

Why Is China So Big? And Other Big Questions: Interview with John E. Wills, Jr.

John E. Wills, Jr., Jack Wills to all his friends and colleagues, was born in 1936. He completed a BA in Philosophy at the University of Illinois in 1956, and went on for an MA in East Asian Regional Studies, 1960, and a Ph.D. in History and Far Eastern Languages in 1967, both at Harvard University. He taught history at the University of Southern California from 1965 to 2004, and now is Professor Emeritus. He lives in the Los Angeles area and has five grown-up children, seven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. This academic year he is a Visiting Scholar at Leiden University. Hendrik Niemeijer and Frans-Paul van der Putten met him in Amsterdam.

So how did I come out of the Midwest, 1,000 miles from salt water, and get involved in maritime history and the history of China? My particular slice of middle America had a number of kinds of latent cosmopolitanism. Our big state universities were and are very open-ended mixes of different kinds of education: business, the arts, the humanities, technology. The one that shaped me, the University of Illinois, was the dominant presence in a small city—30,000 students in a town of 70,000. My father was a professor of agricultural economics. After World War II the world came to America, especially to the applied faculties of our universities, in search of the secrets of modernization, very much including their agricultural sectors. My father had graduate students from India, Iran and South Africa. In the general conformism of 1950s America, my high school was remarkably tolerant and hospitable to creativity and intellectual ambition. I was an undergraduate philosophy major at Illinois, and have never stopped reading philosophy, but never had the right temperament for professional philosophy. At Illinois I met my future wife, a history major, whose links to history now are a fascination with vernacular architecture, especially in the old Dutch towns, and real involvement in genealogical research, which has led to a lot of volunteer library work.

In 1956–58 I did my military service in San Antonio, Texas. I found in an Army post library Harold Isaacs' *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, about the Communists and the Kuomintang in the 1920s. Then I found

a not very good translation of the Analects of Confucius. Certainly I was moved by Isaacs' passionate account of terrible events obviously important in the shaping of our world, but I think the impact of Confucius was more fundamental. I could not have spent my adult life studying a people whose high culture was obsessed by God or life after death. I had been raised in an environment where organized religion was an option but not central to the way you thought and lived your life.

So how could I go on to learn more about China? The answer came from the American foreign policy establishment. The attacks of McCarthy and his allies on experts on China had the effect that few people wanted to go into the field, and the country was short of specialists on almost every area of Asia. First the Ford Foundation and then the federal government offered fellowships to anyone who would study Chinese, Japanese, Arabic or a few other weird languages in graduate school. In 1958 we got married and I enrolled in an MA program in East Asian Regional Studies at Harvard.

So China was an attraction because of a more secular mind-set?

Confucius has said, 'We don't yet know about life, how can we know about death?' [*Analects*, XI, 12]. That doesn't mean that there is no hereafter, but that how to live is more important. In the longer run, I can't think of a better starting point than China for thinking about the transformations of our own times and contributing to this strange new trend we call 'world history.'

*Talking about Confucius, at your age you must have heard and submitted already to the Decree of Heaven. At 70, Confucius said, you can follow your heart's desire without overstepping the bounds [*Analects*, II, 4]. Was it your academic heart's desire to compose such an original work as 1688: A Global History?*

My dissertation on the Dutch East India Company and China, finished in 1967, ran to over 700 pages. In the US we don't publish dissertations as accepted as you do in the Netherlands, but spend years improving and revising the darn things and then finding a press, hopefully a good university press, that will publish the monograph. It was at that point that my doctoral mentor, John King Fairbank, told me that Harvard University Press wasn't looking at 700-page typescripts any more, and asked me to give them no more than 450. So I knocked out the 1680s and the two embassies to Beijing, and the rest became my first book. I published the embassy studies together with two Portuguese embassies in

1984 as *Embassies and Illusions*. This left a third book on the 1680s still to be published. Things I had to know something about for the 1680s book—not just China but the British in India, the Dutch in what is now Indonesia, Jesuits pretty much everywhere—started me accumulating notes on different parts of the world all in one year. I really wanted to do 1687 or 1689 so that I wouldn't have to try to write something sensible about the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, but there were a few stories, perhaps most of all the fall of Constantine Phaulkon in Siam, that made 1688 irresistible. My original title was *1688: A World History*. Steve Forman, my excellent editor at W.W. Norton, suggested 'global' in place of 'world.' This nicely raises the flag for all our talk pro and con about globalization. Many of the short pieces in the book are about surprising connections among different parts of the world. There also is an implicit comparative theme, which I'm not terribly surprised that no one has noticed, of the different modes of state-making and political culture within Europe—Golden Age Holland, Restoration England, the France of Louis XIV—and outside, especially in the great empires, Qing, Mughal and Ottoman, and in Japan. The chapters about the Dutch East India Company even fit in here, as one of the more international, highly developed examples of mercantilist state-building. And your work [Niemeijer, *Batavia: Een Koloniale Samenleving in the 17e Eeuw*, 2005] fits in here wonderfully, showing from above and below the transformations of Batavia and its environs by commerce and capitalist agriculture.

Who stimulated you to study seventeenth-century China?

Beats me. The whole ethos of the Fairbank Ph.D. program was that there were so many important things to figure out about China that each of us ought to find something that no one had really worked on before. But both there and in the study of pre-modern foreign relations it got pretty lonely with no one to talk to. Part of what interested me was the theme of center-regional relations and the ways in which the possibilities of the regions to mobilize themselves and pull away from the center were limited. The Ming–Qing transition of course was the last great case of this in pre-modern China. Here I finally found people to talk to, at a wonderful conference that led to the publication of *From Ming to Ch'ing*, which I edited with Jonathan Spence and for which I wrote an article taking maritime Fujian as my case study. I still find people to talk to in the new millennium, have a follow-up essay out in a conference volume edited by Lynn Struve, and am finding ways to link this emphasis on the

center and periphery back to my studies of foreign relations; it makes a huge difference to those relations that China is so big.

So what were the forces at work in the Ming–Qing transition?

What I show in both my essays is that in many ways, not all of them obvious, the Manchus made a difference. We can see interactions among different provincial power holders, such as princes of the imperial house, adventurers and people who rose through the examination system—and that example, by the way, comes right out of the Dutch Company archives and is in my first book! Within the existing Qing structure people found ways to promote themselves, and continued to work within it. I'm still happy to spend a lot of time on the history of political action. I know there are lots of other important things to study, but I think human commitment and contingency come through in such dramatic ways here.

Does that connect to another one of your books, Mountain of Fame? Why did you decide to write a collection of biographies on major Chinese historical figures covering a period of more than 4,000 years?

The book is the result of the worries about political culture we've been discussing and of teaching. The thread of political culture that runs all through the book is the many transformations of the ruler-minister relation, and the moral mystique of the ministerial role. This already is apparent in the traditional life story of Confucius. Then it's enormously helpful for our understanding of the wrenching changes of twentieth century China to see, about 1898–1911, a lot of very smart people saying 'Look, this isn't working any more,' and seeking instead some form of the solidarity of the citizens of a nation. The concept of the book is very Chinese, with its focus on stories of ordinary mortals, heroes, sages, villains. Chinese friends jump right into the discussion when you ask them, for example, whom they would take as a representative figure from the Northern Song (960–1125).

Is there one person you feel particularly attracted to?

Su Dongpo, from the Northern Song. He had a great deal of interest in Buddhism, especially when he was convicted for opposing the emperor's policies and sent into internal exile. But more fundamentally he was interested in human feelings and connections as they're expressed in literature, and also how to be a good and effective person who accomplished something. When he was the magistrate at Hangzhou he supervised the

building of dikes along one side of West Lake to control the flood waters; you still can walk on 'Mr. Su's Dike.'

But here we are interviewing you not for a Chinese studies journal but for Itinerario. You have also been very much involved in the 'overseas history' field.

Yes, and here early and late there has been a thin but world-wide network of wonderful human connections. I first met Charles Boxer in 1963 or 1964 when he gave some lectures at Harvard, and my wife and I saw him one last time in 1994, when he had just passed 90, was very frail but still full of ideas and books read. Bailey Diffie taught off and on in the USC Department after his retirement, and I visited him and his wife at the lovely country house at Santiago de Cacem south of Lisbon. Ts'ao Yung-ho befriended me and advised me in Taipei when he was still a librarian and not yet a famous Academician. But the first memories are of the morning and afternoon coffee gang in the canteen of the old Algemeen Rijksarchief on the Bleijenburg in 1963–64: Om Prakash, Kwame Daaku, John Fynn. Each of us, I think, saw a specialist or two about our eyestrain problems reading the old Dutch manuscripts in the imperfect light of the reading room. But we also shared our sense of amazed discovery; I remember John Fynn looking up in amazement from a map that gave unique clues to the locations of some peoples in the interior of West Africa. And of course upstairs, doing her work and always accessible for our questions, was Prof. M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs. I saw Om again in Delhi, at a Vasco da Gama quinqucentennial conference in Australia, and at the VOC conference in 2003. Kwame, I understand, died young in the service of Clio, promoting oral history in odd and septic corners of Africa. When I finally got a chance to go to Ghana and see Castle Elmina in 1999, I spent a few very pleasant hours with John Fynn.

And then there was the very tall, skinny young Dutchman who turned up on our fourth-floor doorstep in Taipei in 1972, waving an air letter and saying 'Boxer said I have to come find you': Leonard Blussé. I can't count the intersections on several continents or in several fields of common interest. It also was on a Sunday sail on Leonard's extremely slow boat in 1980 that I met Dhiravat na Pombeira, who in 1999 dropped everything and took me to Lopburi, making an important contribution to 1688, and in 2004 helped me identify a Siamese seal on a photo of a document from the Beijing archives. And this year I have an office on the corridor in the Leiden Department that is the world vortex of 'overseas history.' Pieter Emmer, Femme Gaastra, Henk den Heijer, Henk Niemeijer and Peer

Vries, perhaps not quite in the field but very important for its interpretative challenges.

The coffee gang of 1963–64 were glad to find each other to talk to, but we didn't have much sense that we were part of something bigger. *Itinerario* was part of the growth of the field, and you can trace a lot of it in its pages. In the late 1980s I saw a lot happening, and a lot of historians not being aware of it. A first draft of a review article had three books listed at its head. Several years later, after quite a bit of fumbling and development, my 'Maritime Asia' review article appeared in the *American Historical Review* with over twenty books listed at the head. Things certainly haven't slowed down since then. It's quite an experience to be around the TANAP students, where everyone is as convinced as I am of the importance of the history of maritime Asia!

You mentioned trips to Ghana, Thailand, and Australia. Is visiting places important for your work as an historian?

Certainly, and a key personal pleasure as well. I didn't travel outside the US as I was growing up, but saw a lot of the American west with my parents, and have always had an itchy foot. Most of my traveling has been more or less 'in line of duty', surveying archives and sightseeing on the weekends. A first set of Asian adventures in 1973 took me to the Dominican archives in Manila, the Arsip Nasional in Jakarta, the Tamil Nadu Archives, the Historical Archive in Goa, and others. I have learned a lot from archives and personal connections in Portugal, and my wife and I are very fond of Lisbon. In 1979, after 21 years in Chinese studies, I finally got to mainland China with a delegation of Ming-Qing historians led by Frederic Wakeman. In 1997 my visit to Australia led to 1688-related visits to the Dampier Peninsula in the far northwest of the country and to Bali and Ambon in Indonesia. And in 2004 I had a first visit to Vietnam, with some work in the excellent Han Norn Institute and a chance to get a sense of a society very much on the move despite the authoritarian government; Hanoi reminded me a lot of Taipei in the 1970s.

Did you ever get into disputes with other historians?

Not really. For a long time no one was much interested in pre-modern foreign relations. I've written my share of negative reviews of second- and third-rate books, but I don't think I've ever had a counter-blast from an author.

What do you think of today's academic climate?

It has gotten much too hard to get started as a young historian. Universities are over-producing Ph.D.s without a shred of worry about whether the degree opens up a door to an academic career. Even if you get a 'real job,' the requirements before tenure are ever more rigid: a book published, and often more signs of continuing 'productivity,' while the university presses are cutting back on publishing monographs. Do we go to too many conferences? Probably, but Chinese studies have profited a great deal from them. Interaction at article length can get synergies going among scholars a lot faster than waiting for each other's books.

One of the reasons I'm glad to be retired is that I was increasingly uneasy about recruiting young people into a Ph.D. program in the face of the uncertain futures even for the best of them. Another was that I was fed up with the status anxiety that is so prevalent in American academe. About a hundred American universities aspire to be in the inner circle, the top twenty. A few do improve their relative standing, but at the cost of not doing anything different from those who already are in the circle. But the Dutch, British and German systems now strike me as no better, and as in some ways having deeper systematic problems. A few days ago I saw Peer Vries doing a pile of photocopying. Knowing the range of his interests, imagine how much of this he has to do! In the US the Department has work-study students who help with such things. The American system doesn't give an almost free ride to the upper-class student whose parents could afford to pay for his or her education. Students who do need financial assistance get a package—a grant, a loan, a job as one of those work-study students. So getting stuff copied becomes a small example of a system that is more equitable than the European. The European low-cost higher education on balance often is a net income transfer to the more affluent.

Do you see any similarities in Sino-Western relations today and in the seventeenth century?

I think there is a tendency among European and American policy-makers, especially American and especially the current batch, to think that there ought to be clear and straightforward basic principles in foreign policy. That is what made some of them so optimistic about the transition from dictatorship in Iraq. There's no such straightforwardness in relations with China. Human rights and the rights of minority nationalities will remain issues. But in fact we all seem to take a many-sided approach. It's right that Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the Free Tibet movement keep the pressure on China, but there also are excellent reasons

for maintaining positive relations with the Chinese government. A stable China that sees its interest in stable relations with the rest of the world is in everyone's interest.

The Chinese elite is changing in ways that make such relations possible. Thirty years ago the old guys never really retired, but remained the ultimate decision makers. Now you see ambitious and pragmatic younger people leading many organizations and calling the shots on many issues. But not on Taiwan. No one can get very far from 'Taiwan is part of China.' There is little realistic sense of how Taiwan has grown away from China. It helps to go there, and see how people, whether of Taiwanese or 'mainlander' origin, have become comfortable with being there. Who knows what will happen if and when more mainland officials and opinion-shapers get to visit Taiwan? China is trying to lure Taiwan with opportunities to invest, and is having some success. But the Taiwan political establishment isn't very mature, and politicians tend to seek votes by making strong statements that they know will offend the Chinese leaders. So the whole darn thing remains very dangerous.

I'm still trying to make a contribution to some of this discussion of China's foreign relations by looking at pre-modern Chinese foreign relations and asking if there may be echoes or structural similarities in the way China deals with the world today. For many years I've been trying to argue that the 'tribute system' is not a very useful master concept for understanding pre-modern Chinese foreign relations. But one of my best statements on this was in my book about Dutch and Portuguese tribute embassies, and no one seems to have noticed very much. More recently I've been interested in the eighteenth-century relations between the Qing and Annam, which got the name Vietnam in the course of these relations; very interesting stuff, in which the institution of the tribute embassy really was quite useful. But in trying to build a broader framework I turn back to my ideas about Chinese political culture and why China is so big. Maintaining internal unity was the main goal of China's rulers. Foreign adventures or entanglements with foreigners could threaten that unity. So there was a wariness of foreign contacts, a general tendency to defensiveness. Does that persist in any way today? I really don't know, and the specialists on contemporary Chinese foreign relations don't agree. But certainly China's bigness continues to shape its relations with the rest of us, sometimes in confidence in their ability to take a long view, sometimes in frustration at the limits of their power.

You seem pretty busy for someone who's retired. What brought you to the Netherlands this year?

Leonard Blussé had been after me for years to come talk to the TANAP students or get more involved in some way. When he knew that I had retired and that he and his wife Madelon de Keizer were going to Harvard this year, he made me an offer I couldn't refuse: a loose visiting association with the Leiden History Department, helping out where I could with the TANAP Ph.D. students, and a place to live, their house in Amsterdam with Leonard's amazing private library. Then I added a short course for Leiden MA level students on the new big books in 'world history'. This was a very impressive group of students, and their responses to the books were very instructive. They were particularly taken with John R. McNeill's *Something New Under the Sun*, an environmental history of the twentieth-century world. Clearly they see these big environmental problems as the policy challenges of their adult lives. I literally sat there open-mouthed as they all jumped in to argue about all the issues.

And I've been very much impressed with the TANAP students and with the way the program has developed dialogues among young historians whose homes range from Japan to South Africa, who if they were ordinary members of the historical profession in their home countries would never have much to do with each other. This became especially clear to me at one of our Wednesday evening seminars when a student from Vietnam talked about the geography of the port area from Hanoi down to the river mouth; pretty soon everyone was jumping in wanting to talk about the rivers of Gujarat, of Siam, and so on.

And you have some research, projects for this year? What's all this about opium?

For thousands of years people had taken opium by mouth. Around 1670 they started smoking the stuff, at first mixed with tobacco; you have some of the key citations in your Batavia. The greater addictiveness of inhaling makes this a change of world-historical importance. But it's a long way from smoking opium mixed with tobacco to the vaporizing and inhaling of pure opium, and at the moment I'm not getting very far with that project. The one that is getting somewhere is a study of a batch of seventeenth-century Dutch books about distant areas of the world all by one author, Olfert Dapper. I'm interested both in their contribution to a European sense of a wider world and in the information they contain, some of which can be found nowhere else. And working on this in the superb libraries of Amsterdam and Leiden and picking the brains of the experts on book history and Golden Age Amsterdam are great fun.

So you certainly seem to be enjoying your work as a historian. Do you have any advice for young people who might be attracted by the intellectual rewards despite what you say about the difficulties of getting started?

Actually I think in some crucial personal dimensions young scholars today are making more sensible decisions than most of my generation did. Many of us married young, had children early, and struggled forever after with the competing demands of marriage, parenthood and ‘my beautiful career.’ Now I see in general later marriages and very frequently first a book and tenure and then a baby; I just learned of another case last week. I’m less sure about the commitment of a younger generation to contributing to the nonacademic cultural life or the ‘public sphere.’ My mentor John Fairbank devoted a great deal of time to writing for the general public, as did quite a few of the Harvard faculty of that generation. So did Erik Zürcher at Leiden. Perhaps my generation was more content to seek academic success and to assume that somehow the knowledge we elaborated would ‘trickle down’ to the general public. Now? I don’t know. Some younger scholars are deeply involved in some pretty esoteric sub-discourses in Chinese studies and in history in general. But there also is a lot of extra-academic political and cultural involvement in the younger generation. All I can say is we have to worry about the public sphere; it’s a big mess in the US, and only marginally better in Western Europe.