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Translating China : Henri Borel (1869-1933)

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Chapter 4: Torn between East and West

During the period of sick leave from 1899 until his reappointment in 1903 and sick leave again in 1904, Borel publishes few works on China, other than *The Chinese in the Dutch East Indies* in 1900 mentioned before. It is likely caused by the pressure of producing novels on a regular basis.¹ There is still an essay in *The Guide* (also in 1900), about the wrongdoings of European missionaries in China, entitled *The Chinese Question* (De Chineesche kwestie). This includes Dutch translations of Chinese reports on misconduct by some missionaries in China. Borel claims that with a few exceptions, missionaries were living in luxury, ignored Chinese laws and failed to study the Chinese language and culture. Reviewers are skeptical about this work because other reports write positively on the achievements of missionaries. Based on this, it strikes one that Borel is often trying to empathize with the Chinese side of the issue at hand, and blame the Western side. To a certain extent Borel is right, but as Spence writes 'Behind Chinese exaggerations of Christian excesses lay a complex web of truths that made their exhortations effective.'² Studies show that several aspects should be considered and viewed in the longer historical context of the missions and the Chinese reaction to Christianity. The Chinese view of Christianity as heterodox (criticizing Christian beliefs and making up strange religious practices), the frustration of missionaries at disappointing results of conversion, and the penetration of missions deeper into China's interior are but a few of them. I will not go further into this issue here, as it falls outside the scope of this study.³

Borel is reappointed at Riau in November 1903, the same location as his first post in 1894, but is not there for long. About six months into his appointment, Borel goes on sick leave again. According to his diary, he is convalescing in Sukabumi on West Java from May till June 1904,⁴ and then he goes back to the Netherlands again on 19 October 1904 for a year, before another appointment in Semarang in 1905. According to later documents, however, it appears that Borel was suspended from work in 1904, and an arrangement was made for his

¹ Such titles include: *A dream* (Een droom) in 1899, *Sister* (Het zusje) in 1900, *The Little Butterfly* (Het vlindertje) 1901.

² Spence 1990, pp. 205-206.

³ For more details see Paul A. Cohen, 'The Anti-Christian Tradition in China', in *The Journal of Asian Studies* (20:2), 1961, pp. 169-180; and Daniel H. Bays (Ed.) *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. As Paul A. Cohen notes in his review of *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* in *China Review International* (5:1), Spring 1998, pp. 1-16, the emphasis has finally shifted from foreign missionaries to Chinese Christians and their experience over time. See also chapter 3 'Late Qing Scene' of part One 'Late Qing China' in the *Handbook of Christianity in China. Volume Two: 1800 to the Present*, edited by R. G. Tiedemann, Leiden: Brill, 2010. In particular 'Proliferation of "religious cases"' under 3.3 'The Treaty System', describes the causal factors that gave rise to anti-Christian conflict, pp. 302-310. Daniel H. Bays also goes into the anti-Christian conflicts and violence in chapter 4 'Expansion and Institution-Building in a Declining Dynasty, 1860-1902' of *A New History of Christianity in China*, Maiden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 66-91.

⁴ LM. Diary in Borel Archives.

transfer to Makassar. There are two possible causes for this transfer and both are the result of his writings. The first is the essay 'A Visit to the Sultan of Lingga' (Een bezoek bij den sultan van Lingga) in which Borel describes his disappointment with the palace which he expected to be 'oriental'. This essay was first published in *The Telegraph* of 27 February 1904 and reprinted in the *Batavian Newspaper* of 30 March 1904. Later it was also included in the collection *Wisdom and Beauty from the Indies* (Wijsheid en schoonheid uit Indië), published in 1905. This book will be discussed in more detail below. In the preface to the reprint of the book in 1919, Borel explains as follows:

With reference to the essay 'A Visit to the Sultan of Lingga', a curious incident should be mentioned. As a result of the publication of this essay in the spring of 1904, the colonial administration of the Dutch East Indies found reason to call for my transfer from Tanjung Pinang (Riau) to Makassar (which I could evade by requesting to return to the Netherlands at my own cost). Reason for the transfer was that 'it would be impossible to maintain a good relationship with the Sultan.' Given that in my capacity of Official for Chinese Affairs I never had any official business with this Malay ruler, one will be able to evaluate the relevance of it. Yet several years later the Dutch government, who was so scared of the sultan's sensitivity in 1904, forced the sultan to abdicate. They rightly suspected him of political scheming against our authority, and he was denied the right to remain in any of our colonies and sent to Singapore! Since then the sultanate of Lingga no longer exists.⁵

The essay gives a negative image of the sultan and his staff who were (to Borel's dismay) dressed in Western royal fashion. Borel criticizes the ugly Western-style interior of the palace which he calls 'a warehouse of furniture' and the terrible performance of the dancers. He also mentions the sultan's possession of numerous cars and bicycles that stand idle and rusty, and notes the rumor about the sultan's excessive spending. The voice in the essay could be perceived as that of a spokesperson for the Dutch which could indeed be damaging to relations. Here, it seems beside the point as to whether Borel ever had any official business with the sultan, as Borel argues, and it only shows egocentrism without concern for the consequences. There's no doubt that the essay was an insult to the sultan. As history now writes: the sultan whose name was Abdul Rahman II (1885-1911) was the last head of the Malay sultanate in Riau. It turns out that he increasingly resisted cooperation with the Dutch which led to military action by the Dutch in 1911. The sultan was forced to abdicate and the sultanate was dissolved.

The second possible cause for transfer is the report Borel allegedly wrote after investigating the implementation of the Coolie Ordinance (Koelieordonnantie) in the tin mines of Singkep, an island not far from Riau.⁶ The Coolie Ordinance was introduced by the Dutch government in 1880 in order to regulate the contracts of coolies, which included the clause that employers could punish coolies who failed to comply with the terms in the contract. In hindsight, Borel explains in 1928 that it was his report on the appalling

⁵ Borel 1919, pp. 1-2. Reprint of Borel 1905.

⁶ So far I have found no evidence in the National Archives of such a report.

conditions (including spoilt rice in the kitchen and a lack of basic facilities in the residential quarters of the coolies) that led to his transfer.⁷ In conclusion, Borel accuses the government of hushing up his findings about the coolies, and using the problems surrounding his essay on the sultan as a pretext for his transfer.⁸ Either way, again it is his writings that cause trouble.

In spite of the problems at work, Borel is writing about life in the Dutch East Indies. Besides the essay on the Sultan of Lingga, the topics include various other aspects of life in the East Indies, from festivities and a praying Haji⁹ (a Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca), to landscapes and coolies. A total of ten essays are collected in *Wisdom and Beauty from the Indies* and published in 1905. Borel writes quite positively about nature and scenery, about people he meets, about a party in Preanger (mountainous region on West Java) in honor of a Regent who is bestowed with an award. In these essays, he is still drawn to things Chinese, and a beautiful sight would remind him of something Chinese. It appears that he perceives beauty in the Dutch Indies in Chinese terms, as will be illustrated below. Most importantly the essays also give insight into Borel's awareness of his position and how he feels torn between East and West. An increasing influence of Chinese culture into his writing can be detected, as if he is no longer working from one culture into another but connecting them, and so Borel's translation of China is Borelian. This can be explained, in the words of Wolf (briefly referred to in the Introduction):

In ethnographies as well as in translation in the traditional sense of the word, the cultural Other is not verbalized directly but only indirectly, and filtered and arranged through the ethnographer's or the translator's consciousness.¹⁰

In a sense, it appears that Borel is merging Self and Other, or rather he has found a connection between 'conceptualizing' culture and 'textualizing' it, which we will turn to below.

4.1 Issues of Belonging

Of special interest is the first essay in the book, about Borel's trip to Singapore, which is most revealing of what he experiences as his position between East and West. There are alternating feelings of joy of being in Asia vs feelings of shame of being white. His trip to Singapore was, as Borel explains, to escape from the suffocating life in Riau.¹¹ He had all along seen Singapore as a place to recharge, and was in the habit of doing some shopping

⁷ Borel 3 October 1928. Thanks to Koos Kuiper for referring to this article.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ An excerpt of 'Praying Haji' (Biddende Hadji) was first published in *The Sumatra Post*. Medan, 11-08-1905. Accessed on Delpher on 03-11-2015, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010321967:mpeg21:a0002>

¹⁰ Wolf 2002, 181.

¹¹ Borel 1905a, p. 41.

there as well. As early as 15 December 1895, in a letter to van Eeden, Borel writes that he is going to Singapore for Christmas: 'There is the true tropical splendor, which strangely enough is lacking here.'¹² Moreover, he claims he feels much younger there, with more energy and joy in everything. In another letter, which he wrote when he was transferred from Riau to Makassar in 1896, he also mentions a trip to Singapore in between. One of the reasons that he wishes to spend time there, is: 'I enjoy taking a carriage, an open Victoria, to pass through beautiful lanes, or along the sea, and see nice people in light-colored suits (but no Dutch people).'¹³ This is in contrast with his oppressive feeling in Riau. Borel blames it on the climate. Yet, it seems more likely that Singapore, which was under British rule at the time, feels English. Borel also stresses that it is the people of different nationalities in Hotel de l'Europe, who 'bring something from the great World-Life' (ze brengen je iets mee van het groote Wereld-Leven).¹⁴ This explains his need for a Western environment, which Riau lacks. Finally, it is undoubtedly also because he is not part of politics there, and he is not personally involved. After all, Borel is on a holiday and not working in Singapore.

4.1.1 *From Intimacy to Superiority and Shame*

His description of the trip, from leaving home and boarding the boat to arriving in Singapore and going out for the night, reflects his feelings of being torn between East and West. Borel starts off on a positive note, on the way to the pier, shouting at his old Chinese servant Ah Tong who is walking behind him with his luggage:

I urge him to move faster, pleased to hear my singing Chinese, happy that I have not lost my old accent after the long years in Europe and that there is still a kinship between me and that strange, wonderful people that even in the twentieth century are still living in a distant *ur-antiquity*.¹⁵

It appears that Borel feels close to the Chinese because he can speak the Chinese language. But the image of himself in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century in contrast with 'that strange, wonderful people' in the distant *ur-antiquity* reflects the different temporalities that typically come with a colonial mindset. This is also what Said calls 'imaginative geography', as he writes there is 'no use in pretending that all we know about time and space, or rather history and geography, is more than anything else imaginative.'¹⁶

At the same time Borel reveals his admiration for the Chinese people despite his superior feeling of being more 'advanced'. This superior feeling, however, is soon replaced with shame, as on the boat the shiny eyes of a Haji give him such a penetrating look that it

¹² UVA. Letter of 15 December 1895. Henri Borel aan Frederik van Eeden, Bijzondere Collecties, Universiteit van Amsterdam, XXIV C93.

¹³ UVA. Letter of 19 September 1896. Henri Borel aan Frederik van Eeden, Bijzondere Collecties, Universiteit van Amsterdam, XXIV C93.

¹⁴ Borel 1905a, p. 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Said 1995, p. 55.

makes him feel uncomfortable:

I feel racial hatred, the religious hatred in his eyes. I am a stranger to these Orientals, they tolerate me, and if necessary are polite to me, because I belong to that brute force who has overpowered them, but deep in their hearts they deeply despise me, and their inner feelings are hidden like a treasure too sacred for my eyes. I always have this feeling of strangeness, to be intruding among the dark people of the East, and if I think of many things, of how these people are done with their dreams and imagination, I sometimes feel ashamed to be white.¹⁷

This description is evidence of a reflection of how Borel feels living in the Indies. There is a sudden turn from being happy shouting at his servant in Chinese to feeling guilty for his presence there. Perhaps the happiness comes from within himself as an individual with an interest in China, whereas the shame that he feels originates from being a representative of foreign powers. But whether 'these Orientals' only refer to 'the dark people of the East' such as the Indians, whom Borel feels he does not understand (unlike the Chinese), or whether they include other nationals is not clear. It is not strange that Borel wonders about this awareness of what 'they' feel when 'they' see him ('deep in their hearts they deeply despise me'). In his view, as a consequence of the expatriate presence in the East, 'these people are done with their dreams and imagination', as a logical result of being under control of 'the white people'. This belonging to that 'brute force' vs admiring the Chinese, in a complex society such as that in the Dutch East Indies with so many different cultures and religions, makes it difficult not to feel contradictory, and it must be one of the reasons of his great dislike of living there.

4.1.2 Acting as a Local

This would explain why it is that Borel is quite relieved to arrive at the pier in Singapore. He enjoys the Western comfort of the Hotel de L'Europe while at the same time the view of the harbor reminds him of Xiamen and makes him long for China. Later that night he calls for a rickshaw and notes the surprise on the coolie's face upon hailing him in Chinese, which immensely pleases him. In the Chinese district Borel strolls around until the noise, smells and colors get to him and he wants to run away. Right at that moment a rickshaw with Europeans arrives, and it happens to be a group of Dutch people Borel knows from Riau. They tell Borel of their wish to visit a 'sing-song house' where courtesans, or sing-song girls, entertain male customers. Upon the Dutch people's request, Borel goes up to the door to ask in Chinese for permission to enter. A huge, fat Chinese tells him in English 'No can do Sir! no can do! this belong chinamen only Sir! This belong old chinamen private Club!' but Borel goes on to persuade him:

But I respond in his own singing language, I tell him that I too am half Chinese, really, I did live in his

¹⁷ Borel 1905a, pp. 9-10.

country for two years, I just wish to come in and have a look, truly I am no drunken sailor who will brawl and be rough with the sing-song girls, and that I know so well what 'li' means, and that I will leave again in an orderly manner after I am allowed to take a look. The high pitch singing language which is the key to the whole of China plus a couple of dollars do the trick.¹⁸

Borel flaunts his knowledge of the language and customs, and expresses this feeling again that he is 'one of them': he claims he is half Chinese. It seems that when he is communicating in Chinese with Chinese people, there is no feeling of shame. Note also the colloquial speech he is using, as if talking to the reader about his experiences. He also retains the word *li* in romanization and only notes in a footnote that it is an equivalent of 'decorum.' In earlier works, he already explained that this Chinese concept is untranslatable, for example in his essay 'Chinese degeneration' (Chineesche ontarding), Borel notes that the meaning of *li* surpasses the intensity of words of politeness and etiquette as used in the West. It is exactly this *li* that makes the Chinese feel superior to all foreign people, Borel explains:

Where Europe has the supremacy of armored ships and Krupp canons, China has always defeated her conqueror with *li*. *Li* is the basis of an extremely difficult art, a labyrinth full of pitfalls, that is called 'the Chinese official style'. (...) So long as Europe cannot beat the Chinese *li*, her disciplined armies will not be able to uphold her prestige.¹⁹

By juxtaposing weapons against *li*, Borel takes *li* to be a symbol of obstruction and as long as only the Chinese master this, it cannot be translated. By transcribing and explaining *li*, Borel emphasizes on the one hand his knowledge of Chinese and on the other attempts to keep the foreignness in the text. If Borel had only written that he knew how to behave according to Chinese etiquette, this would have had a different effect.

As a result of Borel's persuasive words, he and his friends are allowed to go upstairs and look around. While the friends enjoy themselves, Borel's anxiety strikes again. A combination of noises, colors, heat and sweat disgust him, and Borel feels that he—a white man from the West—does not belong there, among those brown and yellow and black faces, those alien, Oriental lives:

The obsession of the dangerous, hostile Orient strikes me, I feel small and lost in the roaring crowds of gloomy, brown devils, and I look for a way out in fright, to flee away, to the other side where the green Esplanade is, where the English houses are, safe and familiar. No, never will a white Westerner belong to the sultry, flaming, blazing East, his home is not where the flames are, and the glow, I feel that now acutely and severely, with a burning feeling in my brain and a cold shiver down my spine.²⁰

Strong contrasts emphasize feelings of confusion: Orient vs West, dangerous and hostile vs. safe and familiar, burning vs cold. Feverishly, he storms out of the establishment and finds

¹⁸ Borel 1905a, p. 67.

¹⁹ Borel 1900a, pp. 86-87.

²⁰ Borel 1905a, p. 74.

himself on the street again. Eventually he calms down and strolls along while wondering:

How strange, those cinnamon-brown lads, or is it me who's strange, a white Westerner strolling here so far away from home?²¹

There is this constant conflict within Borel, feeling akin to the Chinese, but at the same time not at ease in Asia/the East and ashamed of being white. It is as if he has an internal conversation with himself, he is wondering whether it is the Chinese who are out of place or if it is himself who is. These thoughts take place in Borel's mind, and show his awareness of the question of identity. This longing to be one of 'them' vs the realization that he is not, stresses the distinction between the Dutch and the Chinese. Divisions, such as 'us' (Westerners) and 'they' (Orientals), according to Edward Said, are:

generalities whose use historically and actually has been to press the importance of the distinction between some men and some other men, usually towards not especially admirable ends. When one uses categories like Oriental and Western (...) the result is usually to polarize the distinction—the Oriental becomes more Oriental and the Westerner more Western—and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies.²²

Despite this distinction, there is an awareness of a 'sense of Western power over the Orient [as being] taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth.'²³ From Borel's writing, we can see that whenever he gets (too) close to being part of 'them', suddenly fear strikes, perhaps also because he feels that he can sense 'their' (Asian) enmity and hatred towards him and wants to flee – even though his affinity with the Chinese remains, and he continues to be pleased at his ability to speak their language.

4.1.3 Perception of Beauty in Chinese Terms

Most of the essays in *Wisdom and Beauty from the Indies* focus on cultural elements and the natural environment in the East Indies. This includes mention of the Chinese and their language, for instance in the essay 'A train journey in the Preanger' (Een treinreis in de Preanger). On his way to the railway station of Sukabumi, Borel hears a few Chinese people talking and notes 'Their melodious Chinese sounds like singing, and it makes me happy that I understand them, that I feel related to their feelings and thinking.'²⁴ From the train he notices a young boy on a buffalo walking on the dyke: 'Dark is the silhouette against the light air, it looks like an old bronze figure that I brought from China, so delicate and fine.'²⁵ Again there is a different temporality for the local people: to Borel, they live in another age, and

²¹ Ibid, p. 77.

²² Said 1995, pp. 45-46

²³ Ibid, p. 46.

²⁴ Borel 1905a, p. 93

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 98-99

they represent the non-modern, non-Western person. Borel's description is strikingly imaginative and subjective. If we were to try to imagine the boy's point of view, it is unlikely that he would see himself as a piece of Chinese antique. The image in itself surely has nothing to do with China. But for Borel it is an association with China which he idealizes. Hence, this indicates that Borel perceives beauty in Chinese terms. It is only beautiful because it looks Chinese, or it looks Chinese therefore it is beautiful.

4.1.4 *Too Little Wisdom*

The author's self-portrayal and his inner struggles in the East are crucial components of *Wisdom and Beauty from the Indies*. Most of the book's reviewers complain of a lack of objectivity. According to an anonymous reviewer in *The Sumatra Post* of 2 February 1906, the book was not well received:

But I can imagine the dissatisfaction of some reviewers about Borel's youngest paper child. As I noted above, Borel's expression of 'how beautiful things are' has become something of a habit. He repeats the same thing too often—moreover he talks too aggressively of his own soul... And yet—even though I often felt the urge of using the known "blue pencil" [i.e. to offer critical feedback]—still I would not have wanted for Borel to have left this book unwritten, because it contains many fine descriptions of nature and life in the Indies. (...) In the Singapore impression there are many clever sketches, some of which are part of the specific Borelian habits.²⁶

Here and in other reviews it appears that his readers feel appreciation for his work for being different, but are also critical of its repetitiveness and a subjective writing style. Among the criticisms by J. van den Oude, another pseudonym of Carel van Nievelt, writing in *News of the Day for the Dutch East Indies*, is that the title of the book is not realized:

There is a lot of beauty in the book, but little wisdom—unless it is the wisdom that is concealed behind the thick veil of mystery, hidden even for Henri Borel. Luster of colors and elegance of lines in abundance, but very little light or clarity.²⁷

Van den Oude is mocking Borel's use of mystery and thinks the title of the book does not agree with the contents. However, at the end he expresses gratitude for the collection, and declares it, together with *The Hidden Force* (*De stille kracht*), a famous novel by Louis Couperus, and *The Goddess who waits* (*De godin die wacht*) and *Orpheus in the Dessa* (*Orpheus in de dessa*) by Augusta de Wit as 'the most insightful, the most inspired that has been written in belletristic form about people in the Indies. Henri Borel found a good restart of his literary performance.'²⁸ Given the fact that both Louis Couperus and Augusta de Wit are renowned writers about the Dutch East Indies, it shows appreciation for Borel's work. At the same time, however, the three titles are novels, based on experience of life in the Indies,

²⁶ Anonymous 2 February 1906.

²⁷ Van den Oude 1905.

²⁸ Ibid.

and Borel's *Wisdom and Beauty from the Indies* is thus compared with fiction.

4.2 Searching for China

During the time that Borel is stationed in Semarang from 23 September 1905 until his transfer in May 1908, newspapers show that Borel gives talks and publishes articles on Chinese topics. Borel is very much engaged with Chinese culture. In autumn 1906, Borel gave a talk at the Royal Physics Association (Koninklijke Natuurkundige Vereeniging) in Batavia on 'Dao, Chinese ideas of God, also in connection with Theosophy' (Tao, het Godsbegrip der Chineezzen ook in verband met de Theosofie) as reported in *The News of the Day for the Dutch East Indies* of 24 November 1906. He also wrote an article about a dinner with a Chinese trade commissioner that he had attended, part of which was quoted in *The News of the Day for the Dutch East Indies* of 14 March 1908. The anonymous writer quotes Borel about the difficulty of making a speech in Chinese, with the right words in the right tones:

This called for caution! It seemed, however, there was a special deity for 'insignificant lastborns' for when I lifted my goblet of champagne, the goddess Guanyin came invisibly to the rescue and I finished my speech as a cunning Mongolian. The pigtailed guests responded to my speech with a passionate 'wan sui' [a congratulatory phrase for wishing someone longevity and good health]! When Mr Borel returned home he had such a 'hangover' that later in bed he wondered whether he was a European dreaming he was a Chinese or a Chinese dreaming he was a European.²⁹

Characteristic here, is how Borel displays his knowledge of the Chinese language, customs and philosophy. He retains the Chinese words *wan sui* 萬歲 in romanization, an expression which means 'long live' as used in 'long live the emperor'. He further gives a detailed explanation about the mistakes you can make in Chinese when you get the tones wrong. Then he refers to the goddess Guanyin, which need not be irony, for in his other works, he displays a genuine interest and admiration for her: witness his art collection of Guanyin figurines, of which photos are included in his *Chinese Art* (Chineesche kunst) in 1906 and his later article on Chinese ceramics.³⁰

Borel compares his command of Chinese with that of a 'cunning Mongolian', referring to the Chinese as 'Mongolian race.' In fact it is because of the Manchus, who invaded China in the seventeenth century and established the Qing dynasty, that Chinese men were forced to shave off the hair on the top of their heads with the rest braided into a pigtail. Therefore Borel is calling the Chinese people 'pigtailed guests' (gestaarte gasten). Finally, Borel adopts

²⁹ Anonymous 14 March 1908.

³⁰ Borel published 'Chinese Ceramics' (Chineesche Keramiek) in *Ancient Art* (Oude kunst) (II), 1916/17, pp. 281-301. A study of Borel's collection of Guanyin figurines can be found in the article 'Guanyin in Blanc de Chine' (in Dutch) in *Asian Art* (Aziatische Kunst) (3), 2004, pp. 27-31. A critical evaluation of Borel's knowledge of Chinese ceramics is included in 'The Rijksmuseum and the Collecting of Chinese Ceramics in the Nineteenth Century' (in English) in *Molds of Fire* (Vormen uit Vuur) (191/192), 2005, pp. 68-79. Both articles were written by Jan van Campen.

a line from chapter 2 of *Zhuangzi* from the famous passage in which Zhuangzi, also known as Zhuang Zhou, dreams he was a butterfly:

When all of a sudden he awoke, he was Zhou with all his wits about him. He does not know whether he is Zhou who dreams he is a butterfly or a butterfly who dreams he is Zhou.³¹

This short passage shows how Borel's writing is permeated with Chinese cultural elements, which he does not really explain. It seems that Borel cannot write in 'normal' Dutch – meaning, without such references – to explain Chinese culture. But what the reader gets is a Borelian version of the image of China. As Wolf writes and quoted above, the image of China by Borel 'is filtered and arranged' through his own consciousness. Borel has found a connection between 'conceptualizing culture' and 'textualizing' it. In such way his texts on Chinese culture are not 'a reconstruction of some pre-existing reality' but rather 'a literary construct', in Wolf's words.³² That is to say, Borel's translation of (the culture of) China is based on his own perception and worded into a personal and subjective Dutch version. It shows that Borel is very much affected by his attempt at 'a literary construct' of China, and aspects of Chinese culture have become a part of his way of thinking and therefore also seep into his writing. This immersion into Chinese culture can also be found in the relations that Borel has with the Chinese.

4.3 Transfer to Pontianak

There are several inter-related matters that lead up to complaints and accusations against Borel which ultimately result in another transfer. It is revealing of his positioning with a tendency towards Chinese people and against Dutch colleagues. These matters include Borel's writing in newspapers in the Dutch East Indies of which the content is considered offensive to Dutch colleagues (like earlier with van Hasselt in Riau as discussed in Chapter 3) and his increasingly intimate relationship with Chinese people. Offensive writing appears for instance in an article of 28 November 1905, published under the name 'A. M. I.' (unclear if it is an abbreviation or if it is simply the French word for friend) in *The News of the Day for the Dutch East Indies*, who denounces Semarang as a 'creepy death city' (griezelige doodenstad) for its inferior lifestyle and lack of facilities.³³ Among the complaints are a lack of entertainment, an inferior commuting system between Tandji in the mountains and the city of Semarang, and bad postal services. In another letter published in *The News of the Day for the Dutch East Indies* of 23 May 1906, A.M.I. complains about the police reorganization which he admits is in itself a good idea, but it is of no use when the staff remains inferior and corrupt.³⁴ According to A.M.I. the police are violent and autocratic and fail to provide

³¹ Graham 2001, p. 61. Spelling of Zhuang Zhou in Graham is Chuang Chou.

³² Ibid.

³³ Borel 28 November 1905.

³⁴ Borel (using pen name A. M. I.) 23 May 1906.

security and safety in the city: robberies occur day and night. To underscore the severity, A.M.I. describes how he is writing his article with a loaded gun within reach. All this writing draws the attention of Assistant Resident of Semarang L. R. Priester (1861-1909) who finds it reflecting offensively about the District Officer of Semarang J. P. Dom (1867?-1936). Therefore, Priester demands the newspaper editor divulge the true identity of the writer. This angers Borel who is of the opinion that it is his right to remain anonymous.³⁵

Furthermore, Borel becomes involved in Chinese matters that go beyond the official description of his duties. Close involvement must have been the result of the fact that Borel had been invited to become patron (*beschermheer*) of the *Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan* or Chinese Association (*Zhonghua huiguan* 中華會館) in 1906.³⁶ The main purpose of this Chinese Association that was founded in 1900, was to promote the learning of the Chinese language among Chinese people born in the Dutch East Indies, and according to an article in the *Colonial Magazine* (*Koloniaal Tijdschrift*) the association 'refrains from involvement in political matters and mainly focuses on education as well as customs and habits.'³⁷ Although patronage of the Chinese Association was government approved, Borel's close involvement with the Chinese was not well-perceived among the Dutch. In the newspaper, he is criticized for attending a meeting of Chinese associations, where he 'was the only white sheep among all the yellow ones.'³⁸ The anonymous writer of this report thought it was shameful. Another newspaper *The Sumatra Post* of 1 June 1907 claims that some Chinese people in Semarang had given Borel money to look after their interests in a *fengshui* matter, but there are no further details whether this concerns a conflict or a legal case. Then in *The News of the Day for the Dutch Indies* of 26 July 1906, there is a short notice about 'The Fengshui Matter in Semarang' (*De Hong-Soei-quaestie te Semarang*), which reports that Priester is called to Batavia to provide details about the Fengshui-case and discuss the matter with H. N. Stuart, the Official for Chinese Affairs there. Earlier an anonymous article in the *Surabaya Commerce Paper* (*Soerabaijasch handelsblad*) explains that there were plans to build a new residential area South-west of Semarang. In this area were Chinese graves and construction would have an impact on the *fengshui* of the graves, therefore the Chinese sought help with Borel.³⁹ There are no documents that can be found in the National Archives about *fengshui* matters.

Yet, there is a file 'Borel-case' in the National Archives about the suspicious relationship of Borel with Oei Tiong Ham 黃仲涵 (*Huang Zhonghan*) (1866-1924), a wealthy businessman involved in the sugar industry. There must be some connection, because

³⁵ Cited in anonymous, 9 July 1907. This refers to an earlier article of the same title in the *Surabaya Newspaper*.

³⁶ Kuiper 2016, p. 538.

³⁷ Anonymous, 1912-01, p. 672.

³⁸ Anonymous 13 May 1907.

³⁹ Anonymous 7 July 1906.

according to an article in the newspaper, it appears that the value of Oei Tiong Ham's property would gain if the aforementioned residential area would be built.⁴⁰ How Borel is involved is not clear, but there are conflicting interests. The nature of the case is so serious that eventually in May 1907 the Governor-General decides to send the Solicitor General (advocaat-generaal) August Jacob Alexander Kollman (1854-1931) to Semarang for investigation. The only thing that the newspapers disclose is that Kollman interrogates Chinese people in Semarang.⁴¹ From the once-confidential papers in the National Archives, it appears that Borel is developing a close relationship with Oei who is offering Borel a job.⁴² There is suspicion that the job offer was of an espionage nature for Japan, and made in order for Oei to obtain information about the Dutch government in the East Indies. Oei alleges he is connected with Japanese Prince Ito Hirobumi (1841-1909) and says that a British-Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies is imminent. In his own report, Borel claims he pretended to be interested in the job offer so that he could learn about Oei's intentions. The reason that he had not yet reported this to his superior, says Borel, is because he did not have written proof of what was going on.⁴³ Finally the Governor-General seeks advice from John Loudon (1866-1955), Dutch ambassador in Tokyo, whether these allegations were true. In his reply, Loudon says Prince Ito denies any recollection of meeting Oei. Loudon also spoke with the British ambassador in Japan, who also denies any secret plans of England and Japan. Loudon concludes that in his personal view whatever claims Oei made are groundless. Although it is questionable whether asking these people directly would yield reliable information, apparently the government is satisfied with Loudon's advice.

The above cases show that Borel is trying to get involved in close relationships with Chinese people. To his Dutch colleagues this behavior of going beyond the official role, bordering on being 'a defector', is highly suspicious. All this is very likely the cause for his next transfer. According to *The News of the Day for the Dutch East Indies* of 27 April 1908, Borel has received a transfer to Muntok, to which he expresses objection. In an anonymous article entitled 'The young boy has to go to Muntok!', which starts sarcastically with:

We call your attention to the immortal author Henri Borel, who told the *Indies Weekly* that he stayed with a Russian princess just because he was Henri Borel, this talented Dutch lad who is also Official for Chinese affairs will be transferred to Muntok.

It is curious how the reporter puts emphasis on Borel as an author over his position as

⁴⁰ Anonymous 31 October 1906. Resident of Semarang is H. C. A. G. de Vogel (1856-1938). See short bio 'H. C. A. G. de Vogel' in *The Fatherland*. The Hague, 24-10-1938. Accessed on Delpher on 03-11-2015, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010018093:mpeg21:a0155>

⁴¹ Anonymous 22 June 1907.

⁴² NA. NL-HaNA, Koloniën/Kabinet-Geheim Archief, 1901-1940, 2.10.36.51, inv. nrs. 86, 100 and 101.

⁴³ Ibid.

Official for Chinese Affairs; he is using the title of Borel's novel *The Young Boy* to refer to Borel and ridicules Borel for self-acclaimed fame. Then the reporter expresses disbelief that Borel begs the Director of Justice to withdraw the transfer to Muntok:

After all, Borel will be leaving the creepy death city of Semarang and he comes closer to the Great Life in the Street of Banka. (...) What change of surroundings! He disliked Priester, and Dom as well, and the whole of Semarang disliked him. Now he has the chance to move to an agreeable place, and work for a Resident who will watch over him like a father. After his daily tasks, he has the opportunity to write his masterpieces and in this way, on Banka, he can gain his retirement money. An enviable fate!⁴⁴

The ironical tone of the reporter is revealing of Borel's image in the East Indies. Apparently Borel's ideas and publications about work in the Indies, and/or his behavior in general, annoy people.

Borel's request not to be sent to Muntok is granted and he is stationed in Pontianak instead. Eventually his undiminished fascination with China leads him to studying the 'national language' of Mandarin, and in February 1909, Borel receives a subsidy from the colonial government to take lessons in Mandarin Chinese and buy textbooks.⁴⁵ Borel takes a course at the Soe Po Sia (*Shubaoshe* 書報社), or Reading Club, which offers language lessons in Mandarin Chinese.⁴⁶ Meanwhile Borel also applies for study leave to go to Beijing, which is granted in August that year. For Borel, this is a dream come true, and it gives him a new opportunity, which will be decisive for his further career. It provides him with new material to write about, which in turn reinforces his self-image of being a China expert. This has important consequences for his next position in Surabaya and for his career prospects at Leiden University, as will be described in the next chapter.

⁴⁴ Anonymous 17 April 1908.

⁴⁵ LM. See excerpt from the Register of Decrees of the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies dated Bogor, 4 February 1909, no. 7, which stipulates that Borel will receive a monthly F50 for learning Mandarin and a sum of F50 to buy textbooks. Materials in the Borel Archives show that Borel was using *Boussole du Langage* by Henri Boucher to study Mandarin Chinese. *Boussole du Langage* is a French translation of the Japanese textbook used to learn Mandarin Chinese.

⁴⁶ Borel 1913, p. 45. Later, the Mandarin teacher Wang Fung Ting (Wang Fengting 王鳳亭) traveled with Borel to the Dutch East Indies. (Kuiper 2016, p. 190) I have not come across specific mention of Wang in Borel's written works related to China and therefore decided not to include him in the analysis.

