

Collecting China

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*Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807),
collections and Chinese studies*

JAN VAN CAMPEN



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Preface

This is a slightly edited and translated version of my thesis, *De Haagse jurist Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807) en zijn collectie Chinese voorwerpen* (2000). The research project that led to this thesis was a special collaboration between the department of Art History at Leiden University, and the Asian department at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. My supervisors were Prof.dr. C. Willemijn Fock, Prof.dr. Christiaan Jörg (both Leiden University) and Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer (Rijksmuseum). The thesis was defended on 7 September 2000, and the book was published by Verloren in Hilversum.

The research project fitted in well with the interest in collection history in the 1990s, which was shown by both private individuals and institutions such as the Rijksmuseum. As an art historian and museum person, I approached the subject from my art-historical background and from my interest in collection history. We saw Royer as a well-documented example of an 18th-century Dutch private collector. In our view this was primarily a Dutch subject, because private collecting flourished in the Netherlands particularly, and developed in its own way. That is why a Dutch-language publication seemed sufficient to us at the time.

In the meantime, interest in global contacts and in the meeting and interaction of cultures has blossomed. And it may be worth looking at Royer's activities and ambitions from this perspective too. Other eyes, such as those of anthropologists and sinologists, will undoubtedly notice other issues, which are at least as important. The Dutch text was problematic for most researchers, and I hope that this translation offers a solution. I have translated most of the original text, omitted the less relevant parts, and I have processed the most important new information (in my opinion) that became available after 2000. It has, however, remained a light revision. There are still many details in the text, of which the reader may wonder about the relevance. I have left it that way because I want to make as much of the data available for possible further research.

For practical reasons, I have opted for an unillustrated text edition that can be used most easily as a PDF. The current inventory numbers of Royer's objects are always mentioned and the objects should be easy to find in the online collection databases of Museum Volkenkunde and the Rijksmuseum. In addition, the Dutch edition of 2000 is still available for enthusiasts, and it is illustrated.

Many people have helped me, and I am very grateful to them. There is a more comprehensive list in the original Dutch language book, but I would like to mention a number of people who have made a crucial contribution. First of all, the supervisors of the thesis, cited above. Ellen Uitzinger, Klaas Ruitenbeek and Koos Kuiper helped me with many sinological issues in the period 1995-2000. During the same period, several people helped me with the Latin, especially Prof.dr. Chris Heesakkers, who also carried out the final checks of the

transcriptions and translations of the Latin. For the recent revision and translation, I was fortunate enough to be able to call on Koos Kuiper again. I'm most grateful for his work on the Chinese books in Royer's collection (appendix 6). Furthermore, Winnie Wong and Paul van Dyke gave me a great deal of help in gaining a better understanding of Royer's Chinese informants Carolus Wang and Tan Assoy. Hanno Willemsen and Menno Jonker helped with the English translation and Jan de Jonge with the Latin, this time. When I worked on my PhD, the staff of both Rijksmuseum and Museum Volkenkunde were extremely kind and helpful. I would like to single out Sijbrand de Rooij who, both then and now, helped me most adequately with information on the Volkenkunde collection.

I very much hope that this English text will offer more people the opportunity to get to know Jean Theodore Royer, his museum and his Chinese studies. And I hope that others, with other backgrounds and interests, will place different accents and come to new interpretations. In this way, Royer will be able to play a role in the current discourse on the global connection, a role which he certainly deserves by virtue of all his efforts.

Introduction

There were many collections in the Netherlands in the 17th and the 18th centuries, which were almost always sold and dispersed after the compiler's death. In the best case, all that remains is a description and an estate inventory or auction catalogue. The Chinese collection of Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807) met a better fate. Thanks to a bequest from his widow, it found a place in a new museum: the Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden. King Willem I accepted the bequest in 1814, exactly the period in which he was in the process of transferring collections of the Orange family to new public state institutions. Thanks to the Royer bequest it was possible to add the Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden to the Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen, the Koninklijke Bibliotheek and the Koninklijk Penningkabinet. The Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden existed until 1883 after which the collection was divided among several other museums. The vast majority of Royer's objects ended up in the Rijks Ethnografisch Museum in Leiden, today's Museum Volkenkunde, and in the Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst, a direct predecessor of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Thanks to the bequest of 1814, we are able to study this private scholarly collection from the 18th century in detail.

Jean Theodore Royer was a man of versatile interest, great intelligence and admirable diligence. He was a lawyer and, from 1765, he worked as a secretary and later substitute registrar at the Hof van Holland, Zeeland en West-Friesland in the Hague, but he dealt with languages, history, art-history and China in his spare time. Royer was an amateur scholar and a learned amateur. 'Amateur' was used in Royer's time in the sense of 'lover', and was also related to the French 'curieux'. An amateur could devote his time to a multitude of subjects. A combination of 'scholar' and 'amateur' makes a useful term to describe Royer. The current meaning of amateur, someone who does not work on a subject for his daily living but does it in his spare time, applies retrospectively to Royer as well. It should be noted that the subjects Royer dealt with as an amateur could not, for the most part, be practiced professionally in his time, i.e., as a principal subject at university. Because some subjects were not yet taught, the terms proto-sinologist or proto-ethnographer are used in this book alongside amateur-sinologist. The serious study of Chinese language and culture – hereafter referred to as 'Chinese studies' – is undoubtedly Royer's most exceptional work as an amateur scholar and this is the subject of this book. Royer was – as it turns out – a studious collector; and it was not without reason that he sometimes referred to the collection as a museum. In Royer's time a museum was understood to mean a (study) collection, and also the space in which a collection was kept, a space dedicated to fine arts and research. The first floor of Royer's house in the Hague can certainly be called a Chinese museum, with rooms where the Chinese objects were kept and displayed, and a comfortable library, where they were studied.

Royer's work as a scholarly collector should be seen in the context of his time. In the 18th century, the idea of building up a collection in order to acquire knowledge was widespread and, broadly speaking, scholarly collections can be divided into two groups: those which were focused on nature on one hand and those which concentrated on history on the other. Royer belonged to the latter group, the antiquarians. He can be seen as an antiquarian who focused on a distant culture rather than an ancient one. Antiquarians did not focus so much on major political developments, on the rise and fall of countries and monarchs, but more on people's daily lives. Its origin lay in the Renaissance when classical antiquity was the subject of study, but in Royer's time the focus had shifted and local history had become at least as important to antiquarian scholars. Inscriptions and (archaeological) objects remained their sources.¹ There is an interesting parallel with the situation in China. From the Song period onwards, there was interest in inscriptions in bronze and stone as sources of knowledge regarding ancient history. It was precisely in Royer's time that this approach flourished among Chinese scholars: acquiring knowledge by collecting and studying one's own observations.² This parallel is an incidental matter with no consequences for Royer and his China interest, but it is too remarkable to be left unmentioned. Royer – as it will turn out – was interested in his Chinese likeness: the Chinese civilized scholar. He will not have realized that he himself and the approach of his Chinese studies would have fitted in quite well in the scholarly climate of China of this very period.

The questions at the heart of this book are obvious. In what way did Royer try to study China? What did his Chinese studies involve? What did his Chinese museum consist of? How did he develop it? And what did he want to achieve with it?

The first chapter outlines Royer's life. A great deal of attention is paid to his work as an antiquarian, because this antiquarian approach is important for a good understanding of his Chinese studies and museum. Royer's struggle with the Chinese language – the creation of glossaries, the search for Chinese instructors, reflections on the language – is the subject of the second chapter. The third chapter is about the museum. The objects in the museum play a role in Royer's work on a dictionary, but they also served as sources of knowledge about daily life in China and Chinese culture, often indicated with the term customs & habits. These are vague indications and hopefully in the course of the book Royer's way of dealing with the customs & habits issue becomes clearer. Chapter two and three combined comprise Royer's Chinese studies. In the last chapter we will briefly discuss others who were interested in China in Royer's time: amateur-sinologists such as Royer and people who assemble Chinese collections, although it will become clear that they were almost always interested in the fine art and crafts aspect rather than in sources of information about another culture.

1 Schnapp et al. 2013; for the Netherlands, see Langereis 2001.

2 This period's classic work on evidential research is Elman, 1984. See also Miller and Louis (eds.) 2012 and Wu Hung (ed.) 2010, particularly L. Lan-yin Tseng, 'Between printing and rubbing: Chu Jun's illustrated catalogues of ancient monuments in eighteenth-century China', pp. 255-290.

China experts before Royer

Royer's Chinese studies and museum are special, but they did not just appear out of thin air on the cultural horizon of the 18th century Dutch Republic. Before we focus on his work, here are a few words about the interest in China, the Chinese language and Chinese customs & habits in the period prior to Royer's own activities. When we look into the range of printed information about China from the 17th and 18th centuries, it immediately becomes clear how much interest in China there was in Europe.³ Missionaries, traders and adventurers all provided information. They each had their own purpose in China, which coloured their reporting in different ways. These informers were of eminent importance to others who did not visit China themselves, but who diligently studied the language and culture and often published about it: the European proto-sinologists.⁴ In addition to these proto-sinologists, there was, of course, a large group of interested people, for whom their China-interest was a passive liking. They were the readers of the works of the above-mentioned travellers and scholars. Who, among the large group of well-educated citizens, did not have the travel accounts by Nieuwhof and Dapper in his bookcase at the time?⁵

Missionaries in China

All proto-sinologists had the problem that they had little or no contact with people who really had command of the Chinese language. The only Europeans who were proficient in Chinese were a small group of European missionaries who spent many years in China. Chinese-European contacts overseas began in the 16th century. From then on, Portuguese and later Spanish travellers explored the possibilities of trading with China, and directly the possibility of spreading the Catholic faith there. Jesuits played an important role in this and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was their most important exponent in those early years. Ricci sought to connect with the Chinese from the ruling upper classes of the population; he learned Chinese, immersed himself in Chinese culture and sought points of similarity between the Christian faith and Chinese body of thought. In order to convert the Chinese, the Jesuits not only had to understand them and be able to speak to them, they also needed books written in flawless Chinese and this required an in-depth study of the language. Their knowledge, which they had first acquired for practical reasons, reached Europe almost immediately. The missionaries sent reports of their work to the headquarters of their order and to the Vatican. These reports were distributed, but the content was also used in publications for a wider audience, which were especially produced by the Jesuits to increase support in Europe for their work in China. Moreover, in the course of the 17th century, several missionaries from China visited Europe, often accompanied by Chinese assistants. This, too, was aimed at gaining support for the mission, but since they often stayed in European capitals for quite

³ See Lach and Van Kley 1993-1994; Lust 1987; Walravens 1987; Hertroijis 2014; Dijkstra 2019.

⁴ Mungello 1985, p. 16; Mungello 1987, p. 67. The proto-sinologists could not read Chinese themselves (at least not well).

⁵ Nieuwhof 1665; Dapper 1670.

a long period, there was plenty of opportunity to transfer knowledge. A well-known example is Philippe Couplet (1622-1693), who was in Europe for no less than 9 years from 1683 onwards. Couplet was accompanied by the Chinese convert Michael Shen Fuzong (c. 1658-1691). Couplet was responsible for the publication of the important work *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, he was in contact with many scholars, and also arranged for Louis XIV to send five new missionaries to China. These missionaries were also scholars (their knowledge of science and especially astronomy opened doors at the Chinese court) and they, in turn, increased the amount of information sent to Europe, which was edited and published there. The *Lettres édifiantes* and Du Halde's *Description de la Chine*, the most important sources on China in the first half of the 18th century, were the direct result.⁶

Proto-Sinologists in Europe

The Netherlands

The information provided by the missionaries formed the basis for a flow of publications in Europe about, or in response to, China. The nature of these works ranges from compilations of Jesuit publications to literary and philosophical works in which China is merely the starting point. In the 17th century, the Netherlands played an important role in the dissemination of knowledge. The VOC went to great lengths to be able to trade directly with China, including sending various embassies to the court in Beijing. Two of these embassies subsequently published travel reports, which immediately became very popular: *Het Gezantschap der Neêrlandtsche Oost-Indische Compagnie aan den (...) Keizer van China* by Johan Nieuwhof in 1665 and Olfert Dapper's, *Gedenkwaerdig bedryf der Nederlandsche Oost-Indische Maatschappye op de Kuste (...) van Sina* in 1670.⁷ Both books consisted of two parts: a report of the journey – containing a large number of observations of the landscape, cities, buildings, ceremonies and costumes – and a general descriptive section with more background information. The observations were important additions to the information available on China, mainly because of the addition of illustrations and a detailed map. The background information was compiled from pre-existing literature, mainly from Jesuit missionaries. The Dutch also played a role in the dissemination of knowledge in another way. Dutch printers and publishers not only produced Dutch publications on China but also many by other European authors. The most important examples include *Novus Atlas Sinensis* by the missionary Martino Martini (1614-1661) and *China Monumentis Illustrata* by the German scholar Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680).⁸ Moreover, learned missionaries and their manuscripts were regularly transported by VOC ships.

Thanks to the Dutch role as disseminators and transporters of knowledge, there was a great deal of Chinese material, including Chinese books, in the Dutch Republic as early as

6 *Lettres édifiantes (...)*; Du Halde 1735.

7 Sun 1996; Sun Jing 2013; Schmidt 2015.

8 Martini 1655; Kircher 1667.

the 17th century.⁹ This led to a number of scholars taking an interest in the Chinese language and Chinese history.¹⁰ Leiden Orientalist Jacob Golius (1596-1667), was particularly interested in Oriental languages that were important for the translation of the Bible. With the help of Martini, the author of *Novus Atlas Sinensis* who visited Europe in the 1650s, Golius established that certain terms in a Persian text were borrowed from Chinese. Golius received Chinese books from Martini for further study. He also possessed a dictionary by Justus Heurnius (1587-1652). Heurnius was a pastor in Batavia and had worked on a Chinese-Latin-Dutch dictionary with the help of a Chinese man who had learned Latin in Macao.¹¹ But the availability of these tools did not lead to any further study of the Chinese language by Golius or his pupils. A number of other Dutch scholars paid attention to other aspects of Chinese culture. Isaac Vossius (1618-1681) was fascinated by the age of the earliest Chinese sources and the consequences they had for biblical truths such as the Flood.¹² Vossius was part of an international network of scholars who discussed these matters, but also, for example, the graphic peculiarities and qualities of the Chinese script; Kircher and the collector Nicolaas Witsen (1641-1717), about whom more below, among others, belonged to the same circle.¹³ When Couplet, accompanied by Michael Shen Fuzong, stayed in Europe, they met Witsen and also Vossius. A difference of faith, Catholic and Protestant, did not stand in the way of a fruitful exchange of ideas. Other scholars were interested in comparing various Oriental languages. Adrianus Reland (1676-1718), who in a publication dealt with the differences in pronunciation of characters in China, Vietnam, Japan and Korea was one of them.¹⁴ Yet, there was no in-depth study of China and the Chinese language in the Netherlands in the 18th century.

Interest in Asia in the 17th and 18th centuries was, however, reflected in private collections in which objects from distant countries occupied an important place. In the 16th century *Kunst und Wunderkammer* collections at European courts, showcased the world created by God. The diversity of creation was honoured by bringing together and arranging large quantities of objects, primarily classified as *naturalia* and *artificialia*. The private collections that were so popular in the Netherlands from the 17th century onwards had different size and ambition, but in a considerable number of these collections, the so-called ‘general collections’, the same notion played a role as starting point.¹⁵ The world was still mainly known from the Bible and the works of a few authors from Classical Antiquity, and a collection could serve as a conformation of the knowledge gained from these sources. The well-known collection of Nicolaas Witsen, mayor of Amsterdam, and VOC director, proves that these could be very serious study collections.¹⁶ Witsen had a large network of informants all over the world and excellent contacts in the world of European scholars. He corresponded about geographical peculiarities, which were often based on Biblical knowledge. There were traces of the

9 Weststeijn 2020, chapter 1 and appendix 5.1.

10 Duyvendak 1950; Idema 2014; Weststeijn 2007 and 2012.

11 Kuiper 2005.

12 As a matter of fact, Vossius was not the first. Josephus Justus Scaliger (1540-1609) had also suggested that Chinese written sources went back before the Flood. See Weststeijn 2007, note 27.

13 Weststeijn 2012b.

14 Hamilton 1996, pp. 23-31.

15 Bergvelt and Kistemaker 1992.

16 Peters 2010.

presence of Jews in Madagascar (the Jewish faith was considered to be the original religion which in its pure form was still to be found in remote places); Ceylon was Salomon's 'Golden Island of Tabrobane', there was evidence of existence of the unicorn – to mention a few example issues. His contacts provided him with eyewitness accounts, images and objects that played a role in the discussion as important evidence. China also played a role for him because of its written history, which seemed to go back further than the Biblical Flood. A bronze mirror in Witsen's collection, originating from the Western Han dynasty (266 BC-AD 9), was a crucial object in this discussion, in which he exchanged ideas with many scholars.¹⁷ It turns out that Dutch learned collectors, and scholars belonged to the same world and that, at least from time to time, they were in close contact with the primary informants on China, Jesuit missionaries.

Berlin, St. Petersburg and Paris

In several European capitals, scholars worked hard to master the Chinese language. In Berlin, the Elector Friedrich Wilhelm (r. 1640-1688) stimulated the work of Andreas Müller (1630-1694) and Christian Menzel (1622-1701). In their opinion there had to be a 'key'.¹⁸ Once this key was available, it would be easy to read Chinese. The material Müller and Mentzel worked with were Chinese books that were available thanks to the VOC contacts of the Elector. Couplet again, was one of the rare people with expertise who helped with their work. Müller and Mentzel were also in contact with the philosopher and scholar Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716).¹⁹ Leibniz hoped for an exchange of knowledge and values between East and West and was impressed by the work of Jesuit missionaries. Part of this exchange was to develop a universal language so that communication would be possible anywhere and anytime. This universal language could be something completely new, or the lost language that was spoken before the construction of the Tower of Babel, and that had to be recovered. But perhaps Chinese could also be considered. Leibniz corresponded intensively with Jesuits in China who, in those years, delved ever deeper into their speculative search for similarities between the roots of Chinese and Christian culture. But he, like Müller and Mentzel, also had contact with Witsen. Once more, the world of scholars and proto-sinologists was closely connected.

Another German scholar worked in St. Petersburg at the Academy of Sciences: Gottlieb Siegfried Bayer (1694-1738).²⁰ Bayer knew his German colleagues and had come into contact with the Chinese language through them. He established that there was no dictionary (in his eyes this was the 'key' that Müller and Mentzel were also looking for) and he decided to make it. The result is *Museum Sinicum* from 1730, the second part of which is a glossary of 2,200 characters, engraved on loose sheets.²¹ These characters he had collected in European

¹⁷ Van Noord and Weststeijn 2015.

¹⁸ Kraft 1973 and 1976.

¹⁹ Kühn 1973.

²⁰ Lundbaek 1986.

²¹ Bayer 1730.