WITSEN’S STUDIES OF INNER EURASIA

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In the seventeenth century an important part of the European discourse on Asia became directly dependent on the Dutch VOC. One can quickly get an impression of the already imposing depth and scope of the knowledge acquired about that continent, and the prominent role the Dutch played in that process, by perusing the volumes of Asia in the making of Europe. But European interest in Asia was selective. In the thousands of pages of Donald Lach’s classical study one will find surprisingly little about Siberia, Mongolia and Central Asia which together form the bulk of the Asian landmass.¹ It is also obvious that the gathering of information by the VOC was to a very large extent restricted to the rich, densely populated, sedentary, agrarian and already significantly urbanized societies of the Asian periphery.

Without question the opulent lands of the Asian rim were far more attractive for a Western commercial company than the harsh, barren plains of Inner Asia. The latter could not be reached by ship and seemed almost only inhabited by not very numerous, but reputedly poor and aggressive nomads. Their main trading item, the warhorse, was highly desired by the rulers of China, India or Persia, but certainly not by Dutch merchants in Asia. It therefore comes as a surprise that Nicolaas Witsen (1641–1717), one of the directors of the Amsterdam Chamber of the VOC at the end of the seventeenth century, was most probably the greatest connoisseur of the whole area of Inner Eurasia in the Early Modern Era.²

In his twenties Witsen had visited Muscovy, but he never went to Asia. He carefully studied the existing literature on the subject, while his pivotal role in political and commercial circles of Holland enabled

¹ Only in vol. III of Asia in the Making of Europe, Book IV, written by D.F. Lach and E.J. Van Kley, Inner Asia, East Siberia and Tibet are rather superficially discussed in a chapter on the periphery of China.
Fig. 1. Petrus Schenck, *Nicolaas Witsen at the age of sixty*, 1701, mezzotint. Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet.