

Chinese Studies in the Netherlands

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In early June 2013 I was contacted by someone with a very impressive name: Gabe Geert van Beijeren Bergen en Henegouwen. He told me he was collecting photographs and permissions for an academic publication about the history of sinology in the Netherlands to be published in 2013 by Brill Publishers. Whilst perusing my “Robert van Gulik 1910–2010” he had come across two photos he would like to use.

Obviously, such permission is not mine to give, so I contacted Thomas van Gulik. As one would expect, he immediately sent a positive reaction and asked me to handle the details. I was happy to be of service. I rustled up the hi-res versions of the two illustrations from my digital archives and sent them to Gabe. He asked if there were any costs involved. My reply was: no, but I would appreciate a complimentary copy of the book once it's published. That shouldn't be a problem, Gabe said.

Hefty tome

The day before yesterday a quite heavy packet appeared in my mailbox. I thought I knew what it contained since I had recently ordered some books. I was wrong, though. When I opened it, I saw a hefty tome in bright orange and black. It was titled *Chinese Studies in the Netherlands* and turned out to be a collection of essays on Dutch sinologists edited by Wilt Idema. I really had to think hard, and then I remembered the mail exchange of more than

half a year ago with Gabe van Beijeren. So this was the reward for my cooperation in that matter: this magnificent book, beautifully illustrated.

As you can imagine, I haven't yet read all 314 pages of it. In this newsletter, I will concentrate on the parts that mention Robert van Gulik, just to give you a taste.

Two photos

Of the two photos requested, one got a royal treatment indeed. It's on page 78 of my book and shows Robert van Gulik playing the *qin*. In *Chinese Studies* it is cropped to emphasize the main subject and enlarged to fill an entire page as the frontispiece. In addition the original photo is used on page 96.

The second photo is on page 81 of my book and shows the Van Gulik family when their second son Pieter had just been born. It is used, slightly reduced in size, on page 94 of *Chinese Studies*.

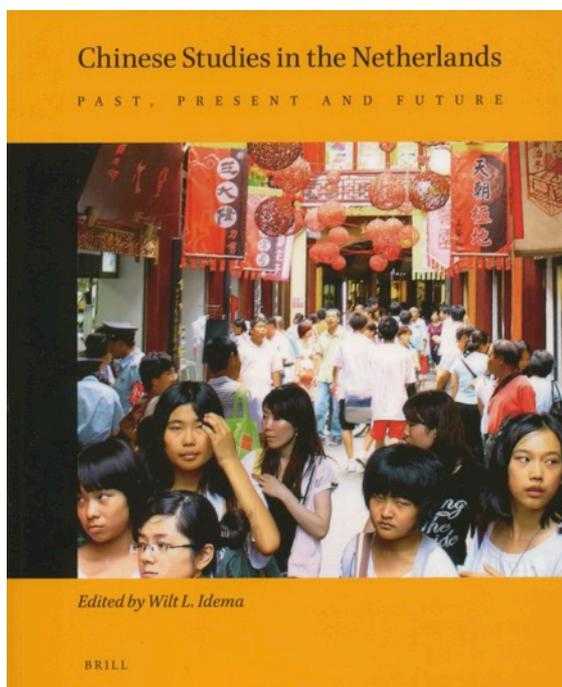
Amateurscholar

Robert van Gulik features in two of the ten essays presented in this book. The first is entitled *Between the Dutch East Indies and Philology (1919–1974)* and was written by Barend J. ter Haar, currently Run Run Shaw Professor of Chinese Studies at Oxford University. On pages 93–96 there's a section called *The Diplomat and Amateurscholar: Robert van Gulik*. It starts thus:

Among the earlier generation of Dutch China-specialists, few are as prominent in the academic world nowadays as Robert van Gulik 高羅佩 (1910–1967). He was also well known to a larger reading public in the Netherlands and beyond for a while thanks to his Judge Dee detective novels. These have now largely gone out of circulation in the English-language world, but have gained a new life in their Chinese translations and adaptations for television. Many of his scholarly works have also been translated into Chinese. As a result, Chinese scholars regularly come to Leiden out of admiration for his work and to study it. Although not formally a Leiden alumnus, van Gulik certainly belongs to the larger story of Dutch Chinese studies and should be treated here.

Ter Haar makes an interesting point based on the fact that Van Gulik actually spent much more time in Japan than in China:

In fact, he saw China in many ways through Japanese eyes. His early interest in Chinese



literature and calligraphy received a tremendous impetus in Japan, so that by the time he arrived in China for the first and last stay during the chaotic years of the Second World War, he had already grown into the Chinese gentleman-scholar that he preferred to be. His Judge Dee novels show more than anything else how he saw China as a projection of an idealised literati world, based on his readings in history and literature, calligraphy, and music. As a man with strong instincts, he also developed a fascination with Chinese sexual culture, the history of which during his lifetime was taboo for professional academics. Thus, we cannot say that his was a largely textual view of China, but it certainly was an idealised one.

Finally, there's a footnote with an interesting obituary by A.F.P. Hulswé which I don't remember having read before.

“Van Gulik did not try to make sinology his career, even though his exceptional talents on a number of occasions could have acquired him a professorial appointment (outside the Netherlands, that is) if he had wished so. But rather than taking the well-traveled roads, which by common experience tend to be the main roads that can't be traveled enough and which always allow one to find something new, Van Gulik became a wanderer ... he had an extraordinarily restless mind that could organize its general restlessness in such a way that he could always concentrate himself for a while on the topic that happened to interest him. On top of that Van Gulik had a curious predilection that accorded with his personality for the margins of the academic domain of philologists, where music, painting, eroticism and the detective story are found, or cocktails thereof. Of course no one can master his field without dealing in his research from time to time with those margins (I'll not speak of other margins); but Van Gulik sauntered from one periphery to the next, and danced around the central issues, so it becomes understandable that among sinologists he was called a dilettante, admittedly not without admiration.”

Berg and Hulswé, *Levensbericht*, 287–293

Tweede artikel

The second essay containing a sizable section on Robert van Gulik is called *China's Art and Material Culture*. Its author is Oliver Moore, amongst other things Curator of the China collections at the National Museum of Ethnology (Museum Volkenkunde) in Leiden.

Two of Van Gulik's works are mentioned: *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* and *Chinese Pictorial Art as seen by the Connoisseur*. Moore had this to say about the controversies surrounding *Erotic Colour Prints*:

In several respects then, *Erotic Colour Prints* is a product of its times. Modern theorists will not be satisfied that van Gulik offers no conceptual distinction between the erotic and the pornographic, other than to use the former predominantly as the category for images and the latter for texts. Questions have also been raised concerning the genuine Ming origin of some of the images that van Gulik used, since he left a trail of ambiguities in his own claims for the sources of *Erotic Colour Prints*, not entirely dispelled by his decision some ten years after publication to plane down the allegedly Ming-period woodblocks that he had collected and used to generate new impressions.

But to try and somehow catch van Gulik out is to miss the point. Of course, in the 1950s, a historical subject as intimate as sex required that an author—a senior servant of the Dutch state—throw out decoys and lay firebreaks (the entire Qing dynasty perhaps), but none of this diminishes his achievement in showing how art and literature functioned for and within contexts of sexual behavior, hitherto considered a taboo subject.

And then of course there's what Van Gulik himself considered his *magnum opus*: *Chinese Pictorial Art*. Moore argues forcefully for a re-evaluation of this great work:

Van Gulik's *Chinese Pictorial Art* as seen by the Connoisseur, published in 1958, deserves to be better known. Its title is slightly misleading, since this is an examination that relies throughout on an exceptionally practical register of connoisseurship, that has little to do with the methods most usually associated with this kind of criticism. One of the inspirations for *Chinese Pictorial Art* was the Italian scholar Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984), a formidable linguist—if politically misguided individual—who devoted an important study to Tibetan images. His preference for the functional, social and ritual contexts of what this art meant to its viewers was an inspiration for how van Gulik set about interpreting the material, spatial and social contexts of paintings made in China. Work that today looks unexceptional was then new, and it still deserves more than glancing reference. Van Gulik was probably the last Dutch researcher to be able to conduct a conversation on the various topics of *Pictorial Art* with a passing generation of Chinese scholars who knew late Qing art and society at first hand.

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