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Translating China : Henri Borel (1869-1933)

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Epilogue

Borel's image of China is (in Wolf's words) 'filtered and arranged through his consciousness.' His translation of Chinese culture and his translations of Chinese literature are all done with a clear presence of his own voice. This is mainly the result of his poetic approach, which was rooted in European Romanticism and further developed with ideas in Chinese and Buddhist poetics that define poethood. Here Borel finds a connection which helps him justify his self-proclaimed poethood, which he maintains throughout his life. Indeed, the image that Borel had of himself was a poet, in this case meaning someone searching for a way to 'transcend humanity'. As he wrote in his autobiographical essay 'Karma', from the collection *Karma* published in 1923:

Nearby lived a poet who had travelled a lot in the East and he would sometimes come to our place to play the piano. He would always play Bach because he could not play anything else anymore, so he said. If you get old, he explained, you can no longer play Chopin or Schumann, and Schubert, not even Beethoven, the Great, but you play Bach because it is way above everything else and leaves everything behind, it rises out above all deeply human into the realm of divine harmony.¹

If we keep this identity in mind when reading his works, we can understand Borel 'poet's way' of translating China. His personal development presented in his works on and from China over a period of forty years, starting off as someone who had no high expectations about China, to ultimately sinicizing Chinese literature, was directly reflected in his writing. He adds Chinese words and phrases to make his own writing and his translations 'more Chinese'. It is as if this were a development from 'Borel in China' to 'China in Borel', as he ultimately felt Chinese.

This explains why Borel is such a visible translator. He is prominently present in both his essays about Chinese culture and his literary translations, and one might argue that the artistic elements of his approach to translating China are as strong as, if not stronger than, the scholarly elements. His presence is prominent in the paratextual elements added to the texts, in the form of introductions and footnotes, but also explanations embedded within the texts. His presence is also felt in the way he claims that some Chinese notions are untranslatable and therefore he gives romanization with explanations. Finally, Borel takes the position that things Chinese should be explained from a Chinese perspective. Hence, in his view, other writers about China and translators of Chinese literature often have a wrong approach and therefore a wrong interpretation. These include not only the missionaries who translated Chinese classics, but also Dutch officials in the Dutch East Indies, who drafted legislation relevant to the Chinese local population, and fellow sinologists in the Netherlands, whom he blamed for their Western methods. Instead, in terms of cultural translation, Borel's

¹ Borel 1923, p. 9.

work displays, in the words of Carbonell, an internalization of a Chinese experience rewritten in his own (Dutch) culture.²

Yet, other elements of Borel's character are those of rivalry with others, of curiosity, and of a strongly felt sense of justice: the desire to surpass others, the urge to explore the unknown, and the conscious decision to divulge professionally confidential matters when he thinks this is the morally right thing to do. Combined with his so-called Chinese mindset and confidence of having a superior understanding of China since he considers himself a poet, these things create tension in work-related matters. He finds himself positioned between East and West and has issues of belonging. On the one hand, he admires Chinese culture, language, literature and philosophy, but on the other hand, he dislikes the food and the smells, and what he perceives as the uncleanliness of the Chinese people. This is revealing of an essentialist streak in Borel. The feeling that he is torn between East and West is illustrated in his essay about Singapore, when he describes his struggle to deal with the urge of going into the Chinese district, and his frantic escape back to European surroundings. It also shows in the way Borel moves out of the Foreign Legation in Beijing, in an attempt to get closer to local life among the Chinese, but ultimately misses the Western comfort and moves back to the hotel in the Foreign Legation.

In thinking and writing Borel becomes increasingly sinicized, but not in terms of daily life. This is reflected in the way he translates China. In his early work, he introduces and explains about Chinese culture, as he does in the essay about Guanyin and Chinese hell, presenting information based on his experience and including excerpts of literary translations. This eventually changes into his assuming the role of the Chinese author, as he does in the Daoist stories collected in *Of Life and Death*, where the border between translating and authoring is obliterated. It is his belief of having a 'Chinese mindset' that leads him to rendering Chinese stories 'more Chinese', by adding Chinese words and phrases.

This leads to growing complacency and self-confidence, which can be observed in the way Borel repeatedly criticizes other sinologists and poses himself as the China expert. The problem is that while he criticizes others, he is making (worse) mistakes himself. His literary translations show that his command of the Chinese language is not as good as he likes to believe. Overconfidence also results in errors in his relay translations caused by editorial intervention, and he does not recognize or acknowledge his own limits. All this has a negative effect on his relations with colleagues in the Dutch East Indies, which results in the transfers to other locations in the colonies and ultimately his departure. Borel's critical essays on Dutch sinologists and Chinese Studies at Leiden University also affected his chances of obtaining a position there.

Still, Borel's writing did find a readership among the general readers. According to

² Carbonell 1996, p. 81.

reviewer Pierre H. Dubois (1917-1999) in his article 'A Look at Henri Borel a century after his birth' (Blik op Henri Borel [een] eeuw na zijn geboorte), Borel 'roused a lot of genuine interest in Chinese philosophy, art and culture with his books, articles and talks.'³ This is evidence of the influence Borel had and his success in popularizing Chinese culture. His writing about China and his translations of Chinese literature were new to the readers, even though his selection of works hardly went beyond the curriculum of Chinese Studies at Leiden University. But the readers would not know about the contents of the curriculum, and perhaps for the general reader this was a good way to start an introduction to China. Moreover, Borel published in a wide range of venues, in books as well as literary magazines and newspapers that reached a broad readership.

His works received very mixed reviews. Most positive reviews praise the novelty of his works, which give a different view of China, unlike other works. The most appealing must have been Borel's method of explicitly mobilizing his knowledge of China, especially when describing what he perceived as the beauty of things Chinese. This must have inspired a different image of China, especially because previously many reports on China had been negative and racist. Negative appraisals—including those by Duyvendak and Nijhoff—often included the assertion that Borel was overly subjective. So much so that some readers find that the China Borel described didn't exist. Yet the many reprints of his works indicate that his books sold well, and his works certainly contributed to a growing interest in Asia in the Netherlands, as reflected in *The Fatherland* of 5 November 1932, which contains an announcement of the opening of the 'Oriental Bookshop' in The Hague. Borel is mentioned among the authors whose books were in the collection. The bookstore was seen as 'a gain for intellectual The Hague.' As Girardot writes about the English-speaking world:

There was, however, a growing demand for books about Oriental and Chinese subjects (especially if they were classical or sacred texts) that were expressly written for a generally literate, although not necessarily scholarly, readership in both Great Britain and America. The extent of this interest is indicated by the appearance in the United States of a number of abridged pirated editions of the *Chinese Classics*.⁴

Likewise, in the Netherlands there was a growing supply of books on China.

Borel was able to overcome the problem that Herbert Giles had (according to Pollard), of having to address a very different audience than sinologists today. Only very few people had any command of the Chinese language, and so Giles had to create the interest out of which grew, very gradually, the present audience. And this was an uphill battle.⁵ For Borel it was the same. Few readers in the Netherlands had had any direct contact with China or the Chinese, and racism and a prejudice against Asian people were little-contested parts of public discourse. The way Borel wrote shows that he was much less racist than others in his

³ Dubois 28 November 1969.

⁴ Girardot 2002, pp. 102-103.

⁵ Pollard 2013, p. 247.

time, and he tried to establish the dignity of the Chinese by giving the reader a translation of China from what he saw as a Chinese perspective.

Yet by writing for readers of his time and his strong presence in his translations, Borel set his images of China apart from directions that would soon be taken by others, such as Duyvendak's demonstrably more objective, and perhaps more 'sober', approach. It was mostly Borel's early works that appealed to the reader, probably because they were genuinely informative and appreciative, without the pedantic tone of his later writing. The very 'personality', or indeed the 'personal-ness' of his writing, affects its long-term sustainability when critically examined. In all, it was doubtless inspirational and impressive for many readers – and for all the 'personal-ness' of his writing, or perhaps precisely because of it, Borel left a legacy that is an important part of the cultural history of the Netherlands, the Dutch East Indies, and ultimately, of China.