A History of Chinese
Linguistics in the Netherlands*

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1 Dictionaries, Glossaries and other Useful Works

1.1 Early Days: Heurnius and Royer

The first person from the Netherlands with a recorded interest in the Chinese language was, according to Duyvendak, “a young scholar from Leiden”, Justus Heurnius (1587–1651/2).1 Having studied medicine and theology, Heurnius was sent to Batavia in the Dutch Indies in 1624 as a Protestant missionary.2 Confronted with a relatively large number of Chinese in Batavia, and realising that the missionary work could only be successful if the missionaries addressed the potential converts in their own language, he compiled a Dutch-Latin-Chinese glossary, entitled Dictionarium Sinense (1628).3 Several copies have survived; the original and most complete one is currently in Oxford. Having no knowledge of Chinese himself, Heurnius was assisted by “a Chinese schoolmaster who knows Latin and was educated in Macau.”4 Dictionarium Sinense is quite

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* This chapter focuses on accomplishments in the study of the Chinese language. The historical background to most of these endeavours, especially the earlier ones, is described in the chapter by Leonard Blussé. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the help I received from Koos Kuiper, without whose input I could not possibly have written this article. Thanks are also due to Jeroen Wiedenhof, Daan van Esch, Wolfgang Behr, Watse Sybesma and Wilt Idema. In presenting transcribed Chinese, I follow the original sources for Southern Min and Hakka, but for Mandarin I use pinyin (adding tones where appropriate), unless there are reasons not to do so. Characters are only inserted when necessary for one reason or another.

1 J.J.L. Duyvendak, “Les études hollando-chinoises au 17me et au 18me siècle,” Quatre esquisses détachées relatives aux études orientalistes à Leiden [Hommage aux membres du XVIIIème congrès international des orientalistes offert par la société orientaliste néerlandaise], (Leiden: Brill, [no date given, but the 18th congress took place in 1932]), 28: “un jeune savant de Leiden”.


3 For complete titles and other bibliographical information, see Kuiper, “The earliest monument.”

4 Kuiper’s translation from a letter by Heurnius in Dutch; Kuiper, 112.
sizeable: the number of entries in the Oxford copy is almost 3,900. It does not only contain words, but a number of short phrases as well (such as “he is the one”). As Kuiper points out, since the only language Heurnius and his anonymous Macau-educated assistant had in common was Latin, a number of mistakes were made that would not have happened if Heurnius had had some knowledge of Chinese, or his assistant had known some Dutch. One mistake that Kuiper mentions is that boeck (‘book’) is rendered in Chinese as “自主。無主人管 (zìzhǔ. wú zhǔrén guǎn)”, which means ‘decide for oneself / have no master in charge’. This error is understandable in view of the fact that the Latin word for book, liber, also means ‘free’. It must be emphasised, however, that on the whole the Chinese translations in the Dictionarium are correct.5

For the transcription of the Chinese translations, two different systems are used: the one designed by the Flemish missionary Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628) and another, probably created by Heurnius himself with speakers (and readers) of Dutch in mind.

Interestingly, the “Sinense” in Heurnius’ Dictionarium Sinense is Mandarin, that is, not classical Chinese, but also not one of the Chinese varieties that were spoken by the Chinese in the Dutch Indies, such as Southern Min (Hokkien) and Hakka. In this respect, the work sets itself apart from the dictionaries as well as phrasebooks and textbooks compiled by Dutch officials and missionaries in the Dutch East Indies in later years, as we will see shortly.

The next hint of linguistic interest in Chinese dates from more than a century later, when Jean Theodore Royer (1737–1807) compiled his Nomenclator Sinicus, a Chinese-Latin glossary, the basis for a dictionary.6 The Nomenclator is part of a collection of notes on many different subjects related to China gathered by Royer, a lawyer and judicial official with a deep interest in China. Characterised by van Campen as an “amateur scholar” or a “learned amateur”,7 Royer was active as a collector of Chinese art and other cultural objects, including books and manuscripts. The Nomenclator contains 356 characters, accompanied by an indication of the pronunciation (apparently, Mandarin), a meaning and, in some cases, a commentary. In assembling this list, Royer referred to a number

5 Kuiper, 117.
6 All my information on Royer stems from Jan van Campen, De Haagse jurist Jean Theodore Royer (1737–1807) en zijn verzameling van Chinese voorwerpen (Hilversum: Verloren, 2000), esp. Chapter 1 and pp. 61 ff. See also Koos Kuiper, Jan Just Witkam, and Yuan Bingling, Catalogue of Chinese and Sino-Western manuscripts in the central library of Leiden University (Leiden, Legatum Warnerianum in the Leiden University Library, 2005), pp. 11–12. The Nomenclator probably predates 1780; Campen, “De Haagse jurist,” 53.
7 Campen, p. 7: “amateur-geleerde”, “geleerde amateur”.