowers” (p. 209) can be identified as *bunga siantan*, a medicinal flower currently used against typhus and dengue. While the editors may not have been aware of such linguistic trivia, they deserve to be mentioned nonetheless for the sake of the book’s non-specialist readers.

Scholars interested in the lives of Asian individuals under colonialism—all too often reduced to footnotes—will find much of appeal in both books. In *The Early Dutch Sinologists*, we learn that one of the standard textbooks in the field, *The Oil-Vendor*, was acquired by Schlegel from a Fujianese storyteller (pp. 129–32). We do not know the storyteller’s name, as Schlegel neglected to mention it, but his contribution is not to be ignored; *The Oil-Vendor* became compulsory reading in Leiden and it took students almost a year to work through (p. 340). We also learn about Leiden’s first native-speaking Chinese teacher Ko Tsching-

dschang, who taught at the Sinology department from 1830 to 1835 (pp. 89, 1020–1). Another notable figure is James William Young, a Batavia-born Eurasian who was considered the best translator of his time; he was fluent in Dutch, Malay, Amoy Hokkien, Zhangzhou Hokkien, Hakka, and Cantonese (pp. 1093–5). Do these individuals not deserve some acknowledgement in Leiden's Asia Library and in the university itself?

The *Chinese Annals of Batavia*, too, are festooned with interesting people. We learn about Thebitsia—"the number one miraculous doctor in Batavia" (p. 87)—who had been to the Netherlands. This local celebrity was also mentioned in the *Brief Account of Galaba* (p. 211). The wife of lieutenant Lim Somko, too, was known for her medical skills and "was able to heal Dutch people" (p. 90). A Balinese widow known as Gan Dji Nyai managed to ascend to the rank of Chinese captain after her Chinese husband passed away (pp. 72–3). The wife of Wang Jie, who had left China illegally, drew many curious stares in Batavia due to her uncommon attire; when the Chinese authorities discovered her illicit excursion, they sentenced to death several people involved in smuggling her out (p. 96). Finally, the anonymous author of the *Chinese Annals of Batavia* was himself quite a character. Presumably a secretary of Batavia's Chinese Council (p. xiv), his pungent portrayal of life in the city spared neither VOC leaders, indigenous royalty, nor Chinese notables.

Equally captivating are the ways Chinese and Dutchmen characterized each other. According to the *Brief Account of Galaba*, the character of Dutch women "is changeable, now fierce, then meek, so that most husbands fear their wives" (B&N, p. 217). A similar opinion was held by Tiō Siaó Hun, one of the Chinese teachers responsible for the Hokkien education of Leiden's sinologists: "European women have a higher position than men (because the men are always so extremely polite and subservient)" (K, p. 495). The Dutch sinologists had little positive to say about the plight of women in China, but Peter Adriaan van de Stadt pointed out that the position of Hakka women was completely different: "Proud as a queen, with a bearing worth carving in marble, she strides forwards. She is a living and thinking creature and has her part in the daily work. Her family is supported by her at least as much as by her husband" (K, p. 582). The *Brief Account of Galaba* contains the following illuminating description of Dutch dining habits: "The host invites the guest to sit down by the table on which they lay a white [table]cloth; they also put white cloth [napkins] on the knees of the guests. Then they place delicious food, most of it roasted, there are various kinds of wine, every person has a dish and cup, and one spoon and a fork" (B&N, p. 217). In China, most Dutchmen preferred to eat European food whenever they could, bringing with them "large quantities of potatoes, meat, butter, bread, brandy, soda water, etc." (K, p. 489).

Numerous other themes connect the books: the hazards of travelling, tensions between immigrants and locals, the importance of taxation for the colonial regime, and many more. Equally prominent is the boredom that plagued men away from home. In his *Anecdotes about the Sea Islands*, Wang Dahai deplored how Batavia lacks “writings of philosophers and poets, wherewith to beguile the time; nor any friends of like mind, to soothe one’s feeling; no deep caverns or lofty towers, to which one could resort for an excursion; all which is very much lamented” (B&N, p. 233). During his three months in Zhangzhou, the sinologist Jacobus van der Spek revealed in a letter how “[s]lowly the days creep forward; when the mail arrives, one pounces on one’s letters and reads them again and again, two or three days, and afterwards one eats, drinks, sleeps, takes the same familiar walks, sees the same familiar, annoying things and becomes silent as a statue for lack of matter for conversation” (K, p. 510).

Just as the author of the *Chinese Annals of Batavia* spared no one in his social commentary, the voice of Leonard Blussé roars through the book’s translation. On the “much-heralded Asian Library of Leiden University,” he remarks that “whatever may be the luxury of a combined library on Asia and better electronic facilities in a specially-designed and -built floor on top of the central library, the merging of the various libraries into one Asian library has dramatically reduced free access to the printed sources, to the sorrow of both serious researchers and students who like to have the real thing at hand” (p. xv). He abhors the myopia of scholars and librarians in Area Studies, who rarely look beyond the confines of “their” regions as potential fields of interest (p. 30). Yet while the *Chinese Annals of Batavia* “barely corresponds with any of the existing genres of Chinese historiography” (p. 30), “[i]t is exactly these syncretic features, so characteristic of the Chinese overseas experience in general, that makes the text interesting, apart from the simple fact that there are almost no other contemporary texts written by Chinese authors describing overseas Chinese urban life” (p. 31).

We can only hope for more who stray from academia’s beaten paths. In theory, connected histories and collaborative efforts to study them offer some balm for the bruises and scars of ethnocentrism, provided that they are conducted on equal footing and inspire further scholarship. China’s reorientation towards the sea is likely to rekindle academic interest in its maritime past. Many of Indonesia’s young historians gaze beyond the horizons of the nation state. It is less clear what will happen in the Netherlands, where the bulk of archival material is situated, and where in depth knowledge of Asian languages is disappearing—at least in tenured academic circles. One can hardly ignore the fact that the two Dutch contributors, Blussé and Kuiper, are both retired

and therefore disadvantageously positioned to initiate border-crossing collaborations in the future. It will be up to new generations of scholars from China, Indonesia, and the Netherlands to join forces and continue to work on this interconnected past with equal levels of endurance and sophistication.

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