Between Money and Curiosity:  
On the Study and Translation of Chinese Literature in the Netherlands and Flanders

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Beginnings

“What scholarly curiosity for the Indies is your Honour asking about? No Sir, it is only money and not learning which our people are after over there. Which is a shame!” said Nicolaes Witsen, the seventeenth-century mayor of Amsterdam and board-member of the Dutch East India Company, who was also an Asia specialist.1 Indeed, if relations between China and the Netherlands date back over four hundred years, the Dutch “mercantile spirit” prevailed for the larger part of that period. Although the Dutch are reported to have brought back from their maritime missions to the Indies, from 1595 to 1598, not only spices but also at least one copy of a classical Chinese novel, the ever-popular Water Margin (Shuihu zhuan 水滸傳), Dutch translation of Chinese literature has only become something of a regular practice since the 1970s.2 And even in these last forty years, Witsen’s words have still rung true.

From the late sixteenth century onward, the Jesuits avidly studied Chinese culture, if only to spread the faith, and as early as 1628 the Dutch missionary Heurnius compiled the first Dutch-Latin-Chinese dictionary, which, however, quickly fell into disuse. While in other European countries the eighteenth

1 The original Dutch quotation is from a postscript of a letter by Witsen (1641–1717) to a friend, dated August 1st, 1712: ‘Wat vraegt UwelEd. na de geleerde curieusheyt van Indiëën? Neen Heer, het is alleen gelt en geen wetenschap die onse luyden soeken aldaer, ‘t gunt is te beklagen.’ Cf. J.F. Gebhard, Het leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz Witsen 1641–1717 (The life of Nicolaas Witsen, Esq.), vol. 2 (Utrecht, 1881–1882), 340–341, according to K. van Berkel, Citaten uit het boek der natuur (Citations from the book of nature) (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1998), 145; also quoted in: S. Huigen et al., eds., The Dutch Trading Companies as Knowledge Networks (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 8.

century saw the first translations of Chinese drama, poetry and fiction as well as the first historical studies of China, the same century for the Dutch was marked by a single retranslation, published in 1767, of the novel *The Fortunate Union* (*Haoqiu zhuan* 好逑傳), based on the English version of 1761, the first Chinese novel ever to be translated into a Western language.³ Only in the nineteenth century, when the colonial rulers in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) became more directly involved in day-to-day local administration, did the need for Dutch experts in the Chinese language become clear. Consequently, a centre for the training of interpreters in Holland was established, eventually leading to the creation of a chair for Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Leiden in 1877.

However, the promising start of Dutch sinology did not lead to an immediate upsurge in the translation of Chinese literature. The early generations of Dutch sinologists were not primarily interested in Chinese literature; also, they published their academic contributions in German, English and French. As a result, the Dutch reading public had to rely for a long time on relay translations via those languages. In the field of classical poetry, these relay translations sometimes even passed through several hands: in the early twentieth century, Dutch poets often adapted the well-known German *Nachdichtungen* (poetic recreations) by Hans Bethge and Klabund, which, in turn—as the two never mastered the Chinese language—were based on the earlier French translations of Chinese poetry contained in Judith Gautier’s renowned *Le livre de jade* (1867). These free adaptations have long determined to a high degree the expectations of the Dutch public regarding classical Chinese poetry, as is especially the case with the major Dutch poet Johan Slauerhoff (1898–1936), a maritime doctor who also travelled to China. He infused his renditions of Chinese poetry, in particular the poems of Bai Juyi (772–846), with his own heavily romantic ideals, and his work, largely based on Arthur Waley’s acclaimed English versions, has been so influential that later direct Dutch translations were often judged flat and insipid.⁴ Only when a first extensive poetry collection of Bai Juyi in direct translation was published in 2001, by translator Wilt L. Idema, was the Dutch audience able to discover that the poet was not the debauched Bohemian Slauerhoff had made him out to be, but a career bureaucrat who merely posed as a drunken bard.

Be that as it may, in the 1920s and ’30s, classical Chinese poetry had a considerable impact on the Dutch poetry scene, where its Eastern worldview was

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⁴ Cf. Idema, “Dutch Translations.”