

**In Memoriam: Burchard J. Mansvelt Beck (May 20, 1947 - October 31, 2020)**

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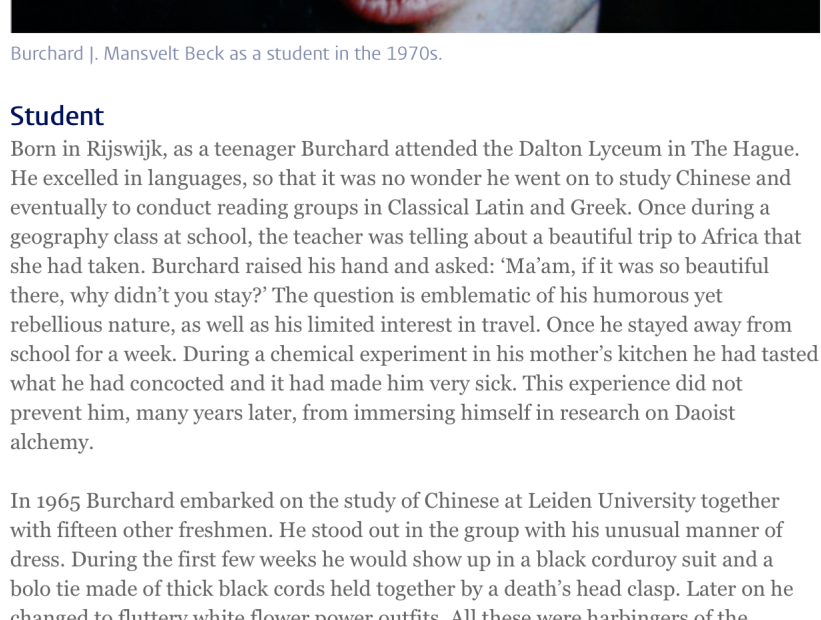
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# In Memoriam: Burchard J. Mansvelt Beck (May 20, 1947 – October 31, 2020)

26 November 2020

An age-old expression in Classical Chinese is *yǔ zhòng bù tóng* 與眾不同, meaning 'out of the ordinary'. It could have been the motto of Burchard J. Mansvelt Beck, who taught that language for decades at Leiden University. What was different about him? He was extraordinarily gifted, helpful, and above all things colorful.



Burchard J. Mansvelt Beck as a student in the 1970s.

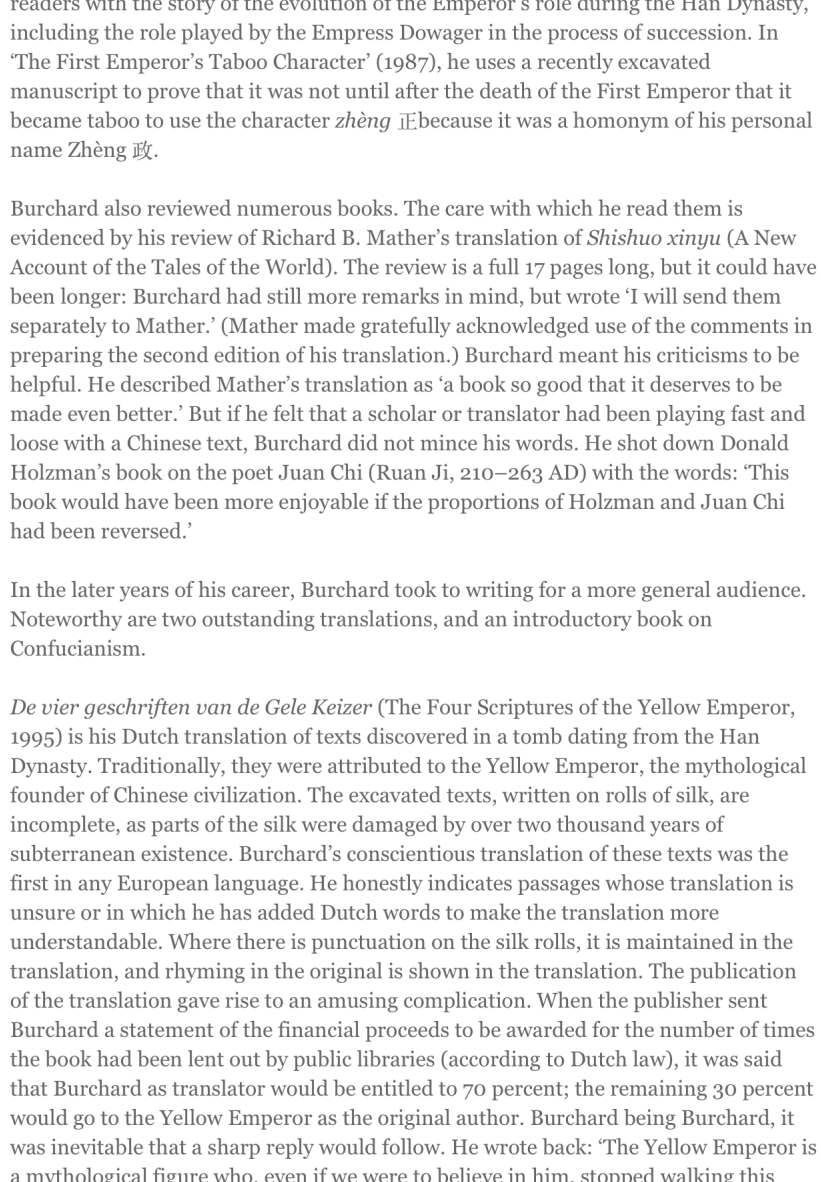
## Student

Born in Rijswijk, as a teenager Burchard attended the Dalton Lyceum in The Hague. He excelled in languages, so that it was no wonder he went on to study Chinese and eventually to conduct reading groups in Classical Latin and Greek. Once during a geography class at school, the teacher was telling about a beautiful trip to Africa that she had taken. Burchard raised his hand and asked: 'Ma'am, if it was so beautiful there, why didn't you stay?' The question is emblematic of his humorous yet rebellious nature, as well as his limited interest in travel. Once he stayed away from school for a week. During a chemical experiment in his mother's kitchen he had tasted what he had concocted and it had made him very sick. This experience did not prevent him, many years later, from immersing himself in research on Daoist alchemy.

In 1965 Burchard embarked on the study of Chinese at Leiden University together with fifteen other freshmen. He stood out in the group with his unusual manner of dress. During the first few weeks he would show up in a black corduroy suit and a bolo tie made of thick black cords held together by a death's head clasp. Later on he changed to fluttery white flower power outfits. All these were harbingers of the striking garb in which he would later meet his students, such as a bright red pelisse with gold epaulettes, or black-and-white checkered shoes under a loud Hawaii shirt.

Sinology is not an easy field to study, and within the first year the remaining freshmen could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Burchard was one of those who stayed on. His teacher, professor A.F.P. 'Toon' Hulswé (1910–1993) was very fond of him. He often kidded Burchard about his clothing, and once when Burchard was applying a bit of makeup, the professor joked: 'I thought real ladies did that in the restroom!' Dirk Jonker (1925–1973), librarian of the Sinological Institute in Leiden and a specialist in Chinese poetry, was another teacher who shared and encouraged Burchard's love for ancient language and texts. Another shining example for Burchard was the famous British sinologist and translator Arthur Waley (1889–1966), who like Burchard remained an armchair traveler who never felt the need to visit China.

Long before Burchard began studying in Leiden, professor J.J.L. Duyvendak (1889–1954) had been getting Leiden scholars interested in studying the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD). His successor, Hulswé, carried the torch further with publications such as his landmark *Remnants of Han Law*. Not surprisingly, Burchard also focused on that early period. His long years of research on the *Book of the Later Han* culminated in a Ph.D. dissertation that during the defense ceremony on May 15, 1986, was praised as 'a detective story of textual criticism.' The later book version, *The Treatises of Later Han: Their Author, Sources, Contents and Place in Chinese Historiography*, won international acclaim. One reviewer wrote: 'This masterful work is a combination of his broad learning, systematic approach, and meticulous effort.'



Burchard J. Mansvelt Beck in 2011.

## Writings

In those earlier years of his career, Burchard did the bulk of his scholarly research and wrote a number of scholarly articles and book chapters. They were mostly about the early Empire from the Qin Dynasty to the Later Han, that is, from 221 BC to 220 AD. In 'The Date of the *Taiping Jing*' (1980), after carefully weighing the various pros and cons, he cautiously concludes that this important Daoist text can be regarded as a product of the Later Han. In 'The True Emperor of China' (1981), he entertains his readers with the story of the evolution of the Emperor's role during the Han Dynasty, including the role played by the Empress Dowager in the process of succession. In 'The First Emperor's Taboo Character' (1987), he uses a recently excavated manuscript to prove that it was not until after the death of the First Emperor that it became taboo to use the character *zhèng* 正 because it was a homonym of his personal name Zhèng 政.

Burchard also reviewed numerous books. The care with which he read them is evidenced by his review of Richard B. Mather's translation of *Shishuo xinyu* (*A New Account of the Tales of the World*). The review is a full 17 pages long, but it could have been longer: Burchard had still more remarks in mind, but wrote 'I will send them separately to Mather.' (Mather made gratefully acknowledged use of the comments in preparing the second edition of his translation.) Burchard meant his criticisms to be helpful. He described Mather's translation as 'a book so good that it deserves to be made even better.' But if he felt that a scholar or translator had been playing fast and loose with a Chinese text, Burchard did not mince his words. He shot down Donald Holzman's book on the poet Juan Chi (Ruan Ji, 210–263 AD) with the words: 'This book would have been more enjoyable if the proportions of Holzman and Juan Chi had been reversed.'

In the later years of his career, Burchard took to writing for a more general audience. Noteworthy are two outstanding translations, and an introductory book on Confucianism.

*De vier geschriften van de Gele Keizer* (The Four Scriptures of the Yellow Emperor, 1995) is his Dutch translation of texts discovered in a tomb dating from the Han Dynasty. Traditionally, they were attributed to the Yellow Emperor, the mythological founder of Chinese civilization. The excavated texts, written on rolls of silk, are incomplete, as parts of the silk were damaged by over two thousand years of subterranean existence. Burchard's conscientious translation of these texts was the first in any European language. He honestly indicates passages whose translation is unsure or in which he has added Dutch words to make the translation more understandable. Where there is punctuation on the silk rolls, it is maintained in the translation, and rhyming in the original is shown in the translation. The publication of the translation gave rise to an amusing complication. When the publisher sent Burchard a statement of the financial proceeds to be awarded for the number of times the book had been lent out by public libraries (according to Dutch law), it was said that Burchard as translator would be entitled to 70 percent; the remaining 30 percent would go to the Yellow Emperor as the original author. Burchard being Burchard, it was inevitable that a sharp reply would follow. He wrote back: 'The Yellow Emperor is a mythological figure who, even if we were to believe in him, stopped walking this planet some four thousand years ago...is that 30 percent supposed to go to a relief fund for mythological figures?'

*Daodejing* (2002) is his translation of the mystical book that is also called *Laozi*, *Lao Tzu*, *Lao-tse*, and so on. There are hundreds of translations of this book in countless languages. What makes it so good? First of all, there is the fact that he translates not only the text of *Laozi* but also the full early Chinese commentary by the Gentleman on the Riverbank (a pen name). In China, sacred texts were typically read in the light of the way they had been explained by interpreters. Now, we are in a position to read *Laozi* in modern Dutch just the way the Gentleman on the Riverbank read it two thousand years ago. Another outstanding feature is the phrasing of Burchard's translation. In Dutch, meanings can often be conveyed by alternative words, some Germanic and some Romance (Latinate) in origin. While others may prefer the Romance variants, Burchard leaned toward the Germanic. This gives his translation a subtle rhythmic solidity that is well suited to the terse assertiveness of the original's tone.

*Confucianisme* (2005) is a book about the teachings named after Confucius (551–479 BC), the most influential thinker in Chinese history. It is customary to begin an introduction to those teachings with the 'founder' himself. But Confucius regarded himself as merely someone who was reviving the insights of the wise rulers of antiquity. Confucianism, in other words, is more than just 'the teachings of Confucius'; Burchard in his book accordingly waits till page 50 (out of 128) to introduce the Master.

Burchard's last publication, 'Confucius in Tight-Fitting Shoes' (2020, in Dutch) is about remarks on the Master as a person by the Amsterdam freethinker *Analects* (27–100 AD). It appeared in a theme issue of the magazine *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*. After he had received his copy last summer, Burchard reported from his balcony: 'what a pleasure it is to have the magazine on my lap and re-read it all in the sun.'



Burchard J. Mansvelt Beck in 2013.

**Teacher**  
In 1973 Burchard took up

employment at the Sinological Institute, first as a graduate assistant and subsequently as an associate professor. He was an unusual sight to see, if only because for a while he was accompanied by his dog, who slept in his office while he was teaching. His classes included Apparaat, literally the 'apparatus' of bibliographic and other materials and study aids with which students of sinology should be familiar, and language training in Classical Chinese.

Once in his Apparaat course he asked the students to re-calculate certain dates given according to the traditional Chinese calendar, to find their equivalents in Western terms. One by one, the students discovered this particular assignment was impossible: Burchard had deliberately chosen non-existent dates which had no Western equivalents because they fell during the West's transition from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. It was his way of impressing on the students what a specialized business chronology could be.

In his introductory Classical Chinese course, he could easily fill two whole class hours explaining the first sentence of the classic *Mencius*, which comprises only six words: 孟子見梁惠王 'Mencius visited King Hui of Liang.' The subjects covered in those two hours included the manner of writing Chinese characters, the word order of the sentence, the location of the historical state of Liang, and the custom of referring to Chinese rulers by posthumous names. Burchard loved to digress while teaching; after ten minutes, he might suddenly 'come to' and say: 'Oh, I've been preaching again!' The digressions might have seemed extraneous, but by filling in background they often helped to make exotic things understandable and to highlight the relativity of one's own frames of reference.

At times, Classical Chinese could evoke Burchard's personal sensitivity. An example was the heart-breaking poem in which Bai Juyi (772–846) remembers his baby daughter who died in the third year of her life. Just as the poet was overcome with emotion while thinking of his beloved Goldilocks, Burchard could hardly keep a dry eye while reading the poem aloud. When he came to the last lines his voice started to fail him and he broke off the lesson, leaving his students behind in the classroom with a deep sense of the power of Classical Chinese poetry.

One of Burchard's outstanding traits was the personal attention he gave to students. He could spend hours poring over a Classical Chinese text with a student while both enjoyed hot drinks and snacks. His explanations were friendly and patient, and with the occasional nod in the right direction he gave the student the feeling of having found the correct translation unaided. The enormous discrepancy in expertise was never an obstacle; it only whetted the student's appetite for more learning. And the one-on-one tutoring wasn't just a one-way street; it also could incite Burchard to delve into texts he himself had not yet read, further refining his linguistic skills in the process. Quite a few of his students were foreigners, and Burchard talked to them in their own language whenever possible. His favorite language was Italian, and his knowledge of it was greatly enhanced by working together on translations from Classical Chinese.

In 2004, in the context of an administrative reorganization of the university, Burchard was pressured into early retirement. This came as a blow, but it by no means put an end to his career as a teacher. His office in Leiden was not his only workplace; a pizza joint was as good a place as any to sit and explain *Laozi*. What he liked best was to receive students in his own home. Whoever enjoyed the privilege of an audience with him at his upstairs home on Vondel Street in Amsterdam would enter into a fascinating world of books, plants, photos, bits of writing, newspaper clippings, paintings, knick-knacks, and...after the dog had passed away...a pussycat. One of these tutorials focused on the standard Confucianist book called *Analects*. The lessons began latish in the afternoon and lasted till about seven-thirty in the evening – whereupon the big table in Burchard's live-and-work space would be cleared off and his chook would come in to serve dinner. At eight o'clock, a television set would be taken out and placed on a chair facing Burchard so that he could watch the all-time favorite soap series *Goede tijden, slechte tijden* – the Dutch equivalent of *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

In addition to personal tutoring, Burchard would help students from a distance. Anybody who sent him a translation asking him to read it was guaranteed to receive his comments and corrections. He enjoyed keeping in contact via email or regular post, even after the students had graduated, showing real concern with their continuing lives. Whenever something reminded him of a student or a former student, he was sure to mention it. Many received letters from him about a wide variety of subjects, ranging from Hopper paintings to Katherine Hepburn on postage stamps. They were always written from beginning to end without capital letters, printed on the reverse side of used paper, sent in brown envelopes and dated with Amsterdam spelling as "am\*dam" (am-star-dam). If you remarked on the originality of that spelling, he was sure to say with a poker face: 'Well, I live in Am-asterisk-dam, don't I?'

## Health

During the last years of his life Burchard battled with health issues, but he never wanted to talk about them. He preferred to speak about Confucius, Tacitus, Prince Mononoke, The Tudors, Game of Thrones, a Japanese poet, the North Korean radio, or one of the other countless things that interested him. In October, during a consultation at a hospital, it developed that Burchard was infected with Covid-19. Initially he had no symptoms and remained mentally as sharp as ever. After the final debate between the American presidential candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden on October 22nd, of which he had watched the live broadcast in the Covid department of the hospital in the wee hours, he remarked that something in the debate had really struck him. The great dream of his own favorite philosopher, Mencius – a ruler who rules so wisely and well that everyone in the world would wish to come and live in his country – would seem that nightmare to Trump, who prefers to keep foreigners out of the country. The following week, Burchard's condition rapidly deteriorated, and on Saturday, October 31st, he passed away (due to Covid-19) in the Onze Lieve Vrouwe Gasthuis hospital in Amsterdam. He was fortunate to avoid drawn-out suffering, but he was unable to see with his own eyes the result of the American election, which would have greatly pleased him.

As one of the 'propositions' appended, by Dutch custom, to his Ph.D. dissertation, Burchard wrote: 'As far as we know, life is an immortal phenomenon.' After a colorful life, Burchard has now joined the ranks of the immortal phenomena.

*'In Memoriam: Burchard J. Mansvelt Beck' was written by Paul van Els and translated by Lloyd Haft, with contributions from Bas Aarts, Leonard Blussé, Jan Bor, Tom Bus, Remy Cristini, Ingrid d'Hooghe, Flip de Heer, Carine Defoort, Anne Gerritsen, Marc Gilbert, Sander Griffioen, Lloyd Haft, Michel Hoekx, Gerard 't Hooft, Lisa Indraccolo, Anne Sytske Keijser, Henning Kloeter, Rens Krijgsman, Tiziana Lippiello, Erna Marcus, Yves Menheere, Willem Remmelink, Piet Sombouts, Ivo Smits, Dianne Sommers, Barend ter Haar, Chris Teunissen, Guido Tielman, Yvonne Twisk, Gabe van Beijeren, Maghiel van Crevel, Jan van der Made, Paul van Eenckevort, Garrie van Pinxteren, Jan Melle van Thuijl, Johan van Wegen, Giovanni Vitiello, and others.*

An overview of Burchard J. Mansvelt Beck's publications can be found on the right-hand side of this page.



Portrait of Burchard J. Mansvelt Beck by Willy Breederveld.

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