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Cover Page



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Introduction

This thesis investigates how Dutch sinologist Henri Jean François Borel (1869-1933) translated China, by examining his renditions of Chinese literature and his writings about China. Borel studied Hokkien Chinese at Leiden University (1888-1892) and in Xiamen (1892-1894) toward a career as Chinese Interpreter for the Dutch colonial government in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) (1894-1916). He was active as a writer and journalist, and his writings in the period from 1893 till 1933 seem to have provided an accessible introduction to China and things Chinese for a general audience, and to have significantly shaped the image of China in the Netherlands,¹ but the academic sinological community at Leiden University did not hold his work in high regard.²

As earlier research has shown, Borel was one of the first to publish works on China as well as translations made directly from the Chinese source text, for a broad readership.³ Before Borel's time, many such works were actually relay translations and some appeared only in publications that were not easily accessible to a general public. Borel's pioneering work and his break with tradition inspired the current study, because his writings raise questions about his motivation, his translation strategies, and the quality of his work. In my analysis, the main focus is on Borel's translation of China, and not on his fictional works, which I only occasionally make brief reference to. These are works that would require a separate in-depth study and a different approach. Instead, I look at the texts relating to China which he produced in the course of his professional career and examine the development of Borel as a writer and translator in the Netherlands, China and the Dutch East Indies. As such, my findings are mostly confined to the tradition of translating Chinese into Dutch, and do not go into the broader context of the translational culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the Netherlands.⁴

Although Borel's prose writing in Dutch on Chinese culture is not regarded as translation in the traditional sense, it is just as important as the literary renderings with regard to Borel's translation of China. Such texts constitute a kind of travel writing because

¹ Pos 2008, p. 179.

² Idema 2003, p. 231.

³ Heijns 2003, p. 248.

⁴ For an overview, I refer to 'Dutch tradition' by Theo Hermans, in Part II: History and Traditions, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 2009, pp. 390-397.

they reflect the experiences of Borel in a foreign country, and as Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn argue, travel accounts 'often adopt an extreme method of translation.'⁵ Both the literary translations and the prose writing were well received in his lifetime and in obituaries Borel was described as a China expert. How then did Borel translate China?

'Translation' here is used in the sense of cultural translation, or translating between cultures. In this sense translation is not merely a lingual rendering of a text from one language into another, but a representation of a foreign culture with 'language' as its vehicle. As Kate Sturge writes:

[Cultural translation] is used in many different contexts and sense. In some of these it is a metaphor that radically questions translation's traditional [linguistic-literary] parameters, but a somewhat narrower use of the term refers to those practices of literary translation that mediate cultural difference, or try to convey extensive cultural background, or set out to represent another culture via translation.⁶

More important for the current study, Sturge further notes that 'More elaborated uses of the term "cultural translation" have been developed in the discipline of cultural anthropology, which is faced with questions of translation on a variety of levels.'⁷ This concerns not only extensive interlingual translation during fieldwork: 'when the fieldworker's multidimensional, oral mediated experiences are reworked into linear written text, this is not simply a matter of interlingual, or even intersemiotic translation, but also a translation between cultural contexts.'⁸

Borel's works encompassed both literary, lingual translations of texts that mediate cultural difference, and his own writings about China that convey aspects of Chinese culture. As Michaela Wolf explains, translators can be called interpreters of the 'culture' in question, and: 'the cultural Other is not verbalized directly but only indirectly, and filtered and arranged through the ethnographer's or the translator's consciousness.'⁹ In all of the publications on or from China, Borel mediates Chinese cultural aspects, which can be understood in terms of 'cultural translation', as explained in relevant places in the thesis.

Given his engagement with culture and language, Borel is very much present in his works, he is a highly visible translator. This is the result of his translation strategy: staying

⁵ Kerr and Kuehn 2007, p. 7.

⁶ Sturge 2009, p. 67.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wolf 2002, p. 181.

close to the source text, introducing Chinese concepts in romanization and adding paratextual elements. It is also a result of his (self-pro-claimed) identity as a poet. European romantic poetry influenced his depiction of China, and he found elements in Chinese and Buddhist poetics to define poethood. Poetics helped him to justify his role of the poet as someone who is able to understand implicit meanings – in this case, in a foreign culture. Borel's positioning as Chinese Interpreter in the colonial administration caused tension in his identification with the Chinese (as in 'being partly Chinese,' and occasionally 'taking their side') on the one hand, and a sense of not belonging in Chinese communities, or not having the right to belong there, on the other.

The thesis is chronologically and thematically divided into three parts. The first part, 'Discovering China', concerns the period that Borel studied Chinese in Leiden and Xiamen. It discusses in two chapters how Borel forms an image of China. Chapter 1, 'Preconceptions' probes into the period before Borel went to China, exploring aspects which helped Borel form an idea of China. Borel shows no strong motivation to study Chinese, and it is not until his third year that he starts to become interested in Chinese texts. For Borel, the image of China is preconceived through his teacher and (text) books. Chapter 2, 'Romanticism' sets out how Borel's Romantic streak gives him a different perception of China. This is reflected in Borel's essays on China: there is evidence of intercultural interaction between Chinese and Dutch cultures. Here, I will go into agencies that are active behind this interaction.

In part II, 'In Search of the Real China', I discuss the changes that Borel goes through when he is interpreter in the Dutch East Indies, where he is disappointed with the Chinese and expatriate communities. His attitude toward and perception of China and the Chinese start to show an Orientalist tendency. To a certain extent, these can be explained with notions from Edward Said's *Orientalism* who argues that cultural representations of 'The East' are perceptions of the West. Chapter 3, 'Orientalism' looks into how Borel explores the identity of the Chinese people in the Dutch East Indies, who according to him are 'a degeneration of the Chinese' in China. His claim of looking at things 'from Chinese perspectives' results in an orientalizing translation style. At the same time, it seems to have made Borel more aware of his position which led to conflicts. Eventually, his attempt to seek justice for the Chinese and his identification with the Chinese cause tension, as discussed in chapter 4 'Torn between East and West'. Still, Borel is searching for 'the real China' and starts learning Mandarin Chinese, which takes him on a study trip to Beijing. In chapter 5, 'A

Poetic Vision' I discuss how this trip to the capital results in the publication of a book about his travel experience there and suggestions for mutual understanding between China and the West. Judging from the contents of the book, it appears that Borel is confident and even pedantic about his knowledge of China. Here, I explore Borel's methods or devices to interpret culture, and how he defends himself for his poetic vision. In doing so, he poses as the China expert. Yet, his attitude as self-assigned expert leads to the end of his career in the Dutch East Indies, while his articles on Dutch Sinology reduce his chances of a career in academia. Here I explore how Borel represents cultural Otherness, with a tendency toward viewing China from 'Chinese perspectives'.

In part III, 'Reevaluating China', I look into Borel's writings after his return to the Netherlands in 1913. There is sentimentality and nostalgia, as he dwells on places in China he visited on his last trip there, and begins rereading and translating texts he was first introduced to at Leiden University in the early 1890s. There is an increasing longing to be 'more Chinese', yet his work reveals the limits of his knowledge of the language. In chapter 6, 'A Chinese Spirit', I discuss Borel's *The Spirit of China*, which emphasizes intuition and spiritual insight. In *The Beautiful Island*, he idealizes China; this is a book that he published after his return from his final trip to Asia in 1920. His idea of becoming 'more Chinese,' grows stronger with the years, as Borel claims that he is looking at life from a 'Chinese point of view'. As shown in chapter 7, 'Sinicizing Chinese Literature', in his literary translations too, his interventions show that Borel is play-acting the Chinese author. Borel tries to make the text 'more Chinese' by adding Chinese words and phrases which are not in the source text. In other words, he is sinicizing Chinese literature, while some of his other articles on China show his pro-Chinese views. In terms of cultural translation, there are clear indications of internalization of Chinese culture (rewritten) in the Dutch culture.

In this thesis, I trace Borel's development throughout the forty years that he actively published on China. By giving examples from his writing and translations, I show how his view of China changes from preconceptions, to Romantic and Orientalist portrayal and finally idealizing China and sinicizing Chinese literature. Essential in this development is his identity, both the way he saw himself and the way others saw him. In the end this determined the way he translated China and contributed to shaping the image of China of that era.