Translating China : Henri Borel (1869-1933)

Heijns, A.J.

Chapter 2: Romanticism

A change in Borel's view of China occurs when he goes to Xiamen for practical language training in August 1892. It broadens his perspective. There is an increasing tendency toward the Romantic and the poetic, and a distancing from the scholarly. This is reflected in his early essays, which are based on his experience in China.

In 2.1, 'Poetics and Poethood', I will show that Chinese and Buddhist poetics complement Borel's background in European Romanticism. He finds a connection in ideas on poethood and the origin of poems to justify his identity of a poet. Lessons by a Chinese teacher and his natural surroundings help him further form a poetic approach to his reading and translation of China. In his self-proclaimed capacity as a poet he is convinced that he possesses the intuition and sensibility needed to understand China, as discussed in 2.2, 'Chinese Pedagogies'. Borel makes attempts at scholarly articles, but he realizes that it is not the way he wants to write about China. The reasons for this will be explained in 2.3, 'Scholarship and Disappointment'. Instead, Borel adopts the said poetic approach, and writes essays about China, analyzed in 2.4, 'Translation of China'. In these essays there is a clear presence of Borel who interprets Chinese culture and presents it to his Dutch readers. As Michaela Wolf writes:

> If translating between cultures, in ethnography as well as in translation, means intercultural interaction, it is of paramount importance to identify the agencies that are active behind this interaction, in historical as well as contemporary contexts.'[1]

Accordingly, I will look at this 'intercultural interaction' in Borel's essays and explore his methods for the so-called agencies of 'cultural translation and transfer', in order to understand how Borel translated China.

2.1 Poetics and Poethood

Borel's search for Asian notions of poethood and art builds on and develops in tandem with his interest in European Romanticism. His tendency to Romanticism already shows in the mention of authors he reads during his studies in Leiden and Xiamen, and in views expressed in his diary and letters. In the winter of 1891-1892, he writes about his favorite authors. On 19 December 1891, he writes in his diary that the English poet Shelley is the one 'who is most beloved, the most beautiful, the greatest.'[2] On 9 January 1892, Borel gives a description of his room in Leiden and a list of authors he is reading. This list includes the English poets Shelley, John Keats (1795-1821), and Milton; French writer Gustav Flaubert (1821-1880) and poet Paul-Marie Verlaine (1844-1896), German poet Heinrich Heine

[1] Wolf 2002, p. 180.
[2] Joosten 1980, p. 38.

(1797-1856); Dutch writer Frederik van Eeden and poet Herman Gorter (1864-1927).[3] Among these, Milton, Keats and Shelley are well-known names in the Romantic movement. Romanticism, rooted in the German Sturm und Drang, was a late eighteenth and nineteenth-century reaction against the Enlightenment. In general, Romantic writing emphasizes imagination and emotion, freedom of thought and expression, and an idealization of nature. These characteristics can be detected in the works written and translated by Borel.

Another indication of Romanticism is the fact that Borel praises Victor Hugo (1802-1885) as a great poet over Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), even if the above-mentioned diary entry with the list of authors shows that Borel did hold Verlaine in high regard. Victor Hugo is one of France's well-known Romantic authors, while Verlaine is associated with the Symbolist movement. Borel quotes a line from a poem by Victor Hugo on 6 April 1894, when he was studying in China:

> Read something magnificent. Victor Hugo's *The Legend of the Ages* [La légende des siècles] 'An immense goodness fell from the sky!' Is it not a sublime line. Such a giant, Victor Hugo. Such a Good one. Verlaine seems smaller in comparison. Verlaine has something that I cannot stand. That damned coquettishness, that posing. It is not what a great poet possesses.[4]

The poem that Borel is quoting from is 'Boaz Asleep', which is 'Booz endormi' in French, or which according to *A Victor Hugo Encyclopedia*, *'*may be considered one of the happiest lyrics of Romanticism.'[5] This poem is included in the mythical and legendary section of Hugo's *The Legend of the Ages*. The poem 'Boaz Asleep' was inspired by the biblical *Book of Ruth*, and 'highlights the advent of Jesus Christ as one of the most important figures in human myth or history, a Jesus born into the House of David which issues forth from the union of the old Boaz and his relative, the young widow Ruth.'[6]

While the core of Borel's views on poetry and his budding poethood is rooted in European Romanticism, it is complemented by the poetics that he finds in Buddhist and Chinese works. Borel is clearly seeking definitions of 'poethood', as his letter to van Eeden on 9 April 1893 shows. Borel writes how fascinated he is by the idea of a deified status of a poet in the Hindu scripture Rig Veda and he cites relevant phrases from Samuel Johnson's (1822-1882) *Oriental Religions and their relation to Universal Religion—India*:

> So beautiful what is written of poets in the Rig Veda. Their hymns are 'of kin to the god, and attract this heart; for Agni [Hindu deity] is himself a poet.' The 'thoughtful gods produce these hymns.' The rishis [saints] 'prepare the hymn with the heart, the mind, and the understanding.' They 'fashion it as a skillful workman a car;' 'adorn it as a beautiful garment, as a bride for her husband.' They 'generate it from the soul as rain is born from a cloud;' 'send it forth from the soul, as wind drives the cloud;'

[3] LM. Diary in Borel Archives.
[4] LM. Diary in Borel Archives.
[5] Frey 1999, p. 35.
[6] Ibid.

> 'launch it with praises, as a ship on the sea'.[7]

The fragments that Borel cites, pertain to the idea that poems come forth naturally from within the poet. Both the idea of poetry from the soul, as well as the analogy with nature, can be found in Romanticism, as Seamus Perry writes about how the 'stress on the "interior" also grew more important as a specific characteristic of the "Romantic"'.[8]

Moreover, Borel claims that he found the meaning of poethood and his ideal in the beauty of art in China:

> It was in China. It was in a beautiful, tall house built on the highest rock of a wonderful island, with views of mountains and the sea all around me, and glorious horizons of light and sky. I felt safe and lonely there, engrossed in the serene philosophy of the Brahmans, Buddhists and the ancient Chinese. There I discovered something which I now firmly believe in: a poet is not a person who composes lovely verses when he happens to be in a good mood, but a poet is a benevolent person whose highly human virtues have grown to their purest forms. 'The Good is the True Being of Beauty,' sage Zhu Xi [朱熹 (1130-1200) neo-Confucian philosopher] taught me and I knew that only the ethically Good is the Essence of Beauty in Art. And the great Sages—not the obscure meditators—the true, clear sages have always been the Great Poets. The immortal poet of the mountain prayer was so great and holy because he was the ideal wise human being. It was right there that I found my ideal of The Beauty of Art forever.[9]

From this passage, it is clear that being in China had a great impact on Borel, and it shows in his early writing, as I will explain below. From the above, it follows that he is using both Western as well as Buddhist and Chinese ideas to interpret and understand poethood and poetry. Borel's Romantic streak easily combines with his engagement with Chinese cultural traditions. As Michelle Yeh writes, in China 'being a poet is typically part of the multifarious identity of a Chinese literatus,' and she notes there is 'an explicit connection between poetic style and the poet's personality, correlating in a profound way stylistic qualities with personal ones.'[10]

Yet Borel composes very few poems himself. As mentioned in Chapter 1, some poems were published in the literary magazines *Now and Later* in 1893 and *The Guide* in 1894. Borel also translates very few poems from Chinese into Dutch, because in his view Chinese poetry is untranslatable. Much later he explains that in a talk at the literary society 'Practice nurtures knowledge' (Oefening kweekt Kennis), that he gave in The Hague in February 1930. The talk was reported in 'Henri Borel on Chinese Poetry' (Henri Borel over Chineesche poëzie) in the *Fatherland* (Het Vaderland), during which he said:

> Chinese characters are ideograms (pictures), they are not written but 'drawn with a brush' (painting), different pronunciations (sound), lack of links [allusions and symbols] in Chinese (which have to be added in translation), use of parallelism (which is lost in translation). The Chinese poet is poet, painter

[7] UVA. Henri Borel aan Frederik van Eeden Brief, Bijzondere Collecties, Universiteit van Amsterdam, XXIV C93. Johnson 1873, p. 104.
[8] Perry 1999, p. 7.
[9] Borel 1898b, p. 10.
[10] Yeh 2005, p. 124.

> and philosopher. (…) A Chinese poem is never of a descriptive or explanatory nature; it is extremely suggestive. Often what is not there is more important than what is. An Englishman characterized this in the words "*Express is non-expression*. [sic] "[11]

Actually, the claim that Chinese poetry is unique and dense is ambiguous, for Borel says the same of poetry in general. To explain the core of poetry, Borel quotes Laurence Binyon (1869-1943). Binyon was a poet and scholar who also published on Asia, including Japanese art and Persian painting. Borel cites Binyon in English in his essay 'Explaining Poetry' (Uitleggen van poëzie) in *The Fatherland* of 9 December 1928:

> Not till the poet discovers his rhythm is he able to express his meaning. It is not a question of sound only, any more than painting is a question of line and color only. To attempt to make an abstraction of these qualities is a fatal mistake; it cannot in reality be done. The power of rhythm is such that not only sounds and forms and colors, but the meaning associated with them becomes different, take up a new life, or rather yield up their full potentiality of life fused into radiance and warmth as by an inner fire.[12]

But the pursuit of similar ideas in Chinese, Buddhist and Western poetics underscores the importance that Borel attaches to poethood. Ultimately, Borel explains in the same essay:

> In poetry (and in all art) it is not about a logical thought, which can be explained, but the rhythmic vitality of the poem and it is impossible to demonstrate this intellectually.
> (…) All poetry contains a kinetic element and a potential element of language, Ransome [sic] has rightly written; the kinetic can be explained if necessary, the potential cannot.[13]

Quoting from American poet and critic John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) shows Borel agrees with him on the kinetic element in poetry. This implies that a poem that moves from the poet to the reader takes up a new life. The poem originally composed by the poet who gave it rhythm and sound, may or may not be understood or perceived by the reader. This movement can be explained and understood but linguistic perception depends on the reader.

Hence, for Borel poethood is not primarily about writing poems. For him being a poet is like possessing a sixth sense, in other words, a sensitive person who 'reads the spirit of the times' better than others. This awareness of the unique status of the poet, both by poets themselves as well as the observers, can be detected in Borel. This poethood or notion of poetic approach is further nurtured in China by his teacher and his surroundings, as we will see below; it explains why he as a poet found himself the unique person to understand and translate China.

---

[11] Anonymous, 18 February 1930. Words in italics are in English in the original.
[12] Borel 9 December 1928.
[13] Ibid.

2.2 Chinese Pedagogies

By summer 1892, Schlegel had declared Borel, Ezerman and van Wettum ready to go to Xiamen, formerly known as 'Amoy' (or Emoi) because of its pronunciation in the local tongue. The purpose of their stay in China was to further study Hokkien, the dialect that they had started learning at Leiden University. Borel went to China with his fellow students, and resided on Gulangyu, literally 'Drum Wave Islet'. The island is located off the coast of Xiamen in Fujian province and can only be reached by ferry. Xiamen became a treaty port in 1842 when the 'Treaty of Nanking' was signed to mark the end of the First Opium War (1839–1842) with Gulangyu as the foreign concession where foreign countries established consulates. The First Opium War broke out between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and China as a result of conflicts about diplomatic relations and the trade of opium.

The study period in China would originally take one year but the students requested an extension with the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies. On 22 May 1893, van Wettum and Ezerman explained in their request for extension that they wished to spend a few months in Hakka districts to learn the Hakka dialect, while Borel in his separate request of 5 June 1893, argued that an extended stay would be beneficial to mastering the spoken language and obtain a better understanding of Chinese customs and habits. He explained that he wished to devote himself to studying only the Xiamen and Zhangzhou dialects and noted that he wanted to be free in his decision on whether or not to spend time in the Hakka districts. He added that in case he was appointed to a post in a Hakka district in the Dutch East Indies, he would learn the Hakka dialect at that time. According to the advice provided by W. P. Groeneveldt (1841-1915), then Vice President of the Indies Council, one year in China is indeed too short to master the spoken language. All three were granted an additional year by the Minister of Colonies.[14]

During their stay on Gulangyu, the students had language lessons in Hokkien from a native Chinese teacher. Their teacher was a scholar, who had failed the civil service examinations, which were the means to gain a government post. In imperial China, male students would study and sit for these exams. There were three levels of exams including the prefectural exams for the degree of *xiucai* 秀才, provincial exams for the degree of *juren* 舉人 and ultimately the palace exams nominally supervised by the emperor for the degree of *jinshi*

[14] NA. Letter of 12 September 1893, no. 40. Request by Borel of 5 June 1893 and advice of the Indies Council of 20 July 1893, both numbered 1403a/35. From notes on the documents it appears that Schlegel was contacted for advice about the extension request from van Wettum, Ezerman and Borel, and the question whether it was necessary to amend the period of study of a maximum of five years as stipulated in the *Statute Book* (Staatsblad) of 1873 no. 123. Schlegel replied that amendment was not necessary because three years in Leiden and two years in China should be sufficient. In this case it was van Wettum and Borel whose performance in the first year was poor, and therefore they needed four years of study in Leiden, according to Schlegel.

進士.[15] Students had to memorize the aforementioned *Four Books* and *Five Classics* (*Wujing* 五經), comprising *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), *The Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), *The Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋). These books have canonical status in Chinese cultural tradition and were supposedly written by 'the holy rulers, wise statesmen, and infallible masters of antiquity.' They not only determined the 'literati's attitudes on man, society and the cosmos' but they were also a source of examples, sayings, quotations, and allusions.[16] Women were not allowed to take the examinations but some girls in wealthy families had access to education, either taught by someone in the family or by joining the private classes of their brother(s) at home. Those men who failed the examinations (and thus did not get an official appointment) would consider taking up employment as private tutors.

Borel wrote about his Chinese teacher Tio Siao Hoen, Hokkien for Zhao Shaoxun 趙少勳[17] in his essay 'The First-born' (De Eerstgeborene) published in the literary magazine *The Netherlands* (Nederland) in 1923. Two years later it was reprinted in Borel's book *Of Life and Death* (Van Leven en Dood). The title of this essay, 'first-born', is the literal translation of the Chinese word *xiansheng* 先生 'teacher'. His praise of his teacher in this essay is in sharp contrast with his original negative view when he was in China more than twenty years earlier. As Kuiper writes, Borel felt cheated by Zhao and at one point even fired him.[18] Yet, in this essay, Borel writes how he realized that this teacher had become his 'spiritual father' (geestelijke vader) and he was his child:

> This school teacher who received a meager twelve dollars from me each month, and appeared promptly every morning at my door like a paid servant, knew how to enlighten me on the wisdom of Confucius as well as Laozi, in such simple manner, by using only a few powerful words and elegant expressive gestures, that no eminent European professor would have been able to achieve. Everything I have written about the Wisdom and Beauty in the Indies, I owe to this teacher. In fact it is not easy at all to explain the ancient wisdom because in the classical Chinese texts (strange as this may sound), what is not written is much more important than what is written and should be received in silence.[19]

Clearly and unsurprisingly, Zhao Shaoxun had a different pedagogical approach than Schlegel and Borel found that teaching Chinese wisdom in the Chinese way was more effective than the Western way. His acknowledgement that Zhao inspired him to write about 'wisdom and beauty in the Indies' is possibly a mistake, it should be 'China' not 'the Indies' or it is referring to the time and place in the Indies that he was writing about China.

The lessons were not limited to language and literature only. The publications by Borel, but also by van Wettum as described below, show that the students were exposed to many

[15] For more on state examinations, see Spence 1990, pp. 10-11.
[16] Idema and Haft 1997, p. 54.
[17] Conversion provided by Koos Kuiper.
[18] Kuiper 2016, p. 358.
[19] Borel ca. 1925 (1926?), p. 32.

facets of Chinese culture. Borel mentions Zhao's explanation of Karma *yinguo* 因果 in the essay 'The Beggar' (De Bedelaar) included in *The Last Incarnation* (De laatste incarnatie), where he asks his teacher about the fate of beggars, because there was one lying outside Borel's house on Gulangyu. Zhao explains that it is the beggar's Karma, or 'cause and effect' in previous lives that led to his present circumstances.[20] Besides attending lessons, the students also made short local trips. Borel makes notes in his diary about his trips to Zhangzhou and Guangzhou.[21]

While living in China, Borel was very impressed with the natural settings there, which he described in his diary on 22 November 1893:

> This afternoon I walked around the island. I walked hard against the cold wind. Oh how beautiful. The sea high up the rocky path and the huge mountainscape on the Chinese mainland on the other shore. Mountains are much more beautiful than rocks. The sea is endless. The mountains are also endless. The sun was about to set.

In contrast to the flat landscape in the Netherlands, Borel admires the difference in natural settings, which must have contributed to his appreciation of China.

2.3 Scholarship and Disappointment

Early on Borel starts writing scholarly articles but realizes after publishing one article in the academic journal *T'oung Pao* that it is not the way he likes to write about China. *T'oung Pao* was launched in 1890 under joint editorship of Schlegel and French sinologist Henri Cordier (1849-1925), professor at l'École spéciale des Langues orientales, known today as the Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales, INALCO). It is one of the oldest scholarly journals on traditional China still publishing, especially on traditional sinology. It must have been a disagreement between Borel and Schlegel over a second submission and advice from Prikker against further publication in *T'oung Pao* that make Borel shun pure scholarly writing. We will return to this below.

Borel's *T'oung Pao* article was written in French and entitled 'Chinese Oath of Friendship' (Serment d'Amitié Chinois) and appeared in 1893. Incidentally, Borel was not the only one who published in *T'oung Pao*. Earlier Ezerman and van Wettum had already published their article 'An Alphabetical List of the Emperors of China and their Year-Titles or Nien-Hao with the Date of their Reign and Duration' in *T'oung Pao* in 1891 in English. Offering alphabetical lists in English and Chinese, the authors hoped that 'Chinese students

[20] Borel 1901a, p. 121.

[21] LM. Borel Archives. Upon return from his trip to Zhangzhou, Borel describes his impressions (of scenery and temples) in diary entries of 2, 6 and 8 January 1893. His plan to go to Hong Kong and Canton is written in the diary entry of 16 February 1894 and his experience upon return is recorded in the entry of 6 or 7 (the two digits are written one over the other) March 1894. Borel's travel account 'From Canton. Travel impression.' (Uit Canton. Een reisimpressie) was published in *The Guide* (60), 1896, pp. 179-195 and reprinted in Borel 1897c.

[will] find them a convenient and practical guide for ascertaining, at a moment's notice, a given name or date.'[22] Later there is another article in English by van Wettum in *T'oung Pao*, included in 1894, entitled 'A Pair of Chinese Marriage Contracts', introducing marriage in China and providing the translation of two marriage contracts. In the article, van Wettum notes 'I heard a good deal about them [i.e. wedding ceremonies], especially from my Amoy teacher,'[23] indicating the influence of his teacher in China.

Returning to Borel's article about friendship, he wrote this, as he explains in the introduction, because he thought it might be interesting for *T'oung Pao* readers to understand such an oath of friendship, and so he translated an oath which was taken by friends who lived in Xiamen. Of course, it was also the result of his training under Schlegel who was the first to study the Triads who used such oaths. Schlegel had published *Thian ti hwui: the Hung-league, or Heaven-earth-league: a secret society with the Chinese in China and India* in English in 1866. Since such oaths were a common form of bonding among Chinese, also in the Dutch East Indies, it was important for students of Chinese to understand this practice. Borel stresses that it was a real Chinese document and that the oath was taken by living Chinese people. According to David K. Jordan in his 'Sworn Brothers: A Study in Chinese Ritual Kinship' the text that Borel had translated was:

> a *Jinlanpu* 金蘭譜 or Register of Gold Orchids document, where gold and orchids are somewhat threadbare symbols of the durability and 'fragrance' (attractiveness) respectively of the sworn brotherhood relationship.[24]

Jordan's explanation of Borel's translated text reads:

> the oath was taken by four nineteen- and twenty-year-old men. In this text the candidates first invoke the precedents of Guan Zhong and Bao Shuya, men of the Eastern Zhou dynasty famed for maintaining an intimate friendship despite enormous differences in wealth, and of Lei Yi and Chen Zhong, two Han dynasty scholars whose devotion was said to have made them as inseparable as lacquer mixed with glue.

Borel's article then goes into the historical background as well as the practical aspects of 'brotherhood' in use at that time. Following this publication, Borel was working on an article about the 'Chinese Principles of Poetry', which he submitted to *T'oung Pao* according to his letter of 7 May 1894 to van Eeden. In this article he includes a quote from the preface by Wang Yaoqu 王堯衢 (18th century) to a Tang dynasty poetry collection. I have identified this work as the anthology *Combined Explanations of Tang Poetry* (*Gutangshi hejie* 古唐詩合解), published in 1732. Borel quotes the part where Wang explains that any sound in nature is caused by movement and the greatest of all are wind and thunder. This is applied to the human heart which is set in motion and creates sound. Schlegel, however, takes issue

[22] Ezerman and van Wettum 1891, p. 357.
[23] Van Wettum 1894, p. 371.
[24] Jordan 1985, p. 150.

with Borel's interpretation of the phrase 'Poetry is the sound of the heart' *shi ye zhe, xin zhi sheng ye* 詩也者，心之聲也, upon which Borel feels offended, as shown in his letter of 7 May 1894 to van Eeden:

> Therefore "*Oh! Poetry is the sound (music) of the heart*" is exactly translated from the simplicity of the Chinese. This was ridiculous, said Schlegel. *Sound of the heart* is nonsense. It should be "*What makes poetry poetry is that it is the echo (!!!) of our feelings*" which is not there in Chinese, because the character for feelings is different than that of heart and echo is completely different from sound. The Chinese literati were astonished when I mentioned this translation. I wrote to Schlegel about it and he replied: the Chinese know nothing about it.[25]

Here are two opposite views of poetry and translation. In Borel's view the sentence can be translated directly from the Chinese. Schlegel, however, disagrees and adds an explanation into his translation, which then also changes the meaning of 'poetry'. For Borel the sound comes directly from within, for Schlegel it is a repetition of sounds. This results in what Borel writes in that same letter that he 'gives up on scholars such as Schlegel', whom he says he admires for his 'genius as an intellectual, but [who is] a zero in higher things (…)'. Eventually Borel uses the paragraph from Wang Yaoqu's preface in 'Wu Wei—a fantasy based on Laozi's philosophy' (Wu Wei: een fantazie naar aanleiding van Lao Tsz's Filosofie), which will be discussed in the next section.

Then there is the influence of Prikker on Borel on what to publish where. Prikker expresses surprise at the scholarly nature of the article which he is not expecting from Borel. He writes in his letter of 20 March 1894: 'My goodness, you are so erudite in that journal, that is not something to be sneezed at.'[26] But it is not just about the scholarly nature of the piece: in the same letter of 20 March 1894, Prikker further goes on advising against Borel's plan to publish more in *T'oung Pao*:

> I think it is wrong if you publish your Buddhist studies in that journal *T'oung Pao*. What good would that do? I had much rather include them in a collection. It seems to me that for that kind of scholarly studies in that journal a publisher can be found. If you write more for that journal Slegel [sic] will throw his weight around and take all the credit. This would make that chap Slegel [sic] happy and there is no need for that.[27]

Apparently Borel had the intention to submit a piece on Buddhism to *T'oung Pao*. It shows that Prikker is most concerned about publishing in *T'oung Pao* because of Schlegel taking undue credit. It is difficult to say if it is Schlegel or Prikker or both who influenced Borel, but no other articles by Borel can be found in later issues of *T'oung Pao*. From the letters it appears that Prikker was acting as a middleman stationed in The Hague, advising on venues

[25] UVA. Henri Borel aan Frederik van Eeden Brief, Bijzondere Collecties, Universiteit van Amsterdam, XXIV C93. Cursive words were in English in the original.
[26] Joosten 1980, p. 175.
[27] Ibid.

and using his connections to facilitate Borel's publications.[28]

2.4 Translating China

After the episode with *T'oung Pao*, Borel turns to writing in a romantic and non-scholarly manner. He focuses on writing cultural essays about things Chinese to be published in the afore-mentioned Dutch literary magazine *The Guide* (this magazine has been publishing since 1837 and still exists today). As Borel explains in defense of critical views of his writing on China, it was not his intention to write sinological and scholarly articles.

The topics and contents of his early essays on China focus on culture, poetry and art in China: Chinese theatre, funeral customs and Daoist thought. Borel's essay 'Chinese Theatre' (Het Chineesche tooneel) appeared in *The Guide* of June 1894. In the first part it introduces various aspects of Chinese opera and the story of Fan Lihua, which according to Borel was one of the most popular operas in China at that time. As explained by Borel, the story of the female warrior Fan Lihua is extracted from the popular book *War in the West* (*Zhengxi* 征西, which he renders in Dutch as *Strijd in het westen*).[29] To give his readers the background to the story, Borel summarizes the plot which he occasionally interrupts with explanatory remarks, such as 'it was not unusual at all at that time for women to be warriors.' In the second part of this essay, Borel describes the performance, the musical instruments, costumes and makeup. Borel also goes backstage to talk to the performers and he realizes that they know nothing about the background or the history of the play. He also learns that the person who plays Fan Lihua is a man. Borel on purpose keeps this secret in his own narrative only to be divulged at the end, in the same way as he experienced it. In imperial China, male actors also played women roles, because Chinese women were not allowed to perform on stage.

A few months later Borel published a second essay, 'A Dead Mandarin' (Van een dooden Mandarijn), in *The Guide* of September 1894. This is a description of Borel attending the funeral of a Chinese official, upon the invitation of a friend of the deceased. Details of the table with the offerings, the food, the candles, and the whole ambience are given.

A third essay is 'Wu Wei—a fantasy based on Laozi's philosophy', first published in *The Guide* of March 1895 as 'Wu Wei—a study based on Laozi's philosophy' (Wu Wei—een studie naar aanleiding van Lao Tsz's filosofie). In reprints of this work, Borel explains that he initially called this 'a study', but after comments by critics that his work was not a translation, he changed it into 'fantasy'.[30] As Borel remarks this is his own creative writing, based on

[28] According to Prikker's letter to Borel of 22-28 January 1893, Prikker also helped enquire the possibility of Borel to become the foreign correspondent in China for the *Rotterdammer*. This was never realized because a broader range of topics was needed and Borel's Dutch language use did not meet the newspaper's requirement. Moreover, Borel's stay in China was too short. See Joosten 1980, p. 98-99.

[29] Borel 1894a, pp. 364-365. For more details about the story, see Eva Hung's 'Fan Lihua and Xue Dingshan: a Case Study in Battlefield Courtship', *Journal of Chinese Studies* (NS No. 1). 1992, pp. 299-313.

[30] Later Borel publishes another essay 'Wu wei' which is not a fantasy, but a more scholarly study. This was

Daoist philosophy, to explain his interpretation of the concepts of *wu wei* 無為 or 'non action' and *dao* 道, or 'the Way'. The story of 'Wu Wei: a fantasy based on Laozi's philosophy' is divided into three parts: I. Dao, II. Art and III. Love. In all three parts there are examples of how Dao is a part of everything, in objects, in people, in art, in emotions. It reads as if the narrator is Borel and the old sage in the story is his teacher. In the story, which is supported with quotes from Daoist works, the narrator is asking the old sage questions about poetry, love, and happiness. In the end the sage reminds the narrator that Dao, Poetry, Love is all one and the same: 'Everything is holy because of the essence of Dao that lives inside.'

Based on what he wrote in his diary and in a letter to van Eeden, it appears that Borel is inspired by the Dialogues of the Greek philosopher Plato (428/427-348-347 BCE) in writing 'Wu Wei: a fantasy based on Laozi's philosophy'. On 2 January 1892, Borel notes in his diary that he started doing a Dutch translation of Plato's *Symposium* from the English.[31] It is likely that the English version is the one by Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893), because Borel quotes from Jowett's preface for ideas on translation, as we will see in Chapter 3. Later in a letter to van Eeden of 12 April 1895, Borel laments that Chinese literature lacks any explanation about (the beauty of) love and women, like that in Plato's *Symposium*.[32] The main influence of Plato in 'Wu Wei: a fantasy based on Laozi's philosophy' is the use of dialogues, and probing into the concept of Love as of Socrates did in the *Symposium*.

The three essays of 'Chinese theatre', 'A Dead Mandarin' and 'Wu Wei: a fantasy based on Laozi's philosophy' were collected and published in 1895 in *Wisdom and Beauty from China* (Wijsheid en Schoonheid uit China), with one additional piece, 'The Appearances of the Chinese' (De schijn der Chineezen).[33] The latter is an account by Borel of his feelings when he first arrived in China, and describes his impressions of the Chinese people and the differences from his home culture. For example, he writes about the time when he saw an old man searching for the right location for his grave. Here he introduces *fengshui* 風水 or Chinese geomancy.[34] Another example is the description of the perfect happiness that old Chinese men derive from having many children and living to old age.[35] Further down, Borel notes that once he saw his old teacher sitting silently high on a rock near his house, and upon his question what he was doing, the old man said 'nothing' which is also characteristic of the Chinese, according to Borel. When Borel expresses surprise, the old man explains he is

published in *The Guide* of 1897.

[31] LM. Diary entry of 2 January 1892 in Borel Archives. Joosten 1980, p. 38.

[32] UVA. Henri Borel aan Frederik van Eeden Brief, Bijzondere Collecties, Universiteit van Amsterdam, XXIV C93. Letter of 12 April 1895. With this letter Borel sends a copy of Herbert Giles's translation of the *Daodejing*.

[33] There is a German translation *Weisheit und Schönheit aus China*, which contains a selection of essays from both *Wisdom and Beauty from China* and *Kwan Yin*.

[34] Borel 1895a, p. 8.

[35] Ibid, p. 11.

xiaoyao 逍遙 (floating, free and unfettered).[36] This notion has become a common expression for leisurely retirement away from the hectic mundane life, but in fact it is a Daoist concept that originates in the *Zhuangzi* (莊子). This Daoist work is traditionally ascribed to Zhuangzi (also known as Zhuang Zhou) who lived around the fourth century BCE. *Zhuangzi*'s first chapter is 'Free and Easy Wandering' *Xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊 in which *xiaoyao* has a deeper meaning of 'going beyond' in understanding things in life. But Borel does not refer to the interpretation in the *Zhuangzi*. Here, he notes that this is hard for 'us' to understand 'the Chinese', and presents 'them' as a mystery, a different world. From these descriptions, we can see that Borel is observing and digesting the customs and habits of China. The description of his experience in China, seeing and appreciating the beauty of many things, tends to be in an Orientalist fashion, as will be discussed in the next chapter; but eventually in the end he feels cheated, because ultimately it is all 'appearances'.[37]

His view of the Chinese, however, changes over the years. The undated fifth print of *Wisdom and Beauty from China,* which I use here, has a foreword dated 1919, in which Borel explains that after all these years, he looks at matters differently. He points at sentences in the book which he would not have written like that later, especially in his essay on 'Chinese Appearances,' where he wrote 'The Chinese are such lovely people, if one only sees them from the outside',[38] and 'Is it not surprising, that I started to admire this nation with innocent joy, which I now laugh about?'[39] Both the publisher and writer, however, decided that it would be better to retain the essays in their original form.

Based on the contents of the essays in the *Wisdom and Beauty from China* I will analyse the characteristics of how Borel introduces China. In the essays Borel observes the differences between Chinese and Dutch cultures. Borel is constantly interacting between China and the Netherlands, in terms of trying to understand the source culture and trying to present it in an accessible way to his Dutch readers. Below, I will probe into 'the agencies', in Wolf's words as quoted above, behind this interaction.

In a way, the essays can also be considered a kind of travel writing because they reflect the experiences of Borel in a foreign country. Travel accounts, according to Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn (as briefly referred to in the introduction):

> often adopt an extreme method of translation by either, in an imperialist gesture, domesticating and thus reducing the foreign to fit into a framework that reproduces that of the self, or, in an opposite anti-imperialist gesture, exoticizing the Other so as to make it distant and simply alien from the observing self.[40]

[36] Ibid, pp. 17-18.
[37] Ibid, p. 20.
[38] Ibid, p. 5.
[39] Ibid, p. 7.
[40] Kerr and Kuehn 2007, p. 7.

Both extreme methods of translation are present in the essays, as will be discussed below. In these essays, Borel expresses his views and feelings about China while he was there, observations of Chinese customs and habits which he finds different from his home culture and which are of interest to the reader. Moreover in these early essays, it is more like Borel discovers not just China, but also himself. As Kerr and Kuehn explain:

> All travel writers about China, in recording an impression of the country, have also portrayed themselves, whether as the briefest sketch or in a full-blown self-portrait for which China is simply the background. We can only become aware of ourselves in relation to others beyond ourselves, and for these writers this is the other meaning of China's ulteriority.[41]

Here the term 'ulteriority', as Kuehn explains, is meant to say that for nineteenth-century travelers in China, there was always something 'beyond', China was too vast and remained something of a mystery.[42] Of course this 'mystery' is a perception, symptomatic of the era's travelers. In the case of Borel, in his eyes China was indeed a mystery, and he stresses this idea in his writing. But because he sees himself as a poet, Borel is convinced that he has what it takes to go 'beyond.'

If we look at the so-called agencies of 'cultural translation and transfer' as explained by Wolf, and based on the contents of *Wisdom and Beauty from China* described above, we can identify ways in which Borel interacts between China and the Netherlands. As I will show in the next sections, I have identified four characteristics of how Borel presents Chinese culture: in contrasts by juxtaposing Chinese cultural aspects with Dutch/Western counterparts, the romanization of Chinese concepts, the use of analogies by referring to similar concepts in Dutch/Western culture, and the stress on the uniqueness of Chinese culture.

1) Contrasts: for example in his claim in the essay 'Chinese Appearances', where he writes that upon seeing the Chinese in China, Borel realizes that he is relieved of the burden of seeing the bourgeois side of the Dutch people, who as ordinary civilized Dutch citizens in clean, stiff suits take walks with the family on Sundays.[43] This he sets in contrast with the Chinese of whom he writes that the way they dress, where they live, what they use, everything is beautiful.[44] He puts the Chinese right opposite of the Dutch, it is 'them' and 'us' mostly in a positive view of the Chinese. Other contrasts can also be found in for example the description of tea cups: the Dutch tea cup is 'clumsy and unwieldy' whereas the Chinese cup 'has an elegance of form and color which will give someone, who has a sense of art, a particularly good feeling.'[45] Emphasis on cultural differences is a form of

[41] Ibid, p. 5.
[42] Personal communication in November 2014.
[43] Borel 1895a, p. 5.
[44] Ibid, pp. 4-5.
[45] Ibid, p. 5.

'foreignization', a strategy in translation studies, which is in the words of Lawrence Venuti 'an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad.'[46] In his writing, Borel tries to give the reader the foreignness of Chinese culture, in the same way he experienced it.

2) Retaining Chinese words in romanization further strengthens foreignization, which I use here for Borel's use of Chinese concepts in romanization or where he gives very literal translations of Chinese words and phrases. Cases of romanization are terms for which according to Borel there are no suitable equivalent words in Dutch, including *xiao* 孝 (filial piety)[47], *xiaoyao*[48] and *gui* 鬼 (ghost).[49] In other cases, Borel gives literal translations of Chinese words or phrases. An example is 'The hero was scared until his soul no longer fitted his body' (*De held vreesde 'tot zijn ziel niet meer bij zijn lichaam paste')* which includes the expression *hun bu fu ti* 魂不附體 (literally 'the soul separated from the body', meaning scared out of one's wits).[50] By introducing these aspects of Chinese culture Borel exposes his readers to new notions. This can have a foreignizing effect, although it can also be seen as enrichment of the Dutch language.
3) There are also instances of domestication, which I use here for cases where Borel gives his readers notions they can relate to, such as terms from the Bible, the term 'fate' in Greek mythology, and connecting Dao with God. In an analogy that might appeal to his readers, Borel writes 'Everything is revelation. Everywhere is God. Dao is in everything.'[51] The idea that Dao just like God is everywhere may enable the reader to better understand the notion. Yet, his approach from Western concepts in the comparison and the use of the word 'God' may be misleading for the intention of the work, which is clearly inspired by Daoist texts. Another example is where Borel says that the mystical music and monotonous singing at the funeral as described in 'A Dead Mandarin', is 'Litany, similar to the hardly moving, immensely quiet music of old-Gregorian funeral songs.'[52] These are analogies which readers can easily imagine and may be considered a form of 'domesticizing'. It must be noted here that not each analogy is a form of domestication. Domestication in translation studies is a strategy that reduces the foreignness of the text, and adjusts the text to cultural norms of the target culture, thereby erasing foreign cultural values. Yet, not all domestication involves erasing

[46] Venuti 2008, p. 20.
[47] Borel 1895a, p. 12 and p. 58.
[48] Ibid, p. 18.
[49] Ibid, p. 65.
[50] Ibid, pp. 33 and 38.
[51] Ibid, p. 98.
[52] Ibid, p. 85.

differences. In Borel's case, he is making comparisons in an attempt to help the reader to understand certain cultural aspects.

4) But foreignization outweighs domestication and in the description of Chinese culture, Borel prominently stresses the uniqueness of Chinese culture. According to Borel typical Chinese characteristics can be found in everyday things, such as a special fondness for flowers, birds and little children. An example is where Borel refers to an old man who carries his bird in a cage, or carries his grandchild around 'without the risk of being laughed at'.[53] This implies that what is 'normal' in China, may actually be not accepted in the Netherlands. Borel also mentions phenomena in China such as storytellers who can be found all over the city[54] and matchmakers to help to arrange marriages and negotiate between two families.[55] Another example is that while watching Chinese opera, Borel indicates that the Chinese appreciate the repeated reappearance of the Mandarin official, while 'this is tedious for a Western person'. The reason for this, as Borel explains, is that in China to become a Mandarin is a reward to someone for being a good person in a previous life, it is the best that can happen in the life of a Chinese.[56] Therefore, the Chinese audience is excited to watch the Mandarin. He compares Chinese and Dutch performances by describing the simple construction of a Chinese stage set up anywhere in the open where audiences come and go as they like, different from performances in the Netherlands which are held indoors in theaters.[57]

Besides the above-mentioned characteristics, another way of presenting Chinese culture to the reader, is in the 'self-discovery' in Borel's writing. This is most prominent in 'Wu Wei: a fantasy based on Laozi's philosophy', in which Borel acts as the ignorant student who seeks out the old sage in search of the truth. For Borel this essay remains his own favorite among all his works, as he writes in the article to celebrate his sixtieth birthday in 1929. In this article Borel claims that if all of his work had to be burnt and he could only keep one item, he would choose 'Wu Wei—a fantasy based on Laozi's philosophy', a work which according to him should have been published separately, just as the French, English and German translations of the tale had appeared as individual titles:

> The best of me can be found in this short tale 'Wu Wei' which fortunately is not only literary but also philosophical, and in which I have expounded on the way of life and vision of the world. All along I have wished for a separate edition in Dutch too (hence not as part of *Wisdom and Beauty from China*), but this was never realized.[58]

[53] Ibid, pp. 6-7.
[54] Ibid, p. 13.
[55] Ibid, p. 36.
[56] Borel 1894a, p. 383.
[57] Ibid, pp. 363-364.
[58] Borel 23 November 1929.

It was only after his death that his wish was fulfilled. *The Fatherland* of 28 November 1933 announced the special edition of 'Wu Wei: a fantasy based on Laozi's philosophy,' for subscribers to *The Fatherland* and Henri Borel's loyal readers.

In this work, Borel is actually part of the story, which is a combination of Daoism, Buddhism and poetics. It contains dialogues between the narrator and an old sage with translated key phrases from the Daoist classics *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing* that weave the story around them. The *Daodejing*, also known as *Tao Te Ching*, is attributed to the Chinese philosopher Laozi 老子 (Old Master) and generally dated around 205 BCE. It appears that Borel tries to reinforce the point he is making in the dialogues by including translated phrases. Yet in some cases he misses the point, as the following example shows, where Borel explains about *wu wei* and *dao.* He starts a wordy explanation in his own words about his interpretation of *wu wei* which he interprets as Going-Naturally (Van-Zelf-Gaan) and then Borel quotes a phrase from the *Daodejing*:

> 是以聖人處無為之事行不言之教 *Shi yi shengren chu wuwei zhi shi xing bu yan zhi jiao* (Therefore the sage practices his teaching of non-action, which he conveys without words)
>
> *De ware Wijze betracht de Leer die zonder woorden is, die ongesproken blijft* (The true Sage practices the Teaching that is without words, and remains unspoken)[59]

The problem with the Dutch translation, which stresses the 'wordlessness' of Dao's teaching, is that it omits a direct translation of *wu wei*. The only effect that this line has is the idea that what is left unsaid is more important than the text. Content-wise this is exactly what Borel said about his teacher Zhao Shaoxun, who was, to Borel, better at teaching the classics than Schlegel.

Part I 'Dao' is about how the narrator is in search of the old sage Laozi and it contains translated passages from the *Zhuangzi*, to explain one should not make too much effort in the search for the truth.

Part II on 'Art' starts with the question by the narrator 'What is Poetry?' (Wat is Poëzie?). To answer that question, Borel gives the translation of the first paragraph from the preface by Wang Yaoqu to the Tang poetry collection mentioned above. What follows then in Borel's story is a dialogue between the narrator and the sage about what makes a poet. In answer to the narrator's question of why poets write poems, the sage retorts 'why do birds sing?' From this whole conversation, it appears that the idea of being a poet is that it is something natural, it comes from within. But this is not limited to 'word-artists' (*woord-kunstenaars*), but applies to artists in general, says the sage. To show this, he pulls out a precious box with the figurine of Guanyin 觀音, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, and

[59] Borel 1895a, p. 100. In the footnote he mentions the source: This sentence is translated from the *Daodejing* (chapter 2).

explains that the creator of this art object has the same naturalness as a poet. Toward the end of this part, the narrator concludes 'your wisdom is poetry and your poetry is wisdom.'[60] The sage, however, refutes this and says 'I do not know what my wisdom is, or what my poetry is. All returns into one. It is so simple, so natural if you know it. All is Dao.'[61] This is a kind of statement by Borel of how he sees himself as a poet at work.

In part III on 'Love', there is a dialogue between the narrator and the sage on the question of what is love. The sage remarks that 'Love is nothing else than the Rhythm of Dao,'[62] yet the narrator thinks that, 'Love is a longing to always be with her, to unite two souls.' But the sage laments that human beings are always searching for happiness, while happiness is only short-lived, and he quotes *Zhuangzi* 'The highest happiness is no happiness'. Finally, the sage reminds the narrator that Dao, Poetry, Love are all one and the same. 'Everything is holy because of the essence of Dao that lives inside.' The sage tells him to go home and gives him the precious box with the figurine of Guanyin inside.

Prikker in his letter of 1 May 1895, criticizes Borel for explaining too much in 'Wu Wei—a fantasy based on Lao Tsz's philosophy' because he says the idea of Laozi was in fact to say more with fewer words:

> My conclusion is that it is beyond doubt that you have done many people a great service by your adaptation of Laozi's philosophy, but I do not think your work agrees with the intention of Laozi.[63]

It appears that Prikker would much rather read the *Daodejing* in its original state, which are the brief chapters containing Daoist wisdom and advice. Perhaps this also stimulated Borel to get on with his translations of the classics that he was working on.

Considering the fact that at least five reprints of *Wisdom and Beauty from China* exist,[64] we can safely assume that the book was successful. The reaction to 'Chinese Theatre' was beyond expectations, as Borel writes in his diary on 14 August 1894:

> Can you imagine the ignominy. A very ordinary, overall subdued piece of mine in *The Guide*, written to pay back van Eeden, and to gain a foothold there henceforth, has created a kind of storm. Almost all the newspapers give excerpts from it and praise me.[65]

Reviews of *Wisdom and Beauty from China* generally praise the work, for example the anonymous review published in *The Guide* of 1895, notes that there might be more scholarly studies about China available, but 'they are certainly not more attractive and artistic.'[66] The

[60] Borel 1894a, p. 130.
[61] Ibid, p. 131.
[62] Ibid, p. 145.
[63] Joosten 1980, p. 219.
[64] It first came out in 1895, the second print in 1898 (?), the third in 1901, the fourth in 1916 and the fifth in 1919.
[65] LM. Diary of Borel in Borel Archives.
[66] Anonymous 1895a, p. 572.

anonymous reviewer attributes the success of the collection to the way Borel has shed light on the

> beauty—that *external* loveliness, gracious forms, taste for colors and lines, and the gestures by those mysterious, basically concentric, characters that form the Chinese people.[67]

From this review, it appears that the image of China and the Chinese people that readers get is different from other (more scholarly) works. The reviewer thinks that Borel has introduced the beauty of China from the outside, rather than the dialectic reasoning of Chinese wisdom. It is almost as if the reviewer can see a painting of China, as if through the eyes of Borel he gets a more visual view of China, because Borel's descriptions go deeper into the visual aspects, such as colors, lines and shapes of cultural sights in China.

Borel used various methods or agencies in the act of cultural translation, such as expressing his own view, comparing Chinese cultural phenomena with Dutch or Western ones, providing connections with Western culture, explaining Chinese concepts, and translating paragraphs and key phrases from important literary works. By doing so, he is negotiating between cultures, creating pathways for meaning and cross-cultural reproduction. At the same time, he gives a very subjective view of China, thus shaping and determining the image for his readers. This can also be seen from reactions of visitors to China, who fail to find the China that was depicted by Borel. In his letter of 29 February 1896 to van Eeden, Borel writes that he received a letter from a young interpreter to-be in Xiamen:

> He wrote to me about his disappointment after having high expectations from my book. Naturally, I cannot explain it, if he lacks the aptitude.[68]

This is telling of Borel's perception and interpretation of China, but also his attitude toward his readers. He is aware of his different view but is convinced his is the right one. With this view and attitude Borel travels from China to the Dutch East Indies. In his letter of 7 May 1894 to van Eeden, he laments that he wishes to stay in China and dreads going to the Indies. Indeed, life in the Indies turns out to be repressive and restricted, both in terms of the freedom of expression in his writing and his movement at work. This results in transfer and sick leave, as will be shown in the next chapter.

[67] Ibid, p. 573.
[68] UVA. Henri Borel aan Frederik van Eeden Brief, Bijzondere Collecties, Universiteit van Amsterdam, XXIV C93.