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Translating China : Henri Borel (1869-1933)

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PART III: REEVALUATING CHINA (1916–1933)

Chapter 6: A Chinese Spirit

In publications from the final period of his life, Borel is often looking to the past to write in the present. He reflects on his earlier work about Chinese philosophy and focuses on key concepts to explain 'the spirit of China' in an eponymous book, *The Spirit of China* (De geest van China). He physically returns to China and writes up an idealized image of China in *The Beautiful Island, A Second Book on Wisdom and Beauty from China* (Het Schoone eiland, een tweede boek van wijsheid en schoonheid uit China) (hereafter *The Beautiful Island*). He turns to texts that Schlegel introduced during their studies in Leiden in the early 1890s, and publishes literary translations of Chinese fiction and Daoist stories, and finally returns to his series of Chinese philosophy, to complete the third and last volume of his translation of the *Four Books*. Overall, Borel's translation of China is based on mystique and sentiment, represented in a more confident style than before, sometimes crossing into the pedantic. Borel portrays himself as knowing everything about China, and to know better than other writers, including active academics. Yet, similar to what Said writes about Richard Burton, 'we are never *given* the Orient; everything about it is presented to us by way of Burton's knowledgeable (and often prurient) interventions (...).'¹ In this last part I will show how Borel too, in a similar way as Burton, presents China 'by way of his knowledgeable interventions' to his Dutch readers.

Upon return to the Netherlands from the Dutch East Indies in early 1913, Borel is on sick leave and has to report to the Ministry of Colonies every six months. It takes time to settle, to digest the experience of a failed career in the East Indies, and to find a new status in the Netherlands. In the period between his return to the Netherlands in early 1913 until his appointment at *The Fatherland* in autumn 1916, Borel is looking back on events in Asia, at the same time as trying to find new employment.

Soon after his return Borel starts giving talks on what is going on in China and the Dutch East Indies at various venues, including the Chinese Society and the Dutch East Indies Association.² Remarkably, he applies for training for the post of Advisor for Japanese Affairs in the Dutch East Indies in autumn 1914, but his request is rejected by the Minister of Colonies.³ In 1915, Borel was drama reviewer at *The Amsterdammer* for a short stint, a position arranged by van Eeden who was editor of *The Amsterdammer* at the time. Then in

¹ Said 1995, p. 196.

² See reports on his talks in newspapers, such as 'Henri Borel on the Chinese Republic' (Henri Borel over de Chineesche republiek) in *The Telegraph* of 6 April 1913, accessed on Delpher on 03-11-2015 <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:110547143:mpeg21:a0117> See also 'Lecture Henri Borel' (Voordracht Henri Borel) in *The News of the Day for Dutch East Indies* of 7 April 1913, accessed on Delpher on 03-11-2015, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010167356:mpeg21:a0048>. A printed version of his talk on the Chinese Republic was published in 1913.

³ LM. letter from the Minister of Colonies dated 25 January 1915, which refers to the request by Borel of 25 September 1914, in the Borel Archives.

the summer of 1915, there are newspaper reports that Borel has an accident to one of his eyes.⁴ The public concern for the well-being of Borel shows he is a well-known figure, for his work and contributions as author and reporter, and as an officer in the Dutch East Indies. The news is published in newspapers both in the Netherlands and in the Dutch East Indies. In November 1915, the Department of Colonies decides to release Borel from service, and by Royal Decree of 7 February 1916, he receives 'honorable discharge on the grounds of physical disability and [is] granted a pension.'⁵ I have found no further details about his physical condition, but Elsa Kaiser notes that it is the accident to his eye that officially led to his honorable discharge.⁶

It seems that Borel finally finds stability when he is appointed editor of the Drama and Literature section of *The Fatherland* on 1 November 1916. It must have been his interest in the arts and writing combined with his experience at *The Amsterdammer* that led to this appointment. For writing the reviews, Borel frequently attends performances, as Kaiser writes:

Who does not know him? Henri Borel? People point at him in theatres: 'Look there is Henri Borel, critic at the *Fatherland*.'

He is one of *the* figures of The Hague. A comedy performance without him seems empty, the hall is 'unfinished'. The audience, the actors ask each other: 'Where is Borel?'⁷

He is known for his critical reviews, which he publishes not only in *The Fatherland* but also in journals such as the *Chronicle* (Kroniek), *The Dutch Revue* (De Hollandsche Revue), and the *Women Chronicle* (Vrouwenkroniek). As W. H. ten Hoet Parson (fl. 1929-1940) writes in memory of Borel:

His sharp, pungent criticisms were often huge disappointments for the artists: but they were beneficial for drama in general, and when they contained praise they were so exuberant, so extremely appreciative that one would know for sure that they came from the bottom of his heart and that they were indeed the highest praise and the best reward for the artists.⁸

This evaluation of Borel's reviews shows him in positive and negative extremes, ranging from the sharpness of his critical faculties to his penchant for exaltation. It is also revealing of his freedom in developing and publishing his views, unlike in the Dutch East Indies where he had to be careful in discussing some topics for fear of the consequences they might have for

⁴ See 'Henri Borel' in *The News of the Day* of 1 June 1915 and 11 June 1915. See Delpher.

⁵ LM. See documents in the Borel Archives.

⁶ Kaiser 1927, p. 142.

⁷ Ibid, p. 136. Further evidence of his attendance is seen in a short note in the *General Commerce Paper* of 15 November 1931, which explains that the doctor diagnosed 'mild nicotine poisoning' and therefore Borel had to be escorted home. The fact that this had to be explained shows that people were concerned about Borel's absence. Accessed on Delpher on 03-11-2015, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010661794:mpeg21:a0131>

⁸ Parson 1933, p. 133.

his career. Besides drama reviews, Borel also writes book reviews and other articles on literature and theater.

Meanwhile Borel also continues to write about China. In the period under scrutiny here, his most important publications for assessing his translation of China are *The Spirit of China* and *The Beautiful Island*.

Section 6.1 discusses *The Spirit of China*. It shows how Borel returns to the Chinese philosophical works that he translated before, and reflects on his experience over the years with the Chinese in the Dutch East Indies and in China. The examples show that Borel continues to invoke intuition and spiritual insight as indispensable for understanding China. But he undermines his self-assigned authority by praising and quoting secondary sources – for which there would really be no need if the matter was merely one of intuition and spiritual insight. This shows how Borel presents China ‘by way of his knowledgeable interventions’, in Said’s words. Ultimately, the image of China in Borel’s works is covered in a haze of mystique.

Section 6.2, ‘Idealizing China’, shows that in *The Beautiful Island*, there is a strong sense of revisiting the past. Borel also mentions changes that have happened in China in times whose turbulence is often associated with the country’s negotiation of globalization and modernity. Borel’s emphasis on the contrast between East and West results in an idealized image of China. As seen before in Chapter 4, this demarcation of East and West, in Said’s words ‘polarize[s] the distinction—the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western—and limit[s] the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies.’⁹ In the case of Borel, it seems to make the distance between the reader and China even greater. On the other hand, Borel’s works also show that his translation of China is ‘not only a matter of transfer “between cultures” but that it is also a place where cultures merge and create new spaces,’ in the words of Wolf.¹⁰ His pro-Chinese attitude mixed with his Dutch background, ‘creates new spaces’. By negotiating the cultural differences in his publications, Borel makes Chinese culture accessible to his readers. This is after all his professed agenda: the nature of his work is supposed to be ‘somewhat popular’ and written for non-sinologists, as he writes in *The Spirit of China*,¹¹ and which has been the aim of his writing all along.

6.1 Intuitions

The Spirit of China is a book published in 1916 that, according to Borel, was inspired by the Dutch translation *De Geest van Japan* of the English work *The Japanese Spirit*, although his methods are different. *The Japanese Spirit* was written by Yoshisaburo Okakura (1868-1939),

⁹ Said 1995, p. 46.

¹⁰ Wolf 2002, p. 186.

¹¹ Borel 1916, p. 70.

and based on lectures he gave at the University of London in 1905. A difference in set up is that *The Japanese Spirit* is one long text, while Borel has divided his into chapters, with illustrations and a selected bibliography.

As regards content, *The Spirit of China* looks like an expanded version of Borel's *The Religions of Ancient China* (De godsdiensten van het oude China), published in 1911.¹² In reviewing these two books, I will not analyze *The Religions of Ancient China* separately, but rather refer to it in comparison with *The Spirit of China*. Many of the topics overlap, but the lengthier *The Spirit of China* has a clearer theme and purpose.

Both *The Religions of Ancient China* and *The Spirit of China* contain the chapters 'Confucius' (Confucius), 'Mencius' (Mencius), 'Yijing' (De 'Yih king') (i.e. *The Book of Changes*), 'Laozi and the *Daodejing*' (Lao Tsz' en de Tao Teh King), 'Zhuangzi' (Chuang Tsz') and 'Ancestor Worship' (De voorvaderen-dienst). *The Spirit of China* does not include the chapter 'Buddhism', but includes new chapters called 'The spirit of China' (De geest van China), 'The language of China' (De taal van China), 'The future dream of Confucius' (De toekomstdroom van Confucius), and 'Chinese art' (Chineesche kunst). Besides the topics of spirit, language and art, which give a more comprehensive image of Chinese culture and beliefs, in 'The future dream of Confucius' Borel explores the idea that the ultimate objective of Confucius is world peace. Borel derives this idea from *The Economic Principles of Confucius and His School* by Chen Huanzhang 陳煥章 (1880-1933), who introduces three stages of evolution of humanity to attain world peace.

The Religions of Ancient China seems to have been put together hastily or it is possibly a result of editorial guidelines:¹³ it has no introduction or explanation of the central concepts of religion or philosophy. In contrast, *The Spirit of China* has a clearer approach to its central topic, i.e. Chinese thought. Borel uses the expression 'spirit' repeatedly throughout the book, well over a hundred times in less than two hundred pages, from introduction to epilogue.¹⁴ According to Borel this spirit can be felt in the natural environment, historical sites, architecture, gestures, human bodies (naked coolies), the Chinese sea, religious sculpture (Guanyin), etc. It runs through the book like a red thread, with each chapter aiming to illustrate the presence of this spirit within various aspects of Chinese culture, including literature and philosophy. His assertion of his own understanding of this spirit implies his professional and indeed his moral authority in writing about China, and his identification with the Chinese. It is, as he says, 'the Spirit of China, that turned me—a Dutchman—into a Chinese.'¹⁵

Throughout the book, there is a tension in the positioning of Borel as the expert vs the

¹² On the cover it says *The Religion of Ancient China*, but inside on the title page the plural form *The Religions of Ancient China* is printed. According to the catalogue of the National Library it is also plural.

¹³ Borel also writes a few times that he cannot elaborate because of length restrictions.

¹⁴ There are translations of quotes and a selected bibliography after the epilogue, but I did not count these in.

¹⁵ Borel 1916, p. 4.

poet. Lay people think he is the expert, while to sinologists he is the outsider. There is an awareness of the idea that 'expertise' and 'intuition' don't go together. This reminds one of 'the rift between poetry and scholarship', that Lucas Klein writes about. 'Poets and sinologists have presented poetry and sinology as if they were locked in eternal conflict', according to Klein.¹⁶ In this article, Klein writes how Burton Watson is able to reconcile this perceived rift. This tension in the positioning of Borel indicates that he too felt this rift and sought a way to accommodate expertise and intuition in his work.

It is especially Borel's notion of 'spirit' which turns China into something that is mysterious – and as such, inexplicable, and untranslatable. Borel argues that in Chinese culture, 'the mind is intuitive, philosophical, poetical and even metaphysical in core and being',¹⁷ and he criticizes others for using 'Western scientific' methods to study China. He is referring to other writers, including European sinologists but does not mention any names, except for de Groot. As such, Borel expects the reader to read Chinese philosophy in what he calls 'the Eastern way', for example in the way he explains the spirit in *Dao*, as in the *Daodejing*, for which he copies excerpts from his earlier publication. Borel stresses that if one lacks intuition, one will not be able to understand *Dao* in *Daodejing*:

Laozi did not write for scholars but for sensitive intuitives. He says himself: 'Those who know *Dao* are not learned, and those who are learned do not know *Dao*.'¹⁸

In this explanation, Borel quotes from the authoritative source, accessible to the specialists only, that is the *Daodejing*. Here, he poses as both scholar and intuitive, which results in the impression that for the lay reader he is the expert (sinologist), while for the sinologist he is the outsider. To enhance the idea that he understands, that he is the authority, Borel further complicates the notion of *Dao*. He writes that *Dao* cannot be expressed in words, and elaborates on the interpretation of *Dao* by referring to Legge's translation of *Dao* as 'the Way, the Path'¹⁹ and the explanation of the character *Dao* by Chavannes.²⁰ Borel argues that the translation of *Dao* as 'the Way, the Path' by Legge does not cover all, and that we should look further into the symbolism of the character *Dao*. Therefore he refers to Chavannes who draws attention to the separate parts of the character *Dao*. This according to Borel can have 'great mystical meaning', but he refrains from explaining: 'I cannot go further into that here.'²¹ Finally he stresses that for understanding Chinese philosophy the symbolism of Chinese characters is very important and that there was *Dao* before Daoism. Of the latter he notes that even Legge had discovered this. There Borel stops, and gives excerpts from his

¹⁶ Klein 2014.

¹⁷ Borel 1916, p. IV.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 92.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 94.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 95.

²¹ Ibid, p. 95.

own translations of the *Daodejing*.

The excerpts are taken from seventeen chapters, which vary in length and have in common their discourse on the topic of *Dao* and *wu wei*, for example, the entry from chapter XLIII:

天下之至柔，馳騁天下之至堅。無有入無間，吾是以知無為之有益。 *Tianxia zhi zhi rou, chicheng tianxia zhi jian. Wu you ru wujian, wu shi yi zhi wu wei zhi youyi.* (The softest in the world will gallop past the toughest. Non-being enters into non-space. Therefore I know the benefit of non-action.)

XLIII: 1. *Het allerzachtste in de wereld overwint het allerhardste.* (The softest in the world will vanquish the toughest.)

2. *Het Niet-Zijn dringt binnen in waar geen opening is.* (Non-being penetrates to where there is no opening.)

3. *Vandaar dat ik het nut weet van wu wei.* (Hence I know the use / usefulness of *wu wei*.)²²

These excerpts serve the purpose of conveying the notion of the ‘spirit of China’ to the reader. The translation is exactly the same as the 1897 version, except for the second line of chapter XLIII which reads ‘Het immaterieele dringt binnen in het ondoordringbare’ (The immaterial penetrates the impenetrable), while the literal ‘Het Niet-Zijn dringt binnen in waar geen opening is’ (The Non-being penetrates to where there is no opening) is relegated to a footnote. In *The Spirit of China*, Borel uses the latter, literal translation in the main text. This seems to indicate that he has returned to the source text, which reflects his approach to translation, i.e. staying close to the source text in word choice. This in itself is contradictory because in his earlier chapter on the language of China, he claims that ‘so-called literal translation from the Chinese is absurd’.²³ His reasoning for this is that Chinese characters (and their symbolism as discussed above) are different from the alphabet. Here Borel quotes Legge, now in agreement with the latter:

In a study of Chinese classical books there is not so much an interpretation of the characters employed by the writer as a participation of the thoughts; there is the seeing mind to mind.²⁴

This ‘seeing mind to mind’ is also the reason why different interpretations exist in translation, according to Borel. The complicating matter there is that the translator should also perceive the unwritten meaning and intention of the author, as Borel writes:

The most important when doing translations is: to come into direct contact with the mind and the line of thought of the author.

It may sound strange but it is true: the invisible thoughts of the writer are more important than the visible script-signs.²⁵

²² Ibid, p. 102.

²³ Ibid, p. 14.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 15.

This awareness of the importance of ‘seeing mind to mind’ gives the impression that Borel thinks he is qualified for the role of a translator from the Chinese. This notion that the translator should feel a special bond with the author has existed since at least the seventeenth century, according to Venuti, who calls this phenomenon ‘*simpatico*’. He illustrates this with quotes, among which is Alexander Tytler’s (1747-1813) who ‘asserted that if the translator’s aim is fluency, “he must adopt the very soul of his author”’.²⁶ Venuti gives examples of his own experience as a translator which show his *simpatico* with the poet he translates, and writes:

When *simpatico* is present, the translation process can be seen as a veritable recapitulation of the creative process by which the original came into existence; and when the translator is assumed to participate vicariously in the author’s thoughts and feelings, the translated text is read as the transparent expression of authorial psychology or meaning. The voice that the reader hears in any translation made on the basis of *simpatico* is always recognized as the author’s, never as a translator’s, nor even as some hybrid of the two.²⁷

In Venuti’s view, the translator should not completely remove dissimilarities but retain a sense of cultural Otherness in translation so as to show the reader the gains and losses in translation:

In contrast, the notion of *simpatico*, by placing a premium on transparency and demanding a narrowly conceived fluent strategy, can be viewed as a cultural narcissism: it seeks an identity, a self-recognition, and finds only the same culture in foreign writing, only the same self in the cultural other. For the translator becomes aware of his intimate sympathy with the foreign writer only when he recognizes his own voice in the foreign text.²⁸

Based on this, we notice *simpatico* in Borel with the foreign author, and he shows an awareness of it by raising issues of translation, including untranslatability. For the purpose of retaining a sense of cultural Otherness in translation, it seems justifiable for Borel to have some untranslatable notions. For example, the notion of *qi* 氣, or ‘mystical cosmic fluid’ in the chapter on the *The Book of Changes* and ‘Chinese Art’, which he explains and then retains in romanization.

Now that Borel has clarified his views on the role of the translator, he also has similar ideas for the reader. Besides the prerequisite of intuition, Borel also recommends reading ‘in a Chinese way’. In general, Borel adds few comments to the excerpts, because he thinks that ‘too much reasoning would only take us farther away from *Dao*,’²⁹ and those who are unable to sense it in a Chinese way, intuitively and suggestively, will never be able to understand it. The spirit of China can never merely be understood intellectually, ‘without the

²⁶ Quoted in Venuti 2008, p. 238.

²⁷ Venuti 2008, p. 238.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 264.

²⁹ Borel 1916, p. 93.

reliable intuitive senses which represent knowing.³⁰

To further clarify this, Borel also adopts what he sees as a Western perspective. For example, he comments on the excerpts from the *Daodejing* that the sequence of the entries is not in accordance with Western logic. He explains that the texts are the result of deep meditation by the original author, but that they should also be the object of deep contemplation by the reader,³¹ and that the study of such texts must be undertaken in 'an eastern, meditative way.' Finally, he concludes the chapter on *Daodejing* by lamenting how sinologists have written volumes about the so-called degeneration of Daoism, while being blind to the pure and original wisdom of China as this continues to exist. As such, Borel asserts that the excerpts from literary and philosophical sources exude the notion of the 'spirit' that is accessible only to readers who possess intuition and spiritual insight and who have substantial personal China experience. By putting it this way, it is almost as if all explanation is in vain, because if the reader lacks intuition and is unable to think in an eastern way, then why bother writing about it?

In a way, Borel's approach to China in 'the Chinese way' is similar to that of the German sinologist Wilhelm Grube (1855-1908), as described by Daniel Leese in a study about the works of four German sinologists: Georg von der Gabelentz (1840-1893), Grube, August Conrady (1864-1925) and Otto Franke (1863-1946). As Leese explains, Grube expresses the will 'to penetrate into the spirit' of Chinese poetry, and to take the standpoint of the Chinese. Grube also believed that 'having mastered the Chinese language had thus provided him with the "key" to the soul of Chinese people.'³² One of the conclusions that Leese draws is that all four sinologists that he studied in this article believed they had 'penetrated Chinese-ness itself' and were therefore able 'to advise and judge from an insider's perspective.'³³ The idea that specialists obtain 'insider' knowledge is also one of Borel's, although he goes one step further in saying that those lacking intuition will not be able to understand.

Besides showing expertise through explaining the 'spirit' and giving excerpts from primary works, we can detect an attempt by Borel to display his professional qualifications and his authority in writing about China. This shows in how Borel emphasizes his years of study of China, and also in the admission of past mistakes. According to Borel, *The Spirit of China* provides a more mature understanding of his study of China than before, as he indicates in his review of *The Soul and Life of a Nation: The Netherlands in the World* (L'Ame et la Vie d'un Peuple. La Hollande dans le Monde) by French author Henry Asselin (1884-?). Borel criticizes the author for his poor understanding of the Netherlands, because Asselin had only lived in The Hague for three years and had no knowledge of the Dutch language. In comparison Borel explains:

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 93-94.

³¹ Ibid, p. 104.

³² Leese 2004, p. 26.

³³ Ibid, p. 33.

In the same manner, I wrote many unpleasant things about the Chinese people twenty-five years ago, in my book *Wisdom and Beauty from China*, [when] I knew [them] only insufficiently. I made up for it twenty-two years later when I published *The Spirit of China*. There is a book that is very popular with foreigners entitled *Chinese Characteristics*, by a certain Rev. Smith. Back then I also enjoyed reading it, but since I have come to know China and the Chinese better, I can see its unjustified and improper sides. A writer, who lived in a foreign country for 3 to 4 years without knowledge of the language, does not have the right to claim that the people 'lack passion, ideal, and imagination', and yet Mr. Asselin writes this down unthinkingly.³⁴

It is true that limited knowledge and understanding will limit one's representation of a foreign culture, but 'writing unpleasant things' does not necessarily point to limited knowledge and understanding. In fact, one could argue that early views may be more sensitive and unbiased as compared to those after several years in a foreign country, when the visitor may actually become less aware of foreign habits and customs.

Be that as it may, Borel presents proficiency in Chinese (or other relevant languages) and the personal experience of living in China/Asia as requirements for writing responsibly and credibly about China/Asia. By doing so, Borel stresses the differences between Chinese /Asian and Dutch/Western cultures. This is, for instance, also the point he makes in his review of Couperus' works *The String of Compassion* (*Het Snoer der Ontferming*) (1924) and *Nippon* (*Nippon*) (1925), both about his travel to Japan. Couperus undertook the journey to Asia in 1921 sponsored by *The Hague Post* (*De Haagsche Post*) in return for travel letters. The itinerary included the Dutch East Indies, China and Japan.³⁵ According to Borel, Couperus's 'essentially Roman' soul did not belong in the East, because Couperus never devoted himself to the study of Asia, and only traveled there for a few months. Couperus also admits that, because he was unfamiliar with the languages of China and Japan, he often felt at a loss. As a result, Couperus thought that the difference between 'the Western and Eastern soul' was 'almost an unbridgeable abyss'.³⁶ Again, we encounter the East-West dichotomy, which, as Said writes, tends to 'polarize the distinction', as quoted in Chapter 4. Couperus, who spent several years in the Dutch East Indies in his youth, also emphasizes the differences. In turn, Borel's view of Couperus' writing reiterates and reaffirms Borel's own position. That is: only people like himself, who have studied and lived in Asia for many years, are sufficiently equipped with the knowledge to write about Asia. A period of a few months or a few years is not enough.

Along with what Borel perceives as his own more mature understanding also comes the sense that he is seeing things in a different light. In *The Spirit of China*, Borel admits to past mistakes, although he puts this in such a way as to suggest that these are common mistakes,

³⁴ Borel 5 June 1921.

³⁵ In another publication *Eastward* (*Oostwaarts*), Couperus writes about his trip to Asia which also includes his experiences in Indonesia and Hong Kong. He mentions that he is using the 'Guide Officiel' for China, which Borel had given him. Couperus 1971, p. 260.

³⁶ Borel 24 May 1925.

implying that the reader cannot take him personally to task for them, and indeed suggesting that it is precisely his revisiting of former views that demonstrates his now much more profound understanding of China. An example is his idea of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which records the history of the State of Lu.

In the past, including the period when I published my Dutch work about Confucius fifteen years ago, I used to think that this book *Chunqiu* [Spring and Autumn Annals] was exclusively historical in nature, and therefore not of much importance to his philosophy. Many other European sinologists were of the same view. However, my Chinese intellectual friends have convinced me that this is incorrect. In their view, it is not purely historical.³⁷

As such, Borel's new-found position that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* are historical-philosophical has come about under the influence of Chinese scholars, albeit this is in itself a traditional view. The process of his repositioning also occurs on the level of individual concepts, such as what he presents as the misinterpretation of *xiaoren* 小人, or 'petty man', which Borel explains:

Most sinologists, including myself, used to interpret this in the sense of despicable man, but according to modern Confucianists it means the less or not yet developed man, the man who is poor because he only thinks about his food and worries, and therefore does not know anything about the higher ethical life. In this sense, it sounds more like what is called the proletarian in the European class system.³⁸

It is not clear to which other sinologists Borel is referring. In his introduction to the translation of Volume I on Confucius, Borel indeed notes that *xiaoren* is 'small man,' in the sense of 'mean, despicable' and that examples of *xiaoren* serve as a deterrent, and are presented in contrast to the *junzi* 'gentleman' in Confucian works.³⁹ He translates *xiaoren* literally as 'the small man' (de kleine mensch). It is not Legge, because Legge writes that *xiaoren* 'a small, mean man' as the opposite of *junzi*, whom he explains to be 'a man of complete virtue';⁴⁰ and Legge appears to see *xiaoren* as an average man, but not a despicable man. Who could he be referring to? In all, Borel gives the impression of being sincere in his admission of mistakes, but downplays their gravity by claiming others committed the same mistakes.

Another way in which Borel asserts authority is through praising and criticizing other experts, showing that he is well read. Although quoting from the work of other experts may in some cases reinforce the point he is making, as we have seen above in the quote from Legge about Chinese language, it undermines his authority at other times. The reason is that some of the texts that he quotes from are written by authors who were not regarded experts on China and did not know Chinese. Yet, the works that he criticizes include

³⁷ Borel 1916, p. 27.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 42.

³⁹ Borel 1895, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Legge 1971, p. 138.

scholarship by de Groot, who was at the time professor of Chinese at the University of Berlin. We will turn to that below.

Among the authors whose works Borel quotes from are the aforementioned Samuel Johnson, Austrian philosopher and essayist Martin Buber (1878-1965), Ku Hung Ming, German-born philologist and Orientalist Max Müller (1823-1900), Italian art critic and scholar Raphaël Petrucci (1872-1917), and American art historian and professor of philosophy Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908). By quoting these experts, Borel invokes their authority vis-à-vis his readers. Some among them, however, had no knowledge of Chinese and worked with secondary sources (in English, German and French) or with an intermediary. By citing less knowledgeable authors, Borel weakens his qualifications as expert. He could have checked first hand material, or works by recognized scholars on the subject.

For example Borel often refers to and cites from Johnson's *Oriental Religions and their Relation to Universal Religion. China* (1877). The book on China is the second volume in the series, which also include *India* (1872) and *Persia* (1885). Johnson is described as a 'radical American evolutionary transcendentalist thinker' by Girardot, who praises the volume on China as 'the masterful synthesis of nineteenth-century sinological scholarship'.⁴¹ However, Carl T. Jackson blames the poor reception of Johnson's *Oriental Religions* on failing to find the right audience: too scholarly for the general reader, it was not sufficiently so for professionals.⁴² *The Spirit of China* contains at least a dozen references to Johnson, also in the chapter on the Chinese language. As explained above, Borel shows how different the Chinese language is from European languages, and cites from Johnson's work on China translated into Dutch. Here are Borel's words with the relevant paragraph from the original English by Johnson:

The American scholar Samuel Johnson rightly says: 'It is a great mistake to hold these picture-signs, thus converted into alphabetic phrases, responsible for a pompous verbiage utterly opposed to the genius of the Chinese, whose specialty is terse, and even elliptical, expression. This latter style is not only the result of the practical qualities of the national mind, but proceeds directly from the nature of the signs, whose relations to one another must be largely supplied by inference and common understanding, like the conversation of friends.'⁴³

The meaning of this quote does not add much value to Borel's argument about Chinese characters and their symbolism, which he already elaborated with a quote from Legge and an example offered by himself, as discussed above. But the fact that Borel quotes from a work which was written by a scholar who does not know Chinese, also decreases its validity. Johnson relied entirely on Western material and as a matter of fact, he put a footnote to the first sentence of the quote, referring to Samuel Wells Williams (1812-1884), but Borel omits

⁴¹ Girardot 2002, p. 211.

⁴² Ibid, p.134.

⁴³ Borel 1916, pp. 15-16. See Johnson 1877, p. 432. English original is available in the online archive.

this. As Jackson writes, ‘the only American Sinologist of note in the whole [nineteenth] century was Samuel Wells Williams.’⁴⁴ Why did Borel not cite directly from Williams? He does so in two other instances. Since Borel has all along attached such great importance to knowledge of the Chinese language, citing Johnson goes against his own expectations and principles for writing about China.

In a contrastive manner, Borel also mentions a couple of times how some writers are unable to grasp the notion of the spirit of China. This is possibly an attempt to enhance his own expertise. Among them are also sinologists who, according to Borel, work only with ‘dry learning and philology’, and lack intuition and spiritual insight.⁴⁵ He does not give names, except for his foremost example of de Groot, whom he accuses, yet again, of writing how the Chinese race ‘is stamped forever with the total incapacity to rise to a higher level of mental culture’⁴⁶ in his *Religious System of China*. In the introduction to *The Spirit of China*, and in the chapter on art and the epilogue, Borel blames de Groot for writing about the Chinese people as ‘half barbarous and semi-civilised’, and criticizes him for his lack of aptitude for philosophy and intuition for metaphysics.⁴⁷

Duyvendak condemns this recurrent criticizing of de Groot as one of Borel’s ‘hobby horses’, in a review of *The Beautiful Island*.⁴⁸ Borel’s criticism of de Groot conceals ‘fatal venom’ and is ‘inappropriate and unfair’, according to Duyvendak. I have found no evidence of a reaction by Borel, nor have I seen reviews by Borel of Duyvendak’s works. There is only the occasional comment on individual issues, for instance in Borel’s article ‘Explaining Poetry’ (Uitleggen van Poëzie). Borel follows up on a discussion in *The Fatherland* in 1928 about poetry started by classicist Dr. K. H. E. de Jong (1872-1960), who asked for an explanation of how to interpret a poem by Dutch poet P. C. Boutens (1870-1953). Amused by the discussion, Borel offers his opinion on poetry, which he says cannot be explained. He gives various examples and quotes liberally from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Herman Gorter, Yone Noguchi, Laurence Binyon, and Percy Shelley, in order to explain that it is silence and rhythm that constitute poetry and give it meaning. In order to reinforce his point, he concludes the article with the proposition that the *Daodejing* has inspired great works of art which to the lay person are just vague and obscure, and goes on:

Well then, years ago an intellectual-sinologist such as Giles and a few months ago again Duyvendak, Reader at Leiden [University], [the latter] in the *New Rotterdam Newspaper*, criticized Laozi with contempt for his inadequate, obscure, incompetent language, and the incompetency of the Chinese

⁴⁴ Jackson 1981, p. 195.

⁴⁵ Borel 1916, pp. 126-127.

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. V-VI and 170.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 170.

⁴⁸ Duyvendak 26 August 1922. Borel’s criticism: (‘Prof. de Groot once wrote, that the Chinese had no idea of sculpture as art when he described the Ming tombs while he had just walked past the magnificent monoliths of the so-called Ghost Alley!’) Borel, 1922, pp. 107-108; brackets in original.

language in general.⁴⁹

Borel only mentions Duyvendak to make his point about the reason why intellectuals fail to understand art. But since he obviously knows Duyvendak's work – it would have been difficult not to – and given the fact that he reviews many works to do with China, and he does not shy away from polemics, it appears that Borel deliberately desists from entering into discussion with Duyvendak. The reason for this is unclear. Borel thinks Duyvendak is 'a sinologist from the school of de Groot, and still working in his tradition (...)'.⁵⁰ Duyvendak, for his part, does review Borel's work, including *The Beautiful Island* and *Mencius*. Although his comments are sharp and critical, they do not stir Borel to react and defend himself. It is possible that Duyvendak's position at Leiden University intimidated Borel and therefore he did not dare oppose Duyvendak. Moreover, Duyvendak had all the knowledge and experience that Borel thought necessary in a China expert.

Still, *The Spirit of China* comes out in a period in which there are no other prominent Dutch sinologists writing in Dutch about China.⁵¹ As noted before, the position at Leiden University is vacant from 1912 until 1919. For general readers who may not have access to works in other languages on China, Borel is recognized as the expert. It does seem there is still an interest in the Netherlands in works from Asia. Van Eeden for example, in his review of *The Spirit of China*, does take Borel's critique of de Groot seriously, and warns against the belief that the Chinese and other Asians are semi-barbarians: 'It is therefore that our nation badly needs books such as *The Spirit of China*, if we want to retain a respectable place among other nations (...)'.⁵² Since Borel's return from the East Indies, he and van Eeden meet on a regular basis and influence each other, even though they do have their disagreements now and then. An example of influence on Borel is his involvement in the Forte Circle (Forte Kreis), a project initiated by van Eeden. Forte Circle is an international circle of intellectuals and writers, who aspire to attain world peace and who have their first meeting in Potsdam, Germany, in June 1914.⁵³ From among the people in Fort Circle, it is Buber in particular whose works have an impact on Borel, in the ideas that he develops in terms of unity in Daoist stories and the decision to translate stories by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) (as discussed in Chapter 7).

Van Eeden also approaches Borel for the former's project of translating the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). According to van Eeden's biographer, this is 'an attempt to unite East and West,' and van Eeden approaches Borel as 'the specialist of the

⁴⁹ Borel 9 December 1928.

⁵⁰ Borel 3 October 1928. Borel's reply to a letter sent by de Kock (not yet further identified).

⁵¹ De Bruin reports from Beijing in newspapers, but he is not publishing books. See 'Impressions of China' (Indrukken uit China) in *The Sumatra Post* of 30 June 1916, accessed on Delpher on 03-11-2015, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010366688:mpeg21:a0001>

⁵² Eeden 11 August 1917.

⁵³ Fontijn 1996, pp. 345-354.

East.⁵⁴ Van Eeden publishes nine of Tagore's English-language collections between 1914 en 1923, most of which he translates himself, although some are done by others under his supervision. Borel translates Tagore's play *The Post Office* (1914), which he publishes as *The Letter of the King* (De brief van den koning) in 1916. Borel may have been influenced by van Eeden to bring more Asian literature to the Netherlands, for in 1918 Borel publishes his translation of *King Suryakanta: A Hindu Love story* (Koning Soeryakanta: een Hindoesche liefdesgeschiedenis). This is based on *A Digit of the Moon* (1890), believed to have been translated into English by British writer Francis William Bain (1863-1940) from an anonymous Sanskrit manuscript. This and other titles in the series eventually turned out to be fiction created by Bain.⁵⁵

There is no evidence of a reprint of *The Spirit of China*, yet with this book Borel firmly reasserts his ideas of an understanding of China. As shown in examples, these ideas are rather subjective and China is presented 'by way of knowledgeable intervention', in the words of Said quoted above. These interventions come in the form of Borel's own comments, and by quoting and at times criticizing other authors. Hence, the readers 'are never *given*' China. But this book and his other publications, including articles in the newspapers and a short work *On Chinese Temples* (Iets over Chineesche tempels) in 1919, show that Borel remains involved and interested in China. Therefore, it does not come unexpected that Borel is developing plans to travel again to the East.

6.2 Idealizing China

After making an arrangement with *The Fatherland* to write weekly travel letters for publication, Borel sets off on his trip to Asia in January 1920.⁵⁶ It must have been mostly his writing about this trip to China in 1920 that gave him the image of someone who 'glorified China'.⁵⁷ Indeed, the way he writes about China and how he describes his experiences, does give one the impression that he is idealizing China. The word 'idealization' here is used in the sense that by adding much sentiment and admiration, Borel actively constructs a vision of China as an ideal civilization, especially in comparison with Europe.

Borel publishes his letters as 'Travel Letters of Henri Borel' (Reisbrieven van Henri Borel) in *The Fatherland* from January to September 1920, and partial reprints in *The Beautiful Island*, in 1922. Both editions are sentimental, although the letters contain more comments

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 314.

⁵⁵ According to a note to this title in the library catalogue of the National Library, Bain was the author of the work. M. K. Naik in 'Guru-land and Disciple: An Aspect of Anglo-Indian Fiction' writes: 'In his own thirteen Indian tales from *A Digit of the Moon* (1890) to *The Substance of a Dream* (1919), Bain himself has captured the spirit, mood, tone, technique and even style of the ancient Indian story so well that he was actually able to pass them off as translations from Sanskrit originals.' In *Literature East and West: Essays Presented to R. K. Dasgupta* edited by G. R. Taneja and Vinod Sena. New Delhi: Allied Publishers. 1995: p. 242.

⁵⁶ His early letter written in transit in Southampton is dated 21 January 1920 and printed in *The Fatherland* of 28 January 1920. Borel notes that the route is via Port-Said and Colombo to the Dutch East Indies.

⁵⁷ Pos 2008, p. 178.

on current affairs than does the book. The publication of the travel letters in the newspaper roughly covers the period from January till September 1920, because he also spent some time in the Dutch East Indies and Singapore. Borel's physical stay in China is from 17 March till 5 June 1920,⁵⁸ where he spends most of his time in Xiamen and Gulangyu, and travels to places in the south including Fuzhou, Zhangzhou, Shantou and Guangzhou. He revisits the places that he had been to when he first travelled to China for his studies in Xiamen in 1892. Borel mentions several times that he has an introduction letter to meet Nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (1866-1925) in Shanghai, but eventually cancels original plans for traveling to the north. Borel blames the high exchange rate which means he could not afford to go on trips because he got less for his money than he anticipated.

As Borel explains in the newspaper, his letters would describe the economic and political situation in addition to offering his impressions of the natural environment.⁵⁹ Borel reports, for example, on the military government in Guangzhou which has separated itself from the Central Government after warlord Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859-1916) gained power in 1915.⁶⁰ (After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, China experienced fragmentation of authority under Yuan Shikai⁶¹ and while the communists were in the early stages of establishing the Communist Party, Sun Yat-sen tried to seek unification from his base in the south.) Besides current affairs, Borel also dwells on Chinese art, opera and temples in considerable detail.

Below, I will show how this image of China becomes sentimental and idealized, especially in repetitive contrasts between China and Europe. In his work, Borel not only reports facts, but also writes about his personal experiences. One example is his arrival in Sabang, Indonesia (*en route* to China), after thirty-five days on a ship.

Another wonderful emotion was to speak and hear the Chinese language again. I walked from one Chinese store into the next, just to hear Chinese, and just like in the past, enjoy the childlike surprise of the Chinese to hear a European speak their language.⁶²

Such exclamations express personal feelings. They contain no direct information about China, and only emphasize the fact that Borel knows the Chinese language. That the Chinese don't expect him to speak Chinese highlights the contrast between Chinese and European. The way he writes about their response as their 'childlike surprise' shows his paternalizing, colonial views. Borel's affinity with the language and his interest in talking to local people does give him a sense of knowing what is going on 'on the ground'. For example, in

⁵⁸ Based on his letter of 16 March 1920, which notes that Borel is leaving for Xiamen the next day. In his letter of 5 June 1920, he writes that this will be the last letter from China because he is leaving in the afternoon directly to the port of Batavia.

⁵⁹ Borel's letter of 16 March 1920, published in *The Fatherland* of 29 April 1920.

⁶⁰ Borel's letter of 12 April 1920, published in *The Fatherland* of 11 June 1920.

⁶¹ For details see chapters 13 and 14 in Spence 1990, pp. 300-360.

⁶² Borel's letter of 24 February 1920, published in *The Fatherland* of 8 April 1920.

Singapore he talks to Chinese rickshaw coolies and hears of their strike to demand pay rise,⁶³ and in China he talks to students and learns how a temple is re-used for education purposes.⁶⁴ Although his descriptions show genuine interest in the people, one detects a feeling of superiority, for instance in what he writes about rickshaw coolies:

It seems inhuman if you have never seen it, but it is really not so bad. In such human-power-cart [a literal translation of the Chinese term for rickshaw] I rode from the pier to Singapore, together with some other passengers. As soon as I addressed the Chinese who pulled my cart in his own language, he reacted as happy and expansive as a child and started to tell me, quite up to date, of their successful strike, which had resulted in a doubling of the fees for rickshaw coolies and gharry riders.⁶⁵

Again, as in the previous example, there is a racist portrayal of the Chinese people as children. Borel tries to convince the reader that pulling rickshaws is normal practice, and that because a Chinese coolie is happy to talk with Borel in Chinese, it is not so bad. His views appear to stem from the idea that coolies are somehow inherently a part of Chinese culture. As Said explains, such terms (to describe the Oriental as childlike, different) were used to express the (cultural) relation, and 'knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world.'⁶⁶ In this sense, Borel's descriptions create the image of China and show his position in that relation, which affects superiority and is pedantic.

On the other hand, the many comparisons between China and the West also emphasize Western perspectives on China. From nature and city architecture to antiques and art works, Borel appears to find China superior to the West. Here is an example of the difference in the appreciation of the sea:

Oh! How well do the Chinese understand that rest and meditation fit the quietness of the sea, whereas us Westerners, barbarians upon seeing the sea, we can only associate its boundless beauty with the pitiful, vulgar antics of the Kurhaus [a hotel, seaside resort and famous site of festivities near The Hague] and noisy entertainment. (...) I now know that nothing is more barbarian than the way we in the West desecrate the splendor by our impure, noisy seaside antics.⁶⁷

This stresses the differences between Chinese and Dutch connotations of the sea. Borel prefers the Chinese way of appreciating the seaside. The differences are emphasized by contrasting opposites, including Chinese vs Westerners, quietness vs loud noise, meditation vs vulgar antics. In each of these contrasts, the image of China comes out more positively than that of the West. Besides an awareness of differences, Borel has a predilection for

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Borel's letter of 22 May 1920, published in *The Fatherland* of 30 July 1920. See also *The Beautiful Island*, p. 133. For more on this phenomenon, see *The Religious Question in Modern China* by Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

⁶⁵ Borel's letter of 24 February 1920, published in *The Fatherland* of 8 April 1920.

⁶⁶ Said 1995, p. 40.

⁶⁷ Borel 1922, pp. 49-50.

imagining things like going back to nature, back to antiquity, back to a primeval past. This can also be found in his description of old bridges in Fuzhou:

Although the road is hard to ride, I think a bridge as old as this cannot be compared with any of the modern bridges of Europe. What style it possesses, and what respectable antiquity it exudes, and how much in harmony it is with the river view!⁶⁸

Borel's comparison of bridges in Fuzhou, which he says date from 1297 in the Yuan Dynasty, with modern bridges in Europe projects his sentiment of antiquity and his search for the past. Again, the image of Chinese bridges is more positive than that of the European counterparts. But perhaps it is also the repetition of contrasts that makes his writing sentimental. The constant reminder that China is different and better, even if these sights in China in themselves are indeed impressive, idealizes the image of China. Finally, a last example of contrast between China and the West is where Borel describes his admiration for jade:

What a respected gem is jade! The precious stone of the West, the diamond, sparkles and shines conspicuously; that of the Far East is sober and soft and contains its concealed beauty inside.⁶⁹

This comparison between precious stones can also be taken as a metaphor for the 'East' and the 'West' at large. It represents Borel's contrast between East and West where the differences in the qualities of the gems stand for the differences in qualities of the cultures/people from the East and the West. Especially the idea of the inner beauty of jade reminds one of Borel's professed ability to see beyond the surface, and of the intuition that is allegedly needed to understand China.

Yet, there is something contradictory about his claim of identity. On the one hand, he presents himself as the China expert, on the other he cannot hide his identity of a European tourist. It is possible to be both expert and tourist at the same time, but Borel shows disdain for the 'sightseeing globe-trotter' who can only appreciate the visual, such as the pagoda and the flowers in the garden. According to Borel, such a traveler 'guilelessly passes by a rich treasure of symbols' within the pagoda.⁷⁰ Here, Borel clearly poses as an expert and tries to distance himself from 'those globe trotters', like he did before in Beijing (as discussed in Chapter 5).

But that he is a tourist all the same shows specifically in his practical worries described in the travel letters, where Borel appears to be very much concerned about the high currency exchange rate, the fully-booked and expensive hotels and less frequent boat schedule,⁷¹ probably because these things affect him personally. That he is a tourist also

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 103.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 109.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 163.

⁷¹ Borel's letter of 24 February 1920, published in *The Fatherland* of 8 April 1920.

shows in his description of his experience on a crowded boat on the first leg of his trip from Xiamen to Zhangzhou. Borel complains about sweaty people smoking cigarettes and the horrible smell of cooked food, and writes in *The Beautiful Island*:

I like the Chinese very much, but those of the common people can be smelly. They do take baths, but because of their awful food their bodies and breath emit a foul smell, especially of onions, garlic and rancid grease.⁷²

In his travel letter in *The Fatherland*, he puts it slightly differently:

By the way, I am in love with the old Chinese culture and worship Chinese philosophy, but I abhor the lack of cleanliness of most of the Chinese.⁷³

This shows Borel's position in understanding and appreciating China. He only takes it at the intellectual and spiritual level (a form of essentialism), not in everyday life among the common people. The same phenomenon we also saw in *Daybreak in the East*, where he moves out of the modern hotel in the Beijing Legation Quarter to stay at a simple hotel in a more Chinese environment. Although it was there that he claims to have got to know the capital of China, yet after a month he was back in the Foreign Legation. A similar incident in *The Beautiful Island* is for example that he goes for lunch in the Victoria Hotel in Guangzhou.⁷⁴ He dislikes Chinese food and fears what he perceives as the Chinese lack of hygiene. So Borel's identity as an expert, his role as a travel writer, and his position towards China, affect the way he writes about China. It shows that he identifies with indigenous values in traditional Chinese philosophy and culture, and he conveys these to his readers. This is a case of where his rendering of China is a place where 'cultures merge and create new spaces' (Wolf's words quoted above).

As mentioned above, *The Beautiful Island* is more sentimental than the letters in their original form. This is mainly caused by the fact that some of the factual information about China is omitted in the book. Therefore, in *The Beautiful Island* in particular, Borel has a very prominent presence as the author, of how he personally experiences China, as distinct from the more 'report'-like features of the letters as they were published in *The Fatherland*. One of the reviewers of *The Beautiful Island*, Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953), notes that the subject of the book is actually not China – but Borel.

China is, in a manner of speaking, not coming to us with all her virtues and vices, but we are going to China with Borel and all his virtues and vices.⁷⁵

⁷² Borel 1922, p. 123.

⁷³ Borel's letter of 11 March, published in *The Fatherland* of 27 April 1920.

⁷⁴ Borel's letter of 3 June, published in *The Fatherland* of 3 August 1920.

⁷⁵ Nijhoff 1982, p. 162.

Nijhoff criticizes Borel for offering a view of China that is very subjective, through the eyes of Borel, and for telling the reader more about himself than about China. This reminds one of what Kerr and Kuen say about how the foreign country is the background for the author's portrait. If we take a closer look at Borel's role in *The Beautiful Island*, we notice how Borel, and 'his actual Self', positions himself toward China, or more precisely toward Xiamen and the island of Gulangyu. His 'inner self' thinks he belongs in China, and he relates this to the notion of *xiaoyao* 'float freely', which seems to affect him directly and emotionally. It is this sense of belonging in China that makes him enjoy his return there, but he explains that in fact, it felt like that from the start, during a previous visit. In the description of his arrival on Gulangyu in *The Beautiful Island*, he writes:

At last, at last I was back, just like I had been 'back' when once—how long ago—I first set foot on [this] sacred soil. Everything was new to me back then, never before had I seen such majestic primal formation of rocks, never had I seen what a Chinese 'mountain-and-waterscape' looked like, for I only knew Dutch landscapes, and yet it all seemed so intimately familiar, as if when I saw it first, I had found back for the first time my safe haven.⁷⁶

The Chinese compound term *shanshui* 山水, which literally means 'mountains and waters', is the word for 'landscape, scenery', and closely associated with traditional painting. Borel uses this many times throughout the book. Words like 'sacred' and 'majestic' reinforce his idealization of China, as do his feelings of China being 'intimately familiar' and his 'safe haven'. During this return visit in 1920, Borel claims that the first time he set foot in China, he felt a sort of homecoming. He has the same feeling when he visits again, as he describes in *The Beautiful Island*:

Here I am at home in between these grand rocks, I belong to this emerald and purple and violet sea, here, in the wide solitude, where I can float away, in a cosmic dream of *xiaoyao*, here my actual Self, that is being tormented and abused in the barbaric West, and that hides miserably behind a pale smile and semi-proud appearance, guileless toward the outside, and recognizes myself in the fraternal Nature (...)⁷⁷

Borel positions himself between East and West and engages in this 'floating freely', which he claims is but a poor translation.⁷⁸ This shows the haze of mystique invoked in his story of understanding China.

According to Nijhoff, Borel went to China out of sheer love of this country, and what he writes about it is worth reading. There is indeed much information about China in his writing, both in terms of what Borel recognizes from before, and in terms of what has changed in the places that he visits. For example, in the chapter on 'Zhangzhou, the New and the Old' (Tsjiang Tsioe, het nieuwe en het oude), Borel explains what changes have taken place, such

⁷⁶ Borel 1922, p. 10.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 146.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 45 and 143.

as the installation of electric street lights, repaving of roads and rebuilding of houses.⁷⁹

Moreover, his writing is filled with Chinese concepts and proper names. He writes terms such as *wu wo* 無我 ‘the absence of an I’ and *nian jing* 念經 ‘chanting sutras’ in romanization, and gives explanations. The characters *wu wo* were written above a door inside a Guanyin temple, according to Borel.⁸⁰ This Buddhist notion means ‘to empty the mind’ and reach a state of just ‘being’ or ‘no self’. *Nian jing* describe song and prayer in the Guanyin temple, which Borel compares with the Christian mass.⁸¹ The names of boats, mountains, cities, and historical sites are also given in romanization, usually with a translation. Examples are the boat Hailong 海龍 ‘sea dragon’, Huangshan 黃山 ‘The Yellow Mountain’, Fuzhou 福州 ‘City of happiness’, and Huata 花塔 ‘flower pagoda’. Again, this displays Borel’s knowledge of Chinese language and culture – and his desire to retain, rather than ‘merely’ translate, China, or to translate it precisely by retaining snatches from its original language – in whatever sense, however literal or figurative.

Another critical evaluation is that, according to Nijhoff, Borel ‘pursued emotion for emotion’s sake, to use a variant of *l’art pour l’art*.’⁸² This seems to be characteristic of Borel’s writing at large, and of a penchant for exaltation that was fundamental to his character, and not specifically symptomatic of the period he was writing in. Duyvendak, for example, takes a much more sober and objective approach in his articles on China published in the magazines *The Guide* and *China*, six of which were collected in his book called *China against the Western Horizon* (China tegen de Westerkim) in 1927. It is not surprising therefore, that Duyvendak is critical in his review of *The Beautiful Island* for its repetitions:

Even worse is the image that the writer has found for a pagoda, which rises out of the mountains ‘like a flower’. Excellent, a truly wonderful image. But is it necessary to repeat it again and again, whenever the word pagoda appears ‘like a flower’? And yet we read it on page 159, 162, and again on page 166.... No, repetition will ruin [the tale], even for the most striking expressions.⁸³

Some of the (other) repetitions were probably acceptable or necessary in the newspaper publication of the travel letters, if they were informative; but they are redundant in the book.

The more sober and objective approach by Duyvendak is appreciated by reviewers. Dirk van Holland praises the book, in his article ‘A Detour to the Netherlands, in South China. What do we know about it?—Borel, Couperus and Duyvendak—a chaotic society—Guangzhou a grand market—city on the river’ (Langs een Omweg naar Nederland, in Zuid-China. Wat weten wij ervan?—Borel, Couperus en Duyvendak—een chaotische

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 103.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 31.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 38.

⁸² Nijhoff 1982, p. 163.

⁸³ Duyvendak 26 August 1922.

samenleving—Canton een groote pasar—de stad op de rivier):

Let us juxtapose with Borel and Couperus the clear, lucid work of J. J. L. Duyvendak, Reader [at Leiden University]: *China against the Western Horizon*. Truthful and yet permeated with honest affection for the Chinese people, this book offers information to the reader about many things Chinese, and the current situation in China.⁸⁴

Duyvendak's work is appreciated for his down-to-earth approach, as another, anonymous reviewer also notes:

It is not often that the Dutch write about China; even less often do they write concisely about it—we refer here to Mr. Borel and a certain doctor Schotman as deterrent examples—joyful it is when one is handed a book that is not devoid of the spirit of sobermindedness, which the Dutch are surely known for.⁸⁵

This is exactly the approach that Borel warns against: experiencing China from what he sees as a Western point of view, with 'the spirit of sobermindedness'. Borel maintains that if one experiences China in a sober fashion, then one will miss many things. It is this intuitive, emotional, and one might say 'exaltable' state of mind that may explain why Borel came to believe that he had 'become Chinese'. For example in *The Beautiful Island* Borel writes: 'When I was sitting there, dreaming and floating, I felt like a real Chinese'⁸⁶ and 'I don't feel like a foreigner, it feels as if I am in my hometown, where I belong.'⁸⁷ These remarks are typical of his idealized representation of China.

One last example of this emotional state of 'being Chinese' can be found in the final chapter 'How I departed' (Hoe ik heenging) of *The Beautiful Island*, Borel writes how on his last day in China, he dreaded his return to the Netherlands.

That day I walked around with an impulse to dress as a Chinese and if need be to rent myself out as a rickshaw coolie, anything better than going back again...⁸⁸

The idea to stay in China and dress like a Chinese coolie is quite dramatic, even if it is hardly very credible. It is a personification of Borel as a Chinese person. It also portrays him as preferring life in China over that in the Netherlands. His state of mind seems to represent a so-called 'Chinese mindset', which he carries along on his return to the Netherlands. This sentiment or mindset of 'being Chinese' translates into his essays published in 1923

⁸⁴ Holland 23 June 1930.

⁸⁵ Anonymous, *Batavian Newspaper* 19 January 1928. The reviewer also writes: 'Of course we do not agree with all the views of the writer, for example we think he attaches too much importance to the so-called literary renaissance of China while too little to the powers of atavism. Yet we do appreciate the work as a whole. It gives the impression of complete honesty and it has the advantage that most of the events that are described were personal experiences of the writer.'

⁸⁶ Borel 1922, p. 49.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 76.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 168.

collected in *Karma*. In this collection, many of the eleven essays are autobiographical, with many memories of the past. This collection falls outside the scope of my study inasmuch as *Karma* is not about China. But the impact of his China trip is so prominent in some of the essays, that they may serve as examples of this so-called 'Chinese mindset'. This can be perceived in events from his life in the Dutch East Indies, and incidents from his youth.

A connection with China can for example be found in the poetic description of a Chinese performer in the essay 'The Beautiful Illusion' (De schoone illusie). In the essay, Borel recollects a former colleague's admiration of Chinese opera and his infatuation with the leading performer, in the Dutch East Indies back in the 1890s. As Borel writes, the performer had eyes 'just like the Chinese poet says, "mystical like still water on an autumn night", the brows were "as gentle as the contours of mountains in the far distance", and the face was "as soft as a peach blossom".'⁸⁹ Borel does not mention the name of the poet but the lines may have been taken from a novella of the anthology *Wonders Old and New*. From this we see that Borel tries to write about a Chinese performer according to Chinese literary conventions. Furthermore, Borel describes the role of the performer as 'a spirit from very far, mystic regions, reincarnated into a human being.'⁹⁰ The use of 'spirit' and 'mystic' makes it sound as if the performer is not a human being. This depiction of the Chinese performer shows that Borel is immersed in Chinese culture and is connected with China in his writing.

In another story, Borel's so-called 'Chinese mindset' is reflected in a seemingly minor incident from his youth that is converted into a 'sign' of previous lives that awakens him. In 'The Little Sparrow' (Het Muschje), he describes his emotions as a fourteen-year-old, when shooting a sparrow with a catapult. Back then boys would all carry catapults in their pockets and shoot down birds, he writes. Yet Borel was afraid to use it. This fear to kill, he realizes 'must have been a memory from previous lives.'⁹¹ Still he forces himself to overcome his fear and with 'an old, slumbering hunting instinct—of how many lives ago, from what faraway times?—awoke inside me', he finally kills one. Borel takes the bird home and just like they did in natural history class, he starts to dissect it with a knife in his room, until he starts feeling dizzy and throws away the knife. It was not until many years later, that he realizes, that this incident was a 'sign' given by the sparrow.⁹² As such, Borel takes Buddhist concepts about previous lives and being reborn to explain and understand the meaning of certain past events. Of course, all this links to the title of the book, *Karma*, and reincarnation as a subject fascinated Borel. As van Eeden notes in his diary in 1921, he observed in Borel an 'inclination toward Catholicism but [Borel] didn't want to forsake his belief in reincarnation.'⁹³ Incidentally, Borel did turn to Catholicism on his deathbed.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Borel 1923, p. 155.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 156.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 93.

⁹² Ibid, p. 104.

⁹³ Van Eeden, diary entry of 6 April 1921. See DBNL.

The image that Borel tries to give is to set himself apart as someone who understands China differently from other writers who write about China. This is central to *The Spirit of China* but also present in *The Beautiful Island*. To reinforce this position, he stresses that in China, literary people are also engaged in Chinese painting. Borel links Chinese painting with calligraphy, which in China is an art in itself, with Chinese characters in calligraphy containing the beauty of the object that they represent.

A literary person is always also a kind of painter. In the past, painting was not a profession in itself, any developed person would paint. It was regarded as the highest refinement in China to be able to express emotions in poetry and with brush on silk. Learning how to draw [for the Chinese] was the same as us learning how to write.⁹⁵

Here, Borel tries to make the point that since literary people in China were artistic, their literary work should be read with an artistic mind, and that only few (non-Chinese) people are able to do that. And perhaps that is the way he saw himself: as a Chinese literatus.

From his work, it appears that he is increasingly making more contrasts between East and West, writing more positively about the East and negatively about the West. His more pedantic writing from this period appears to become idealized compared to his early writing in *Beauty and Wisdom from China* in 1895. Not all readers appreciate this style of writing, all the more because now they are offered more concise and objective writing by authors such as Duyvendak, who also writes in Dutch. Perhaps it is because of this criticism of Borel's overly sentimental style in his own writing on China that he increasingly turns to *translating* Chinese literature in the last years of his life.

⁹⁴ There is controversy about his intentions of turning Catholic. According to 'His deathbed conversion to Catholicism' (Op zijn sterfbed overgegaan tot het katholicisme) in the *General Commerce Paper* of 1 September 1933, Borel was considering it for many years, accessed on Delpher on 03-11-2015 <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010663611:mpeg21:a0051> *The Fatherland*, however, thinks that there were no signs that Borel had plans to turn Catholic. See 'Memory of Henri Borel, a small mosaic' (In memoriam Henri Borel, een kleine mozaïek) in *The Fatherland* of 10 September 1933, accessed on Delpher on 03-11-2015, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010014945:mpeg21:a0194> In the study *There is still poetry, color and warmth: Catholic Converts and Modernity in the Netherlands, 1880-1960* (Daar is nog poëzie, nog kleur, nog warmte, Katholieke bekeerlingen en moderniteit in Nederland, 1880-1960), Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2007, Paul Luykx claims that there is a relation between conversion to Catholicism and a specific form of anti-Western cultural criticism that he found in Borel. Based on his findings, Luykx shows that Borel had intentions to convert to Catholicism for many years, but that fear of losing his work at *The Fatherland* (known for being progressive and liberal) was the cause for postponement until deathbed.

⁹⁵ Borel 1916, p. 129.

