

The Red-Haired Barbarian from Leiden: Interview with Leonard Blussé

You have reached the mandatory retirement age of 65 and gave your farewell lecture on 6 June last. High time to have an interview with you! After Itinerario was founded by George Winius and you in 1976, you yourself did many of the interviews. Interviews were and still are rather uncommon in scholarly journals. Why did you start them?

It was a mixture of egoism and curiosity. We meant the journal to be a research journal, so apart from publishing articles we had two things in mind: to speak with prominent people active in the field and also to do special reports on archives and research institutions. George and I loved to ask colleagues about their backgrounds, their personal interests and their approaches to teaching and research. The interviews worked out well, but it turned out to be very difficult to find people who were willing to write about their experiences in foreign archives. But before you start asking more questions there are two points I would like to make, because they are important: I have been very fortunate to work in a happy department almost all of my career, a real blessing. Leiden University with its fine libraries and the National Archives at a fifteen minute train ride away is a great place to be. I have never seriously thought of going elsewhere. The second point may surprise you, but I never intended to have a career in academia. But then, life is full of good intentions. Once I became caught in the interesting research developments in overseas studies I was hooked.

Could you tell us something about your childhood?

I was born in Rotterdam in 1946, shortly after the war came to an end. The whole city centre had been bombed away by the Germans in May 1940, and during my entire youth the town was in a perpetual building frenzy. The 1950s and 1960s were a period of tremendous development. In those years Rotterdam even surpassed New York as the world's biggest port. Shipping on the Maas river was flourishing, tugboats towed barges up the river, sea ships were sailing in and out of the city to far-flung destinations. Across from our yacht club you could see the ocean steamers of the Holland America line depart and arrive. We actually used to sail

our old flat-bottomed Dutch sailing yacht with leeboards in the midst of all that traffic. The liners disappeared in the 1960s—but not before I had served as a pantry boy on board the *SS Rotterdam* on the Rotterdam–New York line—and for almost forty years now it has been forbidden to sail without using an engine on the river. When I was a young boy I devoured all the books I could find about the sea: various Dutch writers like Anthony van Kampen and K. Norel, and of course British and American ones like Slocum, Kipling, Stevenson, and so on. I was much too young for Conrad! In any case, it was my dream to go to sea.

Why didn't you?

One of the frustrations of my youth was that the connections with Indonesia were slipping away. I was very much in awe of people of my father's generation who had been overseas visiting interesting places. My mother was born in Singapore. Because I had to wear glasses from the age of 10 my dreams of becoming a ship's captain in the merchant marine were shattered. My father was a maritime lawyer, and together with my two older brothers I have been sailing for as long as I can remember. I am the proud and somewhat worried owner of a more than 100-year-old little sailing barge on which we go on vacations with friends and my kids. Ships have always been a part of my life. I am afraid I passed most of my school time dreaming about impossible projects like sailing around the world or settling on Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic after I had read some books about that 'lonely isle.' But when in 1961 a volcano exploded and the complete population was moved from the island that dream was shattered too. I still collect every scrap of paper about Tristan I can find, and I am happy to see that James Fichter, who recently published a great book on American Trade in the Far East, shares this interest with me.¹ At last somebody I can talk to about the Repettos, the Greens, the Swans and the other families of Tristan, who, by the way, have returned to their island.

So why did you take up the study of Sinology?

After I finished the Gymnasium I went to University in Leiden. My interests had changed a bit, and I wanted to take up anthropology. But by coincidence I met with Professor J.H. Van den Berg, a psychiatrist who was well known for his writings about *Metabletica*. He was devising all sorts of aptitude tests for school and business purposes at the time and needed young guinea pigs. After I had participated in one week of tests, I had an informal interview with him to talk about the results. Looking at

my records he discouraged me from studying anthropology, saying that instead I should do something that would keep me more focused. Out of the blue he suggested I should take up either Arabic or Chinese. Feeling that China would rise again in the future I decided on Chinese, especially after I found out that Holland's biggest shipping line in Asia, the Royal Inter-Ocean Lines, had its headquarters in Hong Kong.

If you will allow me a funny anecdote: my grandfather De Monchy, who had worked on Java for an insurance company in the first decades of the past century, liked to play tricks on his little grandson, saying that he could speak Chinese. He would tell me to sit down in front of him on the carpet. Then, sitting in his armchair, he would unfold a newspaper in front of him, burn a little hole in it with a cigar and send three puffs of smoke through it, whereupon he started to 'speak Chinese,' mumbling *Patcha kokka*, *Patcha kokka*. Three more puffs through the hole would follow, the paper was folded again and there the face of grandpa reappeared. I have never found out what those words meant—he never said more. *Kokka* probably was *guojia* in the Hokkian dialect meaning country. *Patcha*? No idea. He may have overheard some nationalistic slogans in the street.

Anyway, I had all sorts of romantic ideas of what a career in shipping in Asia was going to be like. So I started out with Chinese, but I had hardly begun in 1965 when the Cultural Revolution broke out, which made it impossible to go to China for years to come. Not that it mattered for the time being, because in Leiden at the time students did not learn any modern Chinese; all you learned was classical Chinese. So we happily continued studying Chinese history and complex traditional characters while, in the meantime, the Communists were simplifying all of them! Together with a couple of friends I also established the Dutch Open Air Barge Museum, saving a handfull of rare, old sailing barges that had been sent to the scrapyards at the time and went on restoring them. Most of the ships we saved are still in existence and are now incorporated and treasured in the Rotterdam Shipping Museum collection. A few years later, the '68 student revolutions occurred in France, and less aggressively so in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe too. A very exciting time. The whole youth scene was incredibly vibrant, with great music and good vibes. After I had been in Leiden for four years amidst all these kinds of distractions—but wisely passing my examinations—I was rather unsure of where I was heading. I didn't feel I had learnt anything useful yet. I had read a lot of Far Eastern history, could handle Classical Chinese texts and to a lesser extent also Japanese. But then my French girlfriend suggested

that we should go to Taiwan to find out what Chinese popular culture was really about, and that turned out to be a masterstroke.

How so?

It was like diving in the deep after years of swimming lessons at the side of the pool. Just before we left Europe we met with the famous Sinologist and Taoist [Kristofer] Schipper, who had been living in Tainan, in the south of Taiwan, for nine years. When I complained that I would probably have to study Confucius and Mencius all over again, he advised me to enroll in anthropology because it would open up Taiwanese society for me. So I learned to speak Chinese within six months, thanks to an elderly Chinese gentleman by the name of Wang Yuh-chuan. He made me learn by heart three or four 300-character stories a week. Then, I studied anthropology under famous professors like Li Yi-yuan and Ch'en Ch'i-lu and was also able to engage in fieldwork among the tribes in the mountains. But I ended up doing anthropological fieldwork on the folk religion of the fishermen in the Penghu archipelago, between Taiwan and the mainland. I ran into all kinds of folk tales about the 'red-haired barbarians' there. I soon realised that these must have been the Dutch, who roamed those islands in the early seventeenth century and even built a castle there in 1622. Of course this is well-known today, but at that time very little work had been done. In the backyard of a temple, behind the laundry of soldiers living there, I found an inscription saying that the Chinese had chased out the Red Barbarians in the Tianqi period, the early 1620s. A few months later I rediscovered the ruins of the castle on a small promontory in the bay. A big anti-aircraft gun was positioned in the middle. We were arrested for going near it, but now this whole area is open to the public.

Back in Taipei, I was introduced to Professor Ts'ao Yung-ho, the librarian of the research library of the university. Professor Ts'ao had been schooled by Japanese professors before the war, and was very much a product of the Japanese philological tradition. During the 1950s, he had taught himself seventeenth-century Dutch by typing out all the manuscript copies of the VOC diaries of the Dutch governors of Formosa (Taiwan) during the Dutch occupation (1624–62).

That does seem like a very timely and fortunate introduction. Who introduced you?

Well, Professor Schipper had told me that after my arrival in Taiwan I should look up Dr. Inez de Beauclair, a famous anthropologist and niece to the last Austrian Emperor. She was living in retirement at the Academia

Sinica. She was very old, in bad health, and stayed alive eating nothing but biscuits. We agreed that I should see her once a week to have dinner with her. She was a phenomenon, full of interesting stories about the aborigines of Melanesia, Guizhou and Taiwan, among whom she had been involved in fieldwork. She gave me the nickname *hongmao fan*, 'Red Haired Barbarian', and when I met her son years later he did not believe I had known his mother until I mentioned that I was the Red-Haired Barbarian. Dr. de Bauclair was the one who introduced me to Ts'ao Yung-ho, of whom she was very fond. I worked with Professor Ts'ao for two years—he tutored me at home and in his office—after which he suggested that I should move to Japan to continue my studies there under the guidance of his own former professors, Iwao Seiichi and Nakamura Takashi. That was forty years ago! Incidentally, last October we celebrated Professor Ts'ao's 90th anniversary at Taiwan University. There is nobody in the scholarly world to whom I owe as much as to Professor Ts'ao Yung-ho. Now, at the end of his career, he has been promoted to academician of the Academia Sinica.

A somewhat materialistic question, but how did you make ends meet at the time?

We were quite jealous of the well-funded American students of the Stanford centre in Taipei. We received a small scholarship, just like our Chinese comrades at the University, but did not fancy living in separate dormitories. So we taught English and French to make some money. My father continued to send me the same monthly stipend I had received when I studied at Leiden. To him, it made no difference whether I studied in Leiden or Taipei as long as I passed exams. Together, this allowed us to rent a house with some French friends, buy books and lead a relatively comfortable life. In Japan it was a different story altogether. A year after my arrival I received a Mombusho scholarship, to be an assistant to Professor Hibino Takeo at the Jimbun Kagaku Kenkyujo of Kyoto University. In addition I became a recruiter of Western extras for the Toei Eiga film company: they needed western faces for *Yakuza* movies, *Tokugawa jidai geki* (historical dramas) and the like. I was a regular extra myself, actually—I have played Russians, drunken GIs, Dutch VOC captains and so on in plenty of third-rate films. We even played with Robert Mitchum in *The Yakuza*, but unfortunately they cut a lot of scenes out of that film. I studied in Japan for three years and ended up working on a thesis on the Wako—Japanese pirates—during the Ming dynasty. But suddenly, in 1975 Korean scholar So Kwan Wai published a monograph detailing most

of what I was working on, so I had to find another subject and turned to the larger framework of the history of the China Seas.

Who did you study with in Japan?

In addition to working with the historical geographer Hibino Takeo in Kyoto, I helped Nakamura Takashi, then at Tenri University. He was working on a Japanese translation of the seventeenth-century VOC Diaries of Batavia castle. I helped him with the footnotes for the sections about Taiwan and Japan. That is when I began to see how important it is for Asian scholars to use Dutch East India Company sources to fill in gaps in their own historical sources. That really was an eye opener. Among Asian historians, the Japanese were and are number one in translating and editing foreign sources for their own use.

Even before the war, scholars like Yamamoto Tatsuro and Iwao Seiichi had written important monographs using ample foreign sources. That generation was still very active in the 1970s and 1980s. They were very hospitable to me as a young foreign scholar. I was invited to conferences and given the opportunity to publish. Kyoto University was a strange place to be in those days, because student factions were still bashing each other's heads in with iron pipes. Nevertheless, the Jimbun Ken was heaven on earth. At that time the Marxist approach to history, with regard to the Tokugawa period, was losing its grip and even fading away. Japanese historians were completely revising their views on Sakoku, the so-called Closed Country. Based on an essay published by Engelbert Kaempfer in the early eighteenth century, it was generally believed that during most of the Tokugawa period the whole country had been closed off and looking inward. That in itself is to a certain extent true, but it is not correct that this was something abnormal or typically Japanese. Autarky was an old Chinese ideal. Come to think of it, the Koreans were even better at it than the Japanese. While there is no denying that the Japanese strongly reduced their foreign trade, they used the Chinese and the Dutch traders as their eyes and ears for the outside world. The first thing I did when I came back from Japan in the autumn of 1975 was to write an article about the changing views in Japan regarding the concept of sakoku and how the revisionist thinking had developed.² I also brought out the contribution to this discourse by those scholars with access to foreign sources. Around the same time, Ronald Toby wrote his article on this topic from a different perspective. Later on he published his famous book on the subject.³

Did you ever return to your dream of working in shipping?

Around the same time I actually applied for a job with Royal Inter-Ocean Lines in Hong Kong. I even paid a visit to Hong Kong to see what it was like, and found the situation I had always dreamed of: the management of the company living on the hill, overlooking the anchored ships, the harbour... just perfect. The director, Mr. Dirkzwager, was very accommodating—it was early spring, but he told me I could begin in September so that I could finish my contract with Professor Hibino first. But only two months later, when I was back in Japan I learnt from a newspaper that Royal Inter-Ocean Lines was merging with Nedlloyd Lines, and that the headquarters would be moved from Hong Kong to Rijswijk, a suburb of The Hague in the Netherlands! I decided that I had better give up the shipping dream. It was not just the main office's move to Rijswijk; we were also witnessing the final throes of the decline of mercantile shipping in the old sense of the word. Most of the vested European shipping lines in Asia were disappearing fast. Container shipping was on the rise, and everything changed. The romance of shipping was lost, too.

What was the next step?

Well, I heard that a Centre for the History of European Expansion was being established by Professor Henk Wesseling in Leiden. At the time we were living in a little temple in the mountains north-east of Kyoto overlooking Lake Biwa. We spent our last year in Japan there. The Konrenji was a Jodoshinshu village temple, which had been left by its priest, and after a friend of mine, Willem Remmelink, had lived there for two years we moved in and essentially became the *jushoku* (caretakers), preparing tea for the villagers returning from the rice fields in the afternoon and performing all sorts of little tasks. So I collected a bag full of 100 yen coins and went to the only public telephone in the neighbourhood, near the post office on the hill. I called Wesseling from Japan, constantly throwing in all those little coins. He is still fond of telling this story, also because it is such an excellent demonstration of how communication lines have changed since then. But my call was in vain—Wesseling told me that they had just hired Piet Emmer. A new vacancy might arise at some point, but not in the next two years.

But did you return to the Netherlands anyway?

Well, I was almost immediately hired by Professor Teeuw upon returning to Holland, to help him set up the *Bureau Indonesische Studies* [Office of

Indonesian Studies] which was to restore the cultural relations between Holland and Indonesia on an academic level.

Why the sudden interest in Indonesia?

My interest in Indonesia had been there since my childhood. But there was another interesting connection to Indonesia: Professor Nakamura, who was teaching Southeast Asian history at Tenri University. Tenrikyo, the Tenri religion, is a 'New Buddhist' religion. All followers of the Tenrikyo have to give part of their salary to the temple. Interestingly, the head of the Tenrikyo, the *Shinbashira* was a great bibliophile. He was absolutely mad about books. I was told by Professor Nakamura that the *shimbashira* used part of the incoming money to buy books for the university, because the Tenri missionaries in Southeast Asia needed to be well informed before going out to spread the gospel, and learn about the customs of the people. Mind you, this was a man who took KLM planes to the Netherlands in the 1950s, where the staff of Martinus Nijhoff publishers—who also ran a large antiquariate at the time—would meet him personally at the airport. After having enjoyed a copious dinner at Sauer, his favourite fish restaurant in The Hague, they would spend the whole night sorting out thousands of kilos of books and journals on the Netherlands Indies, mostly purchased from retired colonial servants who did not want them anymore. So Tenri, until the 1970s, had the most complete library on Southeast Asia in Japan. I would go there once a week—first of all to help Professor Nakamura translating the Batavia diaries, but also to just delve into the stacks of this library. I could stay with friends one night a week. I read everything I could find in old journals, specifically on the Overseas Chinese.

Overseas Chinese?

Yes, I felt there was a strong connection between the Dutch and the sojourners and immigrants from China's south-eastern seaboard provinces in Indonesia—it has always been my idea that the colonisation of Java and Sumatra cannot be explained without taking into account the strong cooperation and competition between these two partners. I say partners, even though the two were part of a different world economy, the Dutch within their formal imperial set-up and the Chinese as part of an overseas Chinese informal empire. There can be no doubt that this was, in political terms, an unequal relationship, with the Dutch 'colonial masters' on top. Nowadays people even speak of 'co-colonisation,' which is a somewhat stronger term, but back then this was a new idea. It is also what I ended up writing my thesis about, *Strange Company*. I exploded the

myth of Batavia as a Dutch colonial town in the tropics by showing that the biggest population was actually Chinese, and that it was a Chinese colonial city just as much as it was a Dutch one. That idea of a Chinese informal empire of trade amidst Southeast Asian state formations in the eighteenth century I further developed through papers at conferences in Lisbon, Tokyo and London; and it was actually in Tokyo that my friend Sakurai Yoneo suggested that I was really referring to a Chinese Century. That was also the title that I gave to the article when I finally published it in the book of essays in memory of Denys Lombard.⁴

What did you end up doing at the Bureau of Indonesian Studies?

Ah yes, it was an interesting experience because I saw how this very well-intentioned project was not as effective as everybody had hoped. It was mainly due to a poor selection of students and to an overabundance of steering committees on both sides. Professor Teeuw was a fine organiser and diplomat, but with all those people from everywhere having a say in everything the programme was top heavy. The selection of the students was difficult to control in Indonesia. They came to the Netherlands to study history, linguistics, anthropology etc. But we did organise the first Dutch–Indonesian Historical Congress since the war!

That was how I got to know both the older and the younger generation of Indonesian scholars, like Sartono, Ong Hok Ham, Adri Lapien, Eddy Masinambow, Thee Kian Wie and Taufik Abdullah, all of them formidable scholars. Most of them had had a formal Dutch colonial school education first, and university degrees from American universities afterwards, often on Fulbright scholarships. I realised how many difficulties they had encountered after returning to Indonesia to teach the next generations at very poorly organised universities. It was an almost impossible mission. However, times have changed. Nowadays, we cooperate closely with our colleagues of Gajah Mada University in Yogyakarta. Dr. Bambang Purwanto is running a tight and dynamic department there and I am proud that our TANAP and Encompass programmes, training their students in Leiden, have been useful for him and other professors in Indonesia.

But at some point, you did join the Centre for European Expansion?

Yes, I did. As Wesseling had said, there was a new opening after two years, and I was fortunate enough to be selected. I worked together with Piet Emmer (Caribbean history, slavery and migration), Gerard Telkamp (the Centre's documentalist), Robert Ross (South African History), George

Winus (Portuguese empire), and later also Jaap de Moor (documentation and colonial military history). Piet Emmer had been publishing a bilingual newsletter in French and English, but he had only managed to issue it twice. George and I decided that there was a task for us to carry out, so we founded *Itinerario*. Thanks to that close cooperation I have learned so much from George in terms of writing and dealing with broad historical issues. George, Piet, Robert and I took turns as editor of *Itinerario* in the early decades of the journal's existence.

What were the first years of Itinerario like?

When you look at the first issues of *Itinerario*, they almost look like issues of a high school journal. But we immediately decided that we were going to do something different from other journals, that is to say that we were going to do interviews with important people in the field. For a period of over twenty years there was no greater joy for me than to interview great historians. What better opportunity is there to encounter interesting people? It was a great privilege to meet so many of these scholars—some of whom have long since passed away. But where does one nowadays find the likes of Ronald Robinson, Henry Brunschwig, Bailey Diffie, Niels Steensgaard and Charles Boxer? We republished the most interesting interviews of the first twenty years in book form when Henk Wesseling moved to NIAS under the title *Pilgrims to the Past*. It is perhaps time that we published the second batch with people like Geoffrey Parker and Hermann Giliomee.

Scholars today are bred and nurtured almost exclusively within an academic setting. But that earlier generation had often done completely different things in life. Diffie, for instance, had joined the stock market and made a mass of money before he went into academia. That would not be possible today. I have a close American friend and colleague, whom I shall not name here, who after writing a terrific Ph.D. thesis joined his family's firm. He retired from business at the age of 50-something, but he has not been able to join a faculty again, even though he is an excellent historian. He would have been a great asset to any US history department and its students. Shame on the system!

One of the more memorable interviews we did was the one with Charles Boxer. After a copious dinner at my house, he told George Winus and me so much about his military past in the Far East that he afterwards asked us not to publish it during his lifetime. By the time he died at a very great age, the tape had disappeared with George, who moved to various places after his early retirement. Boxer, by the way, is another good example

of someone who joined academia later in life. His wife Emily [Hahn] was a well-known writer for the *New Yorker*, and Boxer, who was a very overpowering figure when you met him, changed into a meek schoolboy whenever she was at his side smoking thin cigars! Do read Emily Hahn's *China to Me*, which is about her years in Shanghai and her budding relationship with Charles

Boxer.

Anyway, I was fortunate to join the Centre in Leiden, especially since I was a Sinologist by training. I was something of an ugly duckling at the history department, having had such a different education from my colleagues. It was also a great privilege to work with Henk Wesseling, and through his connections with French scholars, as we did back then: Fernand Braudel, Jean-Louis Miège, Maurice Aymard, Denys Lombard... French and English within one conference was no problem. British scholars like Robinson, Chris and Susan Bayly and Tony Hopkins would also attend conferences where French was spoken.

I am very fortunate to have known quite a few remarkable people in the field. Among them was M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, the famous archivist and VOC historian, whom I regularly visited after she retired. This 'iron lady' gave a lot of impetus to the VOC-related studies that have been flourishing over the past decades. What would global history be like without all those wonderful studies of early modern trade in Asia by Bruijn, Gaastra, Glamann, Steensgaard, Prakash, Das Gupta, Chaudhuri, to name just a few? Closely involved with the Centre were also the Leiden Indologists Jan Heesterman and Dirk Kolff, the multi-talented Cees Fasseur, and of course Professor Han Baudet from Groningen. Emmer and Wesseling organised special European summer programmes on European expansion. As 'mister Asia' at the Centre, I helped set up the Cambridge–Leiden–Delhi–Yogya programme, which held four meetings on the comparative history of India and Indonesia. It was a great success and a lot of fun, involving people like Dharma Kumar, Ashin Das Gupta, Om Prakash, Sinnappah Arasaratnam and Sartono Kartodirdjo. Mind you, this was before the global history craze started. In the 1980s, this comparative approach was something new. Indianists used to work only on India and Indonesianists only on Indonesia. Then came a project called 'The Transfer of Science and Technology' in which Chinese, Turkish and Japanese scholars were also involved.

The funny thing was that for some time at the Leiden history department we young lions working in overseas history were sort of seen as like parachutists—Wesseling had all of these young and energetic

people working for him! Rather than creating a chair in Overseas History, young scholars were hired and encouraged to develop their own fields. We started *Intercontinenta*, *Studies in Overseas History*, all sorts of workshops, and the archival buffs working on the VOC had the weekly loempia [spring roll] lunches close to the National Archives in the Hague, with archival curators Margot van Opstall and Marius Roessingh! Those were very energetic years, working closely with people from abroad. The idea of publishing extracts from the *Deshima Diaries* was actually born during those lunches.

All these things have only been possible because we got a lot of help from friends. A good example is Gerard and Ria de Graaff, who have been producing *Itinerario* since its humble beginnings at the *Labor Vincit* printing shop. This couple have gone through all the technological developments of text production that have occurred since the 1970s. One of the great things of Cambridge University Press [which began publishing *Itinerario* in 2010] is that there is something like a gentlemen's agreement that as long as Mr. and Mrs. de Graaff are still able to produce the journal, they will continue to do so. Rosemary Robson has also been editing the English for as long as I can remember.

What else did you work on during those years?

As homage to my former mentors in Taiwan and Japan, I thought it would make sense to publish the diaries of Zeelandia Castle of Taiwan.⁵ At the time, the Chinese government still had this very strange idea that Taiwan had been part of the Chinese empire and Chinese culture for thousands of years. The original population of the island of course belongs to what De Josselin de Jongh used to call the 'Greater Indonesian Culture Sphere.' That is also why Nathalie Everts and I started publishing important excerpts on Taiwan's native population from the VOC archives in *The Formosan Encounter* series. We have literally given back history to 'people without history.'⁶

A mere look at the VOC documents already makes it clear that, although there had been some contacts with the Chinese fishermen and smugglers prior to the Dutch arrival, this was basically an Austro-Malay language-speaking population and very much part of the larger Southeast Asian cultural sphere until the Dutch started bringing in large numbers of Chinese settlers who eventually, under the leadership of Zheng Chenggong, kicked them out and brought the island under Chinese domination in 1662. As I love to say, Taiwan made in Holland.

Anyhow, I fell into my own trap, so to speak. I had never realised what a hell of a job it is to get out source publications, and how much time it takes.⁷ I must confess that I had a lot of help. It was great to work with Wouter Milde, Paul van de Velde, Cynthia Viallé, Rosemary Robson, Margriet de Koning Gans and Nathalie Everts—colleagues who fortunately also enjoy this kind of work.

Eventually source publications were to become a significant part of your work. Our discipline's publish or perish credo does not quite tally with dabbling in source publications, but somehow I got stuck deeper and deeper into this muddle. I often had sleepless nights wondering how we would ever be able to finish. But the satisfaction of having supplied people in the field with sources that they would otherwise never have had access to has been enormous. The last source publication project in which I am now involved in is the *Kong Koan Gongganbu* project with my Chinese colleagues Nie Dening and Wu Fengbin, and others of the Nanyang Research Center at Xiamen University: the publication of the minutes of the Chinese Council of Batavia. This is a ground-breaking project. If I exaggerate a bit, these archives may be as important for the history of Overseas Chinese as the Donghuang Caves have been for the history of Buddhism in China. These minutes of the Chinese Council at Batavia published by Xiamen University Press allow us to see for the first time from within how an Overseas Chinese urban community functioned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ten volumes are out already.

Such projects depend on the initiatives and personal enthusiasm of those involved. Looking back now, I feel proud that we have made these source publications possible. In the case of Taiwan they have completely changed the views on the early history of the island, as is shown in the Ph.D. theses of Tonio Andrade and Chiu Hsin-Hui. The Zeelandia Diaries have even been translated into Chinese. In the Japanese case, the Deshima Diaries also have had an important impact. Here the collaboration with the Historiographical Institute of Tokyo University and the Japan Netherlands Institute in Tokyo has been absolutely essential. Last year my Japanese friends, punctual as always, surprised me a year before my retirement with a flattering *Festschrift* full of a variety of subjects that they have been working on over the past years.⁸

After China opened its doors in the 1980s I started to go to Xiamen. At first I went every three years or so. But later, after the Nanyang Research Institute appointed me as extraordinary professor, I started to go every year for three weeks or more. It has been very inspiring; to live in

China every now and then and work at the university there and to get in touch with the daily problems that people face. Every time again I realise how important it is to go somewhere regularly if you want to understand anything of the history of a country or of the conditions under which your colleagues work. In two decades Xiamen changed from a run-down urban settlement where there was running water only between specific hours each day into an attractive modern city with all the modern amenities available now.

Was Xiamen at that time already the best place for research on Overseas Chinese?

Yes, that had always been the case, but during the Cultural Revolution much of the documentary evidence got damaged and eaten by worms. Professor Tien Jukang used to say in those days: we started our Southeast Asia programme at the same time as Cornell with about the same investment, but look what the Americans have achieved and what an appalling situation we are in now! But then by the end of the 1980s all sorts of young people started to come to the Netherlands from Japan and China, and I was able to help some of them, like my friend Dr. Zhuang Guotu. Largely thanks to him the Nanyang Yanjiuyuan (Southeast Asian Research Academy) has regained its prime position in China and East Asia.

You also worked with Zhuang Guotu on a book related to the Queen's intended state visit to China of 1989.

One writes scholarly articles, source publications, articles and books for a broader audience, but sometimes you are asked to write something for a commemoration—in 1989 I was asked if I could write a book in Dutch and in Chinese on the Dutch–Chinese relations to be presented to Deng Xiaoping on the occasion of the Queen's visit to China that year. I managed to get this done in six months with a lot of help from Dutch and Chinese friends—and this was in pre-internet times. It was great fun in the end. We had a Chinese typesetter in Hong Kong but both the Chinese and Dutch editions were printed in Amsterdam. The Chinese version should have been published by a Chinese publisher—but this would have taken ages—so I invented a Chinese publisher by translating the Dutch publisher's name (Cramwinckel) into a somewhat antique-looking Chinese bookshop name, Lukoudian Chubanshe. Even now this is still creating headaches for Chinese librarians all over the world.

The copies got into the aeroplane but, due to the Tian'anmen Incident, the state visit was cancelled. Zhuang Guotu had done most of the translation work for the book. Now it so happened that the Chinese authorities had in turn also asked Xiamen University to make a book to be presented to Queen Beatrix, a Chinese book. While he was studying in Holland I had taught Zhuang Guotu seventeenth-century Dutch by translating into Chinese the authentic travel diary with sketches made by Johan Nieuhof, secretary to the first Dutch embassy to China.⁹ I had discovered that rare manuscript in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris. Zhuang now proposed that we also make the Chinese present together, without anybody on the Chinese side knowing that we had also cooperated on the Dutch present. And so the day after Queen Beatrix was to present 'her' book to Deng Xiaoping, the Queen was scheduled to receive from the Chinese another book by the same authors! This practical joke gave us incredible energy and strength. But because of the political developments the whole crazy scheme fell through. Whether the Dutch present ever reached Deng Xiaoping, I don't know. Ten years later it was reprinted when the Queen did visit China. On that occasion I told the story to the Queen and her husband, Prince Claus, and they found it very amusing.

Tribuut aan China [Tribute to China] was meant to be accessible both for Chinese and Dutch readers. So when writing I had these audiences in mind—I wanted to write about people and events that distinguished Dutch–Chinese relations from the well-known Chinese relations with other Western countries.¹⁰

*Let us return to the Overseas Chinese for a moment. How did your doctoral thesis [published as Strange Company] come into being?*¹¹

In the early years of the Centre for European Expansion, as I mentioned, we did a lot of organising and were very active in setting things up. When Ivo Schöffer became the temporary head of the Centre—Wesseling had left for Princeton for a year—on his first day in charge he said: 'What about your thesis?'. I was writing an ambitious book on the history of the Dutch China trade; actually I had written eight chapters of it but had great difficulty in pulling the whole thing together with all the various odd jobs to do. Then Schöffer said: 'You have already written widely about Overseas Chinese, so why don't you turn that work into a book?'. So I did, and graduated in one year. The moral of the story is that you need at that moment in life somebody to help you see things in perspective, things that you do not see yourself because you get caught up in all kinds of work. One of the chapters from that study I later reworked into *Bitters Bruid*—

which was translated into English [as *Bitter Bonds*] as well as many other languages. It is a biographical study cum divorce case of a rich Batavian mestizo lady in the seventeenth century.¹²

Having written about a woman's life in the seventeenth century I thought it would be fun to write a biography of a twentieth-century woman from Asia. In Xiamen I became acquainted with the Tan family—intellectuals from Indonesia. After Mr. Tan died, when in Xiamen, I visited his widow Anni frequently—often three times a week. We hit upon the idea that I should write a biography of her interesting life which spanned her youth in the Netherlands Indies, her pre-war studies at Utrecht University, wartime under Japanese domination, post-war Indonesia and finally their 're-migration' to the mother country just before the Cultural Revolution broke out with all its impact on the family.¹³

What a story to tell!

In comparison with *Bitter Bonds*, for which I had to dig up everything from the archives, I now recorded whatever Anni Tan was saying and I typed it out when back in Leiden with the help of our then secretary, the redoubtable Mrs. de Kock, whom all past visitors to the Centre will never forget. It became something of a sport to look up the people Anni had been talking about and to check her story. This also brought me into close contact with the sons of the famous Raja Gula of yore, Oei Tiong Ham.

I think it is very important to enter such a project knowing quite a lot about the society and living conditions of your biographical subject before you even start talking to him or her. You must also be able to supply all kinds of information so that the story can be placed in context. Anni's story was basically one of female emancipation in twentieth-century Asia. It is a pity that the book, which sold well in Holland, never was translated into English or Chinese—something I may yet do in the future. Chinese publishers are hesitating because the book ends with Anni's (rather innocent) memories of her family's experiences during the Cultural Revolution.

When you hear about all these different things on which my friends and I have been working, you can see that my research has been fragmented over China, Japan and Southeast Asia. And my main interest, the overseas Chinese, is itself a fragmented subject. It connects with many other subjects, like seafaring, international trade, port cities, state formation (Chinese as tax farmers), mestizo societies. So the point is that all these various activities do not so much hamper one's creativity, but they do so if one is engaged in a long-term book project. The greatest authority on

the history of the overseas Chinese, Wang Gungwu—a scholar whom I admire tremendously, has however been very successful in making ends meet. He appears frequently on all kinds of platforms, delivers public speeches and later rewrites them—perhaps he doesn't have to even!—into great essays. I very much enjoyed reading his memoirs recently. What a monumental figure!¹⁴

When did you start the Crayenborgh Lectures?

In 1994 Wim van den Doel and I initiated the Crayenborgh Honours Course. Like doing the *Itinerario* interviews, this too was an egoistical act of self-satisfaction. For a period of seventeen years, with the initial help of a businessman/historian, Arend de Roever, we were able every spring to invite twelve first-rate historians from all around the world for private lectures to twelve selected students. We chose a different subject each year. Ironically the Crayenborgh Course has been such a success that in the end the formula has been stolen and deformed and turned into a monster by Leiden University. We never intended the students to get marks or credit points for attending, and we selected them not necessarily because they had the highest grades but also because they showed character in extra-curricular activities. The university has turned this round completely by selecting undergrads with the highest grades in the first two years. Those often are the most unimaginative students that one can imagine! Our idea was that every year there is a number of history students who are so intelligent and clever that they will certainly not continue in the historical field after they graduate from university, but will seek a career elsewhere. The sad thing is that such students will have read many books but they will never have met and engaged in discussions with great historians themselves. And that is precisely what we wanted to provide to them.

You are currently the first Professor of the History of European-Asian Relations.

In Holland there is a system where there is only a restricted number of chairs for university professors. And so it becomes very difficult to get such a position, especially if you work in a field that crosses disciplines. At the Royal Academy (KNAW) this was recognised in the 1990s, so they decided to establish some extraordinary chairs for people who were bridging different fields. That is how I was offered a chair, which I could name myself. And so I named it History of European-Asian Relations. Leiden University later on formalised this chair on a personal basis, and now this has been institutionalised. And because in the Netherlands we still have a mandatory retirement age, I am now happy to hand over the

torch to Jos Gommans. I found out that a professorial position is essential for setting up new projects. That was a bit of an eye-opener to me. Once you have the *ius promovendi* and come up with a good plan doors open. Mandatory retirement has its upsides: it will give me ample time to do research and write and supervise the twelve Ph.D. students that I have left. But unfortunately it also closes doors. For example, a French colleague of mine wanted to invite me to come to Paris to teach for a month or two, but it turns out that his university will not provide money for people past the age of 65. Can you believe it?

What was it like to teach at Harvard, when you were there in 2005–06?

After I arrived at Harvard to take up the Erasmus Chair for one year, Wilt Idema invited me to give the Reischauer Lectures in addition to teaching a course in Indonesian history. That really forced me to think about a topic and to turn it into three lectures. I decided on the interaction between three early modern ports around the China Seas: Batavia, Canton and Nagasaki. The talks were published as *Visible Cities*.¹⁵

Another anecdote, if you will permit me. I taught the first Indonesian history course ever taught at the Harvard history department. I have the impression that before the emergence of Obama, with the exception of Philip Kuhn, hardly anyone at the department was aware that there existed something like Indonesia. I seduced students of the history department to participate in this class by challenging them when they came ‘shopping’ at the beginning of the semester to draw a map of Indonesia. Nobody could. I promised that the three students who drew the best map for the next week would be treated to an ice cream. Remember these are Harvard students who all want to be the best—so the week afterwards I had eighteen students who had all made nice maps, and I took them all to an ice cream parlour and said: ‘And now you must sign up,’ which sixteen of them eventually did. I returned to the history department, quite content with myself, and said to the administrator that I had sixteen students—and the administrator said: too bad Leonard, if you had seventeen students you would have had a teaching assistant! It was great fun working at Harvard for a year. We were living at Adam’s house just opposite the Widener Library.

One of the biggest projects you undertook as professor was TANAP. Can you tell us how it came into being?

After I had written the book on China, the commemoration of 400 years of Dutch–Japanese relations in 2000 came up. The book for that

occasion was put together with some sixty Dutch and Japanese young scholars and published in Dutch, English and Japanese versions. It was a gigantic undertaking, which would not have been possible to carry out without many friends, among whom were Willem Remmelink, Ivo Smits and Martha Chaiklin. We had to translate so much. After we had pulled that off, the ABN AMRO bank approached me to write a series of books about Dutch relations with various countries in Asia in connection with the commemoration in 2002 of the founding of the Dutch East India Company in 1602. I felt that I should not do so myself, but after realising that the various authors in Asia who could do so were all in their 60s and 70s, I said: 'Why don't you give me the money and I shall train a new generation of Asian historians who can use the VOC archives.' The bank refused and gave the money to the Rijksmuseum for a VOC exhibition instead.

But the idea lingered on, and I teamed up with the people of the Rijksarchief (now National Archives) and we decided to propose a project where the Archives would ask for money to work on the preservation of the remaining VOC archives in Asia (Jakarta, Colombo, Chennai) and we would train at Leiden young lecturers from universities in some twelve countries in Asia which had had VOC trading posts. And out of that major offensive we were able to establish the TANAP [Towards a New Age of Partnership] project. The whole set-up of the project and its achievements can be seen at <http://www.tanap.net/>.

But let me briefly explain what it entailed: for three years in a row we carefully selected every year ten young university teachers in Asia who did not yet have a Ph.D. for a one-year advanced Master's course. For the best ten we reserved a Ph.D. scholarship. The project was so successful that in the end we acquired twenty scholarships—ten from the project and ten from outside. With the exception of one student who became gravely ill, all of them have obtained their Ph.D. degrees. I have personally supervised more than ten of them. All in all, I have supervised the writing of 30 Ph.D. theses over the past ten years. Quite a lot of work.

By now most of the TANAP theses have been edited by Cynthia Viallé and me and have been published in the TANAP Monographs Series by Brill. The TANAP programme organised with Henk Niemeijer, and later its successor, the ENCOMPASS (Encountering a Common Past in Asia) programme coordinated with Alicia Schrikker, were ambitious projects.¹⁶ With comparatively speaking modest sums of money we were able to train some ninety young historians from Asia to use Dutch archival texts (VOC and colonial archives) to write their own country's history. Again without

the help from volunteers like Hugo 's Jacob (originally from Groningen University) and Lodewijk Wagenaar (from Amsterdam University) we would not have been able to reach our goals. We have created a whole network of young enthusiastic people teaching and working at various Asian universities and archives. I hope that these programmes will be continued in the future, but when the pilot leaves the ship somebody else has to take charge. It is great fun to have one large family spread all over Asia.

How do you view the development of the field of European Expansion History, from its origins in Colonial History to today's World History?

Colonial history was already dead when I started studying. It was a dirty word. Curiously enough, I think it may soon make a comeback. The concept of the History of European Expansion was developed at Columbia University. George Winius has commented on that in his interview [for *Itinerario*], I believe. That topic still has its own value, and also its own approach. After all, Europe played a major role in global history for some time; as Jürgen Osterhammel has remarked, the nineteenth century was in many respects the European century. When Jan Romein wrote his *Eeuw van Azië* [The Asian Century] in the 1950s he was a bit premature, but the twenty-first century definitely will be so. What I have found fascinating about working as an Asianist at the Centre of European Expansion is that there is an enormous wealth of Asian language sources to combine with Western sources. I hope to continue doing so in my future work. What I do worry about, if you allow me to slightly change the subject, is the decline in interest among Asian students in the historical discipline. Especially in Southeast Asia fewer and fewer students major in history. History does not seem to offer attractive job perspectives any more in this MBA oriented world.

In your farewell lecture you mentioned your plans to engage in a long-term research project on the comparative history of the Rhine and Yangzi deltas.¹⁷ Yet your students performed that same night an eighteenth-century drama in which you were symbolically beheaded as a professor.¹⁸ Wasn't that a gentle gesture that you should start repairing your old boat, and stop meddling in academic affairs? Any more plans?

Well, during the summer holiday I shall have to read the beautiful *Festschrift* I received from my Dutch friends and colleagues.¹⁹ Then I will have to finish a book on Chinese shipping to Southeast Asia in early

modern times. And who knows, perhaps I may find the old floppy discs with the chapters on the Dutch China trade.

One more question: how has modern technology affected the field?

We of course profit from the internet and from progress with regard to digitisation but I do have a nostalgic feeling when I think of foreign friends who used to come to work for longer periods at the archives here or elsewhere. Nowadays many people no longer come because they can get most of the stuff they need from the internet; or they just sit one week in the archives photographing like crazy. I think this development is bad news for academia. And I am not the only one. Eric Tagliacozzo told me last year he felt he was probably one of the last who could afford to work at the archives here for a longer term and make friends there with colleagues like Martha Chaiklin, Tonio Andrade and Kerry Ward.

But is it not positive that digitisation provides access for more people?

Yes, there is no denying that. But if I look at somebody like Om Prakash, who spent so much time in the VOC archives before he could really get a grip on the seventeenth-century Dutch language and the wide variety of materials, I wonder whether people can gain enough depth in the archives, even if they take 1,000 photographs. You need to have the focus and develop the skills to work with the archival sources in your hands.

But I agree that the good old days of Charles Boxer are long over now. Boxer wrote most of his books and articles on the basis of manuscripts he would collect and which he would trade for something else when he moved to a new topic. He was a collector at heart—but he collected to trade it for something else. When visiting the Netherlands he would bring something to trade and exchange with Nico Israëls, the antiquarian book seller. By doing so you learn a tremendous lot, by discussing manuscripts with people who deal in these manuscripts—like art collectors. It adds extra colour to the whole academic enterprise.

This also touches on something else, and I guess I should stop rambling on after this for fear of turning into the proverbial Dutch Uncle. From the early days of collecting ships, as an anthropology student doing fieldwork, and also ‘on the road’ during many of my trips either in Europe, Asia or even America, I have always been interested to see how people live elsewhere, and discover more or less direct links with the past. Learning foreign languages is indispensable if you really want to understand ‘the

other.' The interview with the Dutch philologist-turned-Arabist Cees Brouwer in *Itinerario* a few years ago tells it all.

If you talk with Dutch, American or, for that matter, Chinese students nowadays, they often have no clue what China was like in the 1970s or in the more distant past because they grew up in such different circumstances. Most of them spend virtually their whole lives at school on campus or, even worse, in front of a computer screen. Young people should reconnoitre the field. So, I greatly sympathise with the good old Minangkabau custom of merantau or, to put it in more romantic German terms, *das Wandern, das Wandern*. Yes, A.J.P. Taylor was right: what a good historian needs is a pair of sturdy boots!

Notes

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- 15 L. Blussé, *Visible Cities: Canton, Nagasaki and Batavia* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2008).
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