ASIAN HISTORY

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Three Months in Mao's China

Between the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution

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For Emma and Otto
In memory of their grandparents

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Introduction

On 13 September 1964 my father, Erik Zürcher, turned 36. That year, his birthday was not celebrated during the day with the family, with coffee and cake and heated discussion as was customary, but in the evening, with a large party at a big house belonging to some married friends, Kitty and San Go.[1] It was a party with friends and colleagues, most of them linked to the Institute of Sinology in Leiden. There was drinking (a lot of drinking), and there was music, dancing and speeches. The dancing in particular was exceptional for this group of friends, for whom parties tended to mean drinking, smoking and endless chatting.

The reason for all this exuberance was that the birthday party was also a farewell party: two days later, together with his old college friend, Gan Tjiang-Tek,[2] the curator of the Chinese collection at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, Erik would leave on a six-month voyage, of which four months, he hoped, would be spent in China.

By 1964, Erik Zürcher had been a professor in Leiden for three years. He was a 'sinologist'; that is to say, he had studied Chinese language and literature and had also taken his doctorate in that field in 1959. Despite this, it was not as Professor of Chinese that he was appointed in 1961. Leiden already had a professor in that field – Anthony ('Toon' to his friends) Hulsewé – and with just a handful of students of Chinese each year, two professors would have been too

1 Go Lam-san: a pharmacist in Leiden and family friend of Erik's.

2 Gan Tjiang-Tek was born in Bandung in 1919 and came to study in the Netherlands shortly after the Second World War. He became a Dutch citizen in 1963. Tek would remain lifelong friends with Erik and Henny and attended both their cremations.

much of a good thing. Erik had been a brilliant student though, and his thesis, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, on which he had worked for six years, was recognized as a pioneering work immediately upon publication. Armed with offers from various American universities, he was able to set his terms. Leiden wanted to keep him, so in 1960 he was made a lector (a now-defunct university rank under that of professor), and less than a year later, in 1961, professor of 'the history of East Asia, and in particular East-West relations.' This somewhat bizarre title allowed the university to appoint him alongside Hulsewé, who was eighteen years his senior.[3] In any case, the post was well matched to Erik's interests. His thesis was on the way in which Buddhism (originally from India) had spread within China and the changes it had undergone in the process, and in later life he would become extremely interested in the history of the early Catholic mission in China, particularly in the Jesuits. Both are examples of contact between different cultures, with the underlying (comparative) question being why Buddhism, but not Christianity, became a national religion in China.

Erik very nearly missed out on becoming a sinologist at all. He had come to Leiden to study Egyptology, and made a start on this programme. That he became a sinologist was the doing of the same Tek who would become his travelling companion in 1964. During the initiation rituals at the Leiden University students' society, Tek (who was already a senior student) discovered Erik hiding behind the coats in the cloakroom. Rather than give him away, Tek began to

3 For more on the history of sinology in the Netherlands and Leiden, see W.L. Idema (ed.), *Chinese Studies in the Netherlands: Past, Present and Future*, Leiden: Brill, 2014.

persuade Erik of the advantages of studying Chinese. Some time later, Erik did indeed change programmes.

Erik had already been away from home for long periods prior to 1964. After graduating, in 1952 he had been 'lent out' by his tutor, the celebrated Leiden Sinologist J.J.L. Duyvendak (Hulsewé's predecessor),[4] to a Swedish colleague, the elderly art historian Osvald Sirén. That was how it used to be; the relationship between a professor and his students, assistants and doctoral students was a cross between a guild-like master-apprentice relationship and a form of serfdom. The proposal by the brilliant but very authoritarian Duyvendak that Erik should move to Stockholm for six months was literally an offer that Erik couldn't refuse.

This can't have been easy, because in addition to graduating, Erik had also recently got married to someone who does not address us directly in this book, but who is nevertheless a central figure: my mother, Henny Dineke Bulten. It is typical of the academic relations of the time that Erik also asked, and received, Duyvendak's permission to marry. Although Henny would follow him to Sweden after a few months, this would be the first occasion – so soon after their marriage – on which she remained at home alone, as a sacrifice to academia. While working on his thesis, Erik moved once more, this time to Paris for a few months, to be supervised by Paul Demiéville, an eminent French Buddhologist and friend of Duyvendak's. Since 1956 Leiden had also had its own Professor of Buddhology, Jan de Jong, but for reasons that are no longer clear, Erik harboured a deep-rooted dislike of this man. He probably felt that De

4 J. (Jan) J.L. Duyvendak (1889-1954). He was appointed in Leiden in 1919 after working for years as an interpreter/translator at the Dutch Embassy in Beijing. He was a prominent figure in the Dutch academic world, including as rector of Leiden University.

Jong did not want to help him, out of a sense of rivalry. So off he went to Paris, which meant that Henny – now with a baby son – had to stay behind in Oegstgeest.

Although travelling for prolonged periods for study or work was nothing new, the journey to China in September 1964 was of a different order. After six years of university study, six years of doctoral research and three years as a professor, Erik had never once set foot in China. Nowadays this would be inconceivable; every student of Chinese spends a year, or even longer, in China. China is the world's fourth most popular tourist destination (with 55 million visitors a year) and large numbers of business travellers are constantly flying to and fro. The situation in 1964 was very different, however: in an age when only the jet set flew, and most people were only familiar with the inside of a jet plane from films, China was extremely far away. There were no direct flight connections between the Netherlands and China. The train took ten days and the boat at least three weeks.

China had always been a far-off land, of course; the expression 'the Far East' (also beloved of Chinese-East-Indian restaurants, perhaps for its nostalgic undertones) did not appear out of the blue. But at the time when Erik was studying and embarking on his academic career, it was further away than it had been for many years. Before the Second World War, there had been intensive trade relations and a great deal of missionary activity. Moreover, the Chinese community in the Dutch East Indies, which amounted to more than a million people, ensured constant contact with the Netherlands. All of this ended with the outbreak of war. In the years immediately following the war, China descended into a bloody civil war. In 1949, when Erik was in his third year at university, Mao Zedong's Communist

Party seized power. This was less traumatic for the Dutch than for the British and the Americans, with their considerable interests in China (moreover, the Netherlands was already deeply entangled in postcolonial wars in Indonesia, in which Erik's older half-brother Jan fought). However, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 brought an end to all relations. The Netherlands immediately followed its NATO ally, the United States, in branding North Korea an aggressor, and Dutch volunteers, including Erik's future colleague, the professor of Japanese Frits Vos (also present at the farewell party in 1964) went off to fight in Korea. From that time China was not only very far away, but also completely sealed off – at least, as far as Westerners were concerned. Any reports about the country that did emerge were largely based on rumour and speculation, which could lead to both massive exaggeration (of the threat posed by China) and grave under-estimation (of the numbers that died in the great famine). Erik and Tek's visit was therefore quite exceptional. They were able to go because the journey had an 'official' character. Erik had two objectives: for the Netherlands Organization for the Advancement of Pure Research (the ZWO, the predecessor of today's Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, or NWO), he was to make an inventory of Chinese Research institutes and to research opportunities for collaboration; and for Leiden University, he was to research possibilities for student exchanges, and in particular possibilities for students of Chinese at Leiden to spend time in China. Tek was tasked with purchasing traditional folk-cultural objects for the museum. The journey was prepared in detail, and from beginning to end the reins were in the hands of the Chinese state travel agency, Luxingshe, which determined who could travel where and when.

With hindsight, we can see that Erik and Tek visited China during a 'window of opportunity'. The People's Republic had existed for fifteen years (they would watch the largest celebration of its founding). The country was recovering not only from the horrors of the Japanese occupation and the civil war, but also from what has ironically gone down in history as 'the Great Leap Forwards.'

In 1958, a radical wing within the leadership of the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong, contrary to the wishes of moderates such as Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, had forced through a large-scale programme of economic reform that was in fact a Chinese version of the collectivization and industrialization that Stalin had implemented in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. The goal was the same: to industrialize the country at a rapid pace. The state would fund the industrialization with the profits that would be made from the state monopoly on trade in agricultural produce. By buying grain and rice cheaply from farmers and selling them to town-dwellers and internationally at a higher price, the state would raise the money for factories, dams, railways and ships. As it was anticipated that the farmers, who made up the overwhelming majority of the Chinese population, would resist the reforms, agriculture was collectivized: small privately-owned farms and small cooperatives were forced to form large communes, which were put under party supervision. One of the most utopian aspects of Mao's campaign was that small farmers were tasked with building small blast furnaces and using them to produce their own iron, by melting down every available metal object, including surplus cooking pans, into raw material for industry.

Between 1958 and 1961, the Great Leap Forward swept the country like a destructive tornado. It led to an economic

and human catastrophe, and one of the largest famines in Chinese and world history. There is much debate about the number of victims, but estimates range from 23 million to 45 million deaths. In the meantime, during the whole era of the Great Leap, China continued to export grain on a large scale in order to earn foreign currency for industrialization!

From 1960, resistance to Mao's politics grew within the party. At the 1962 party congress Mao was openly criticized and forced to perform public 'self-criticism'. Although he maintained his position as chairman of the party, he was so discredited that he had to relinquish the daily leadership. Mao remained the ultimate symbol of the Chinese revolution, but it was 'moderates' such as Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai who ran the China that Erik and Tek visited in the autumn of 1964. Only two years after their visit, in 1966, Mao would stake everything, launch the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution', regain power and eliminate his competitors.

In other words: our travellers' visit to China coincided with a breathing space that opened up between 1962 and 1966, when the country was not at the mercy of the megalomaniacal schemes of dogmatic ideologists. This certainly explains Erik's relatively positive assessment of the situation in China and the communist system. Despite – or, perhaps, because of – growing up in a communist family, he was certainly no communist himself, but at this time he was still a 'leftist' in a general sense: fiercely anti-colonial, quite anti-American, and burdened with a kind of equivocal aversion to the bourgeois circles in which he, a professor in Leiden, naturally moved.

His positive assessment also stemmed in part from a slightly Orientalist or paternalist attitude: 'We [Westerners]

would not be able to live in such a system', he wrote in his diary, 'but for them [the Chinese] it is the only way'. At the same time, Erik was critical of the never-ending, all-permeating propaganda and indoctrination; clearly more critical, in any case, than Tek, who closely identified with the 'new China' and whom Erik saw as somewhat naïve. They had heated and sometimes vitriolic debates about this, but their friendship could take it.

For a long time, it was unclear as to how long Erik and Tek would be permitted to stay in China. In the end, they would stay for three months. On Christmas Eve they crossed the border into what was then British Hong Kong. They spent some time together in Hong Kong, but then their ways parted: Tek went to his family in Indonesia, Erik to Japan. From there, he travelled back to the Netherlands via India, Egypt (where my mother and I joined him), Turkey and Greece.

Throughout the journey to and around China, Erik faithfully kept a diary. In addition, each week, mostly on Sundays, he wrote a detailed letter to Henny in Oegstgeest (bits of which were read out to me). He had bought a modern Fujica single-lens reflex camera for the trip, and used it to take hundreds of photographs, or slides, to be accurate. Slides were extremely fashionable in the Netherlands in the early 1960s. While it seems strange looking back in 2015, at that time it was completely acceptable to invite one's friends and neighbours over for an evening, serve wine and cheese, and bore them with slides of your experiences for hours on end. Slides would come to play a central role in Erik's work. In the 1970s and 1980s he built up a picture archive of more than 20,000 slides (mostly photographs from books and journals). From 1991 this would form the basis of the 'China vision' project. At the

end of the 1990s, the slide project was overtaken by the digital revolution, and under Erik's successors, it became of the earliest examples of digitalization in university education.

The slides that Erik took in China failed to withstand the ravages of time (or what was in fact fifty years of storage in the damp Warmond polder). The diary and the letters did survive, however, and they are the sources on which this short book is based. In 1964 Erik wrote in his diary: 'Puck[5] is keeping all my letters. That will be nice for later.' More than fifty years later, in early 2015, this did indeed prove to be the case.

Erik Zürcher remained a professor in Leiden until 1993. He became the best-known China specialist in the Netherlands, and enjoyed a special bond with the royal family from the late 1970s. He continued to work after his retirement in 1993, partly in increasingly small corners at the institute where he had been director, and partly at home in the large, secluded house in Warmond. It was there that he died, after a few final years troubled by health problems and increasing blindness, in February 2008. He was 79. Henny remained alone in the large house, feeling not the slightest need to dispose of Erik's things. Everything remained as it was, aside from his academic books, which were donated to the university library in Leuven (Erik had felt most akin to the kind of research that was done there).

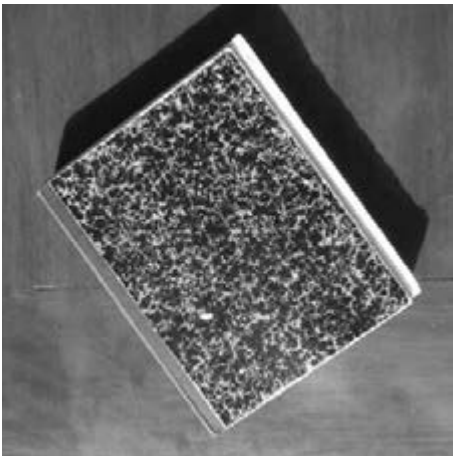
At the beginning of 2015, when Henny herself passed away at the age of 87, almost exactly seven years after

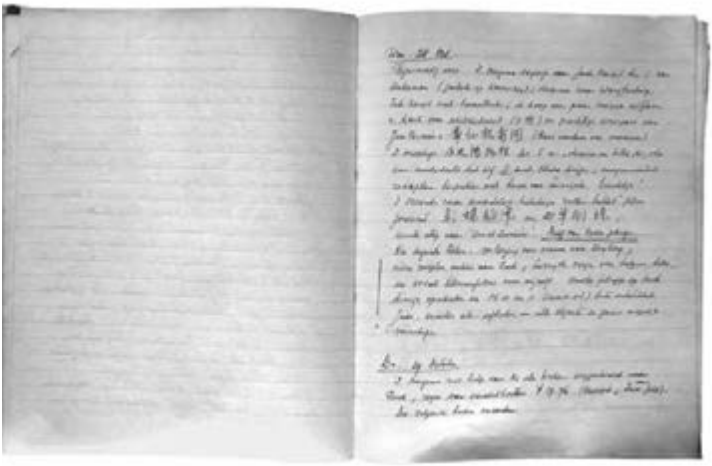
5 For reasons that are no longer known, Henny's parents began calling her 'Puck' when she was a young. Erik kept the custom going. He spoke to others of her as Henny, but he called her Puck. As the letters show, her pet name for him was 'Eerft'.

Erik, Kim and I found his suits and ties still in the closets, his coats (still with their rolls of peppermints in the pockets) on the hallstand, and countless drawers full of paper throughout the whole house. We found them in the middle drawer of my mother's writing desk: fourteen airmail envelopes with Chinese stamps, large and red as propaganda posters, and in every envelope, three light-blue sheets of India-paper, crammed to the edges with my father's characteristically tiny but very readable handwriting.

For Kim and myself, the following weeks and months were an exhausting orgy of packing, clearing out, throwing away and passing on things, something that naturally entailed a continuous confrontation with the past lives of Erik and Henny, as well as with my own childhood. Weeks after discovering the letters in the writing desk, in my father's desk I came across an old exercise book with a hard, black-green cover. On reading the first sentences, it immediately became clear that this was a travel diary, the one that Erik had kept during the same journey to China in 1964. Two documents on the same subject, kept separately by two people for fifty years, had been reunited. The idea of publishing them as one came to us on the spot. After all, although these were very personal documents, they also had features that might make them interesting to others: they were uncensored reports on what was at that time a hermetically sealed country, written by an observer who was not merely a tourist or business traveller, but a professional trained China expert who was familiar with the language and kept his eyes and ears open.

When we first read the letters and the journal, it was clear that this was indeed an interesting historical source. In places, the text read like a message from another planet or





The travel journal.

something out of a time capsule; mostly due to the complete metamorphosis that China has undergone since, but also because of the glimpse that reading the texts allows into the manners and way of life of the Dutch in the 1960s; and, of course, due to the sometimes archaic spelling and choice

of words.[6] To cite J.P. Hartley's famous opening sentence, it is true that 'The past is a foreign country, and they do things differently there'.[7] At the same time, the text is so personal that those who knew Erik would immediately be able to recognize his voice without any trouble at all – it is as though one can hear him speaking.

After Amsterdam University Press expressed an interest in publishing the texts, we wondered what form such a book might take. The material consists of two very different sets of source texts, of course. Erik wrote the diary entries for himself; they were intended as a souvenir and reminder, and are full of references in Chinese to people, institutions and ideas. The letters are composed pieces of writing that were intended to keep the home front up to date, but also evidently to entertain. Sometimes the two sources complement one another, sometimes they overlap, and in some places they go in completely different directions.

Kim and I decided to make the letters the basis for the book. We present the letters in their entirety, with the exception of a few passages that relate solely to Henny's activities in Oegstgeest and Leiden and that do not relate in any way to the voyage to China. We include excerpts from the diary that complement the letters, either because they cover something that is not addressed in the letters, or because, on the contrary, they clarify a passage in the letters. After we had compiled a first rough draft of the manuscript, Erik's former colleague Wilt Idema, an emeritus professor in Leiden and Harvard, helped us enormously by providing expert advice on the meaning and spelling of the numerous

6 We have modernized the transcription of Chinese names and terms. Erik used the then common Wade-Giles transcription method, whereas we have used the Pinyin transcription method, which is more commonly used today.

7 J.P. Hartley, *The Go-between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953, p. 1).

Chinese names, terms and places, something for which we remain extremely grateful. We are also grateful to the Leiden sinologist and art historian Oliver Moore, who was able to dig out many details of the objects that Tek and Erik brought back for the National Museum of Ethnology and themselves, and who helped us to navigate the catalogue of the museum.

We did not change the order of the texts in order to create 'storylines', but this does not mean that we cannot distinguish certain leitmotifs or themes that appear time and again in the letters and diary entries.

The most striking storyline is that of the old and the new China. Through his studies, Erik was mainly familiar with China from books. The first visit to the real, living China was thus a non-stop voyage of discovery, in which he continuously reflected on the question of the extent to which the old, classical, imperial China still lived on, and the extent to which the communist regime had fundamentally changed the country.

In order to be able to answer this question and understand China better, Erik and Tek worked long hours, certainly in the beginning, immersing themselves in both elite and mass culture. Night after night, they would visit film and theatrical performances, especially those of Peking opera in its classical and modernized forms; and they went to temples and palaces and toured the most important museums. Besides this, during the day they would visit working-class neighbourhoods with their performing storytellers, puppet theatres, singers and jugglers. This was aided by the fact that Tek had the task of purchasing traditional artefacts for Leiden's National Museum of Ethnology, which automatically took them to the markets and shopping districts where folk art was to

be found. There, they also found the traditional Chinese cultural product *par excellence*: food. They ate at 300-year-old gourmet restaurants and at market taverns, and Erik diligently noted down everything he consumed. Luxingshe ensured that the achievements of modern China – in the form of factories, laboratories and agricultural communes – also got a place on the programme.

Whereas Tek's work took him to markets, Erik's work – exploring possibilities for academic collaboration and student exchanges – inevitably brought him into contact with the many layers of the enormous Chinese state and party bureaucracy. This results in a second storyline. Particularly in the diary, Erik frequently refers to the endless, lengthy discussions and negotiations. Although there was some interest within the bureaucracy at this time in intensifying collaboration with the West, Erik mostly came away from these discussions with a feeling of uncertainty. The same was true of the constant negotiations with the state tourism agency about the journey and the length of their stay (whether it would be two, three, or four months; whether they would go to the interior or not…). Both the positive and the negative decisions seem to have been completely unpredictable, and there is a great sense of being subject to an arbitrary will; which again led to constant speculation about China's motives.

A third storyline concerns the travellers' relationship with their own 'support network'. For Erik this was the Dutch Embassy, and in particular undersecretary Roland van den Berg. Van den Berg was a fellow sinologist who, like Erik, had studied in Leiden. In great contrast to Erik, however, he also had an insider's knowledge of China, because – having been born in Shanghai as the son of the Dutch consul – he had spent the first ten years of his life

there.[8] Erik received a great deal of help from Van den Berg from the very start, something for which he was very grateful, but this did not deter him from making some barbed comments about the diplomatic world and Westerners in China in general in his letters and diary. The group that was most Tek's 'own' was that of the Dutch-East-Indian Chinese who had established themselves in China after the war, mainly as medical specialists, in the period when Tek himself had gone to the Netherlands. Meetings and discussions with these *huaqiao* ('overseas Chinese') were difficult, but also interesting, as this group – which the Chinese government considered to be essential, and who enjoyed special privileges – consisted of people who were both insiders and outsiders.

Finally, of course, the letters and the diary entries cover the human aspects that play a role in every journey, and certainly every long journey: illness and discomfort, annoyance at one's travelling companion (even though Erik and Tek actually made a very good team, all things considered) and homesickness. Homesickness was also a consequence of the degree of isolation that the travellers experienced in China, something that is utterly unimaginable for us. The Internet was still science fiction; there was no contact by telephone with the Netherlands; telegrams were for emergencies; letters took a week to arrive, on average; and foreign newspapers were not on sale. Erik and Tek knew very little of what was happening outside China – and even *in* China – and the news that they did receive had either been filtered by the Chinese party media or was subject to great delay. Meanwhile, things were happening in the outside

8 Roland van den Berg would later become the Dutch ambassador in Beijing. He would thus see how the student protests were suppressed violently in 1989 and how Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands' state visit was cancelled at the last minute (her household made it as far as the government plane on the runway at Schiphol).

world that autumn that the partygoers at the birthday party on 13 September would never have been able to imagine. It was known in advance that American presidential elections would be held and the Olympic Games would take place in Tokyo, but the deposition of Nikita Khrushchev as party leader in the Soviet Union and the detonation of the first Chinese atomic bomb came as a complete surprise. If there is one thing that the texts in this book make clear, it is how different the world was, fifty years ago; how far away, in other words, the Far East truly was.