



The Global Trajectory of Nicolaas Witsen's Chinese Mirror

• WILLEMIJN VAN NOORD AND THIJS WESTSTEIJN* •

I can scarcely express to you how greatly it pains me to have been the cause of such a priceless piece, a remnant of Chinese antiquity, meeting such an ill fate.¹ There it lay, shattered into a dozen shards: the most prized work in Nicolaas Witsen's (1641-1717) collection of Asian objects (fig. 1). In late 1705 Witsen, burgomaster of Amsterdam, had wanted to show a learned friend a Chinese mirror, found in a grave in Siberia. The two Dutchmen had corresponded for a year about this artefact, which was inscribed with seemingly ancient yet inscrutable characters. Now Witsen had dropped it.

The friend who expressed his regret was the antiquarian Gijsbert Cuper (1644-1716). He waxed lyrical about Witsen's cabinet which, in terms of Asian art, was probably the richest in Northern Europe.² On show were Indian and Ceylonese votive sculptures, Chinese and Japanese paintings, and jewellery, maps, books and ceramics.³ The account confirms the importance Witsen attached to his mirror. Fortunately, before his friend's fateful visit he had already ordered an engraving to be put into print. Over the next few years, Witsen and Cuper frantically sent copies to their learned contacts. The Siberian mirror became a topic of wide-ranging discussion, from the philosopher Leibniz in Hanover to the Augustinian order in



Fig. 1
MICHIEL VAN MUSSCHER,
Portrait of Nicolaas Witsen Wearing a Japanese Robe [in the background the personification of Amsterdam], 1688.
Brush and pencil drawing, 46.2 x 33.5 cm.
Amsterdam, Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap,
inv. no. KOG-AA-4-03-008.

Rome, from the Chinese community in Batavia to missionaries in Beijing and Pondicherry (fig. 2). Whereas the multitude of Chinese material culture present in the Netherlands around 1700 was almost never discussed in writing – porcelain and even paintings apparently not deemed worthy of scholarly interest – this mirror received a wholly different treatment.⁴ What made it so important in the eyes of Witsen, Cuper and their contemporaries?

Previous studies have noted the mirror's presence in Witsen's collection.⁵ This article will chart the object's global trajectory: from its manufacture in Han dynasty China to its use on the Eurasian steppe and its subsequent reception in the early eighteenth-century European Republic of Letters and beyond, a route that ultimately led back to China. This small object mobilized a cultural network that connected Amsterdam to the rest of the world around 1700.

The mirror arrived in Witsen's hands through a Russian friend. He included an illustration and explanation

of the object's inscription in the 1705 edition of his book *Noord en Oost Tartarye* (fig. 3). After failing to procure a translation in Europe, Witsen had sent it to the Chinese community in Batavia (now Jakarta) by way of Johan van Hoorn (1653-1711), the recently appointed governor of the Dutch East India Company (voc).⁶ This was not such a surprising step. Witsen, himself a director of the trading company, repeatedly ordered Chinese books in Batavia, from where access to Guangzhou was relatively common.⁷ As he told Cuper, 'a learned man among [the Chinese] has translated it':⁸ 'I have sent [an image of] the mirror to Batavia where there are more than ten thousand Chinese. No one understands it, but the governor-general had it brought to China to show to learned Chinese and ask them for an explanation. So it happened: the dish is made more than 1800 years ago and it is surely in ancient Chinese, now mostly unknown.'⁹

Strikingly, while Witsen and Cuper not only valued the object's historical

Fig. 2
Map of the Witsen
mirror's global
trajectory.



LEGEND

- Linzi – site of production of Han dynasty mirrors
- Verkhoturys – burial site of the Witsen mirror
- Amsterdam – Witsen
- Batavia – Van Hoorn
- Guangzhou – anonymous Chinese scholar
- Deventer – Cuper
- Rome/Montefiascone – De Lionne/Hoang
- Cape of Good Hope – Bonjour
- Hanover – Leibniz
- Beijing – Bouvet
- Pondicherry – Visdelou
- Paris – Bignon
- Copenhagen – Sperling
- Berlin – De la Croze



Fig. 3
The Witsen mirror
in N. Witsen, *Noord
en Oost Tartarye*,
Amsterdam 1705,
p. 750.
The Hague, National
Library of the
Netherlands, 61 c 5.

relevance, they also recognized how it embodied geographical interconnectivity. As they appealed to Chinese scholarship to interpret the mirror, they were among the first Europeans to see China as very similar in its appreciation of learning, books and academies: it also had its own, sophisticated tradition of antiquarianism.¹⁰ Witsen himself immediately ordered Chinese books to provide context: 'God willing in the years to come I shall receive more explanations from

the Indies of this Chinese wisdom. They have provisionally sent me twenty or thirty suchlike devices of kings and learned folk printed both in ancient as well as in contemporary Chinese.'¹¹ Cuper later confirmed that Witsen had received from China:

'a book with many images of these mirrors, including that very same one that has been found in Siberia; [he told me] that the most ancient mirrors were marked by interlocking lines, and that

Verklaring van het omschrift, in de ronde kring, der voorgaande Metale Spiegel;
uit de Sinefche taale (ten besten doenlyk was) overgezet tot Batavia; den 22 December 1704:
en by de Sinezen gefchat over de 1800 Jaaren out te zyn.

in de binnenste omtrek by A, ziet men de letteren,
zo alze op de Spiegel vertoent staan, zynde zedanyge letteren
by de Sinezen gebruikelyk geweest voor veele eeuwen.

in de buitenste omtrek by B, zyn de hedendaagsche
Sinefche letteren tot verklaring van het oude Schrift-
hier nevens gestelt.



Onderricht: hoe de Sinezen de Letteren in het omschrift lezen en uitspreken.

Tien-hoe-kie-heat, Tjeeng-pik-tien, See-kuen-see-tien, Soey-ti-ambian, Kocan-sik-tie-ouanghean,
Kiong-phien-tjian, Tien-djid-ti-oy, Geyu-treeng-ti-siong-tien.

Tien-hoe-kie-heat. dat is.

God is zuiver, rein, en onbesmet
in zyn geheel.

Tjeeng-pik-tien. is.

God is zoo schoon, als klaar en
helder water.

See-kuen-see-tien. beduidt.

Iemand door een Koning, of Vorst bemint en
in vele zaaken gebruikt wordende, moet
de zelve aanzien als zyn God: zich
wachtende anders te beledigen, want zulke
doende zoo zal het hem gaan.

Soey-ti-ambian. is.

Als water dat op en afleept.

Kocan-sik-tie-ouanghean. dat is.

Maar wanneer een Koning iemand tot Staat
verheft, en ziet dat zyn gedrag goed en vryl is, zoo
verheft hy hem in zyn hert zoo groot als de gekroone Lee.

Kiong-phien-tjian. dat is.

Men is bang voor zyn, hier als men gemaal doet;
maar als men goed en rygt wandelt, zoo
is het, hert alwoes verheugt.

Tien-djid-ti-oy. is.

En zoo schoon als het schynzel der Zonne.

Geyu-treeng-ti-siong-tien. is.

En, wanneer men als dan by de Menschen
zal aangezien worden als een God of, sterk,
om dat er niemand Gods gelijken is.



Fig. 5
Drawing of a Chinese bronze mirror from Witsen's collection, 1715. Diameter 24.4 cm, pencil and chalk. Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam, Special Collections, UBA Bf 85b.

this was the most ancient script. I have seen this book and found there everything Mr Witsen has said, and I cannot admire enough the rarity and diversity of the characters that one sees there.'¹²

This book may well have been the *Chongxiu Xuanhe Bogutu* (see below) or a similar work. Thus, soon after the mirror's excavation, scholars discussed its antiquity, origin, trade, use and meaning in an attempt at an integrated approach to Western and Chinese scholarship. The following article will embrace a similarly symmetrical analysis. It will first identify the mirror's decoration, inscription, and archaeological context. Then it will address the object's European afterlife and how this extended to Asia.

The only Chinese antiquity published earlier in Europe was the famous Nestorian Stele (illustrated and translated in Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata* of 1667). This documented the Christian presence in Asia and dated from AD 751.¹³ As will become clear, the Witsen mirror was much

older. It provoked a range of historical, geographical and philosophical discussions, centring around two issues. Most essential was the age of Chinese civilization in comparison to the West. A further question concerned language: was Chinese older than Hebrew and the Egyptian hieroglyphs?

Though the mirror is now lost, there remains an extraordinary amount of specific source information, both written and visual. This makes Witsen's cherished item stand out among the many Asian objects in Amsterdam around 1700, and revelatory of new ideas sparked by the increasing relevance of Chinese civilization in Europe.

The Witsen Mirror

Witsen describes the object as 'a steel mirror of over 20 cm in diameter, the reverse of which is shown in the accompanying image; it was sent to me, the reverse being polished smooth just like the Chinese and Japanese mirrors made to the present day from a certain metal alloy: it shows ancient Chinese letters'.¹⁴ The detailed engraving allows for a hypothesis about the mirror's meaning, origin and date. This is a worthwhile exercise as it concerns, to our knowledge, the first documented Chinese bronze mirror in a European collection (figs. 3, 4).¹⁵ Witsen received another, similar object in 1715, of which a drawing, but not a translation, survives in his correspondence (fig. 5).¹⁶

The detailed engraving of the Witsen mirror (fig. 3) shows that the decoration adheres to the earliest and most lasting principles of mirror design: radial symmetry with a rotating viewpoint and division of the mirror surface into quadrants. It urges the user to read the design in a circular fashion, whereby the lower part of the design looks coherent with the upper part upside down.¹⁷ The decoration is divided into concentric circles. A perforated central knob (to which a cord could be fastened) is surrounded by twelve round flat studs in groups of three,

Fig. 4
'Explanation of the inscription in the circle of the aforementioned metal mirror', in N. Witsen, *Noorden Oost Tartarye*, Amsterdam 1705, following p. 750. The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands, 61 c 5.



Fig. 6

Decorated back of Mirror with *Qingbai* Inscription (broken and repaired), found in a Western Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 9) burial in Changsha, Hunan province, China. Diameter 14.4 cm, 289 g.

Photo: © Changsha Municipal Museum.

separated by bird-like figures. This is encircled by a narrow rope groove and a plain raised band, with eight linked arcs enclosing a raised decoration of spirals. Two rope grooves enclose a ring of raised seal script characters. A wide, plain outer border slopes down slightly to the outer rope band. This design has been described in Western

literature as the central arc type, while Chinese scholarship identifies it as the linked arc pattern *lianhu wen* 連弧紋.¹⁸ There are five main types of inscriptions for linked arc mirrors, of which *qingbai* 清白, used for the Witsen mirror, is one (see below). On average the mirrors measure approximately 14 cm in diameter and are dated to

the mid- to late Western Han period (206 BC-AD 8).¹⁹ Witsen's belief that the mirror was at least 1800 years old (i.e. second century BC) is therefore close to the usual date of these linked arc *qingbai* mirrors (fig. 6).

A Religious Interpretation?

'It is remarkable that these letters are more than a thousand years old and the common man cannot read them,' says Witsen. 'This is a device or *symbolium* from one of the ancient Chinese emperors, around the time of the so learned and pious Confucius of whom was said, with more reason than was said once about Plato and Seneca, "O Saint Confucius!"'²⁰ With this statement Witsen connects the mirror to the idea that ancient Chinese history would reveal a parallel with Christianity. Westerners generally portrayed Confucius (? 551 - ? 479 BC) as one of the 'virtuous pagans'.²¹ This was a favourite argument of the Jesuit missionaries, the only Europeans with access to the Chinese imperial court. They held that Confucius (like the Hebrew prophets) had taught proto-Christian teaching before Christ's actual coming.²² This idea legitimized their extensive scholarship on China. It seems to have seeped through in the translation of the Witsen mirror, attributed to the 'learned man' from the Chinese mainland. In *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, the inscription is translated as a monotheistic paean:

天無紀絮

God is pure, immaculate and wholly un tarnished.

清白天

God is as beautiful as pure and clear water.

事君忠天

One who is held dear by a king or ruler and called upon in many circumstances, should look up to that one as his God: keeping themselves from insulting others, for this is how they shall fare in turn.

水之奔明

Like water which flows out and recedes.

玄錫之汪洋

But when a king raises someone to the peerage, and sees that his behaviour is just, then the rejoicing in his heart will be as vast as the entire ocean.

恐世世

One is fearful of their Lord when one does evil, but if one keeps to the straight and narrow path, then the heart is always overjoyed.

天日志美

And as beautiful as the light of the sun.

外承之膏

And then amongst men one shall be regarded as a God on Earth, for there is none [more?] equal to God.²³

Witsen acknowledges the complexities involved in translating ancient Chinese texts, noting that each 'letter' requires a separate interpretation worth an entire sentence. Even the Chinese scholar who received the mirror was unable to interpret all its moral teachings.²⁴ Apparently, the translator sought meaning in an unstructured stack of seal script characters without knowing where the first sentence starts in the circular inscription.²⁵ Yet the way he broke up the sentences actually only contributes to the confusion. Most of the lines in Witsen's translation are rather fanciful, adding elements absent in the present characters.²⁶ However, this is not to say that the poetic licence was complete.²⁷ In fact, some of the sentences contain acceptable translations of individual characters.²⁸ Witsen's publication appears to be the first attempt to translate a Chinese antiquity into one of the European vernaculars.²⁹

Later scholars have identified the inscription on the Witsen mirror as a variant of the so-called *qingbai* 清白 or *jingbai* 精白 type.³⁰ The full *qingbai* inscription has eight phrases of six characters. Based on the rhyme scheme, they can be divided into two stanzas of four phrases:³¹

潔清白而事君

Making without blemish my pure
whiteness to serve you,

怨陰驩之奔明

I resent that impure pleasures may
cover up its brightness;

披玄錫之流澤

Wearing the shining lustre provided
by the polished tin,³²

恐疏遠而日忘

I fear that I will be estranged and day
by day be forgotten.

慎糜美之窮皓

Being cautious that my ravishing
beauty exhausts brilliant whiteness,

外承驩之可說

I put aside the enjoyableness of
pleasing [you].

慕窈窕之靈景

Admiring the divine spectacle of the
fair and graceful [lady]

願永思而毋絕

I wish that there may be everlasting
remembrance and never separation.

Although the Dutch translation was far from correct, it was not deliberately deceptive; as Witsen states, it was 'the best doable'.³³ The most conspicuous difference is the absence of the divine in the modern translation. This may be explained as a misreading, in Witsen's transcription, of the character for the grammatical particle *er* 而 as *tian* 天, heaven or sky (which is thereafter interpreted as God). In the ancient seal script (the script used for this mirror)

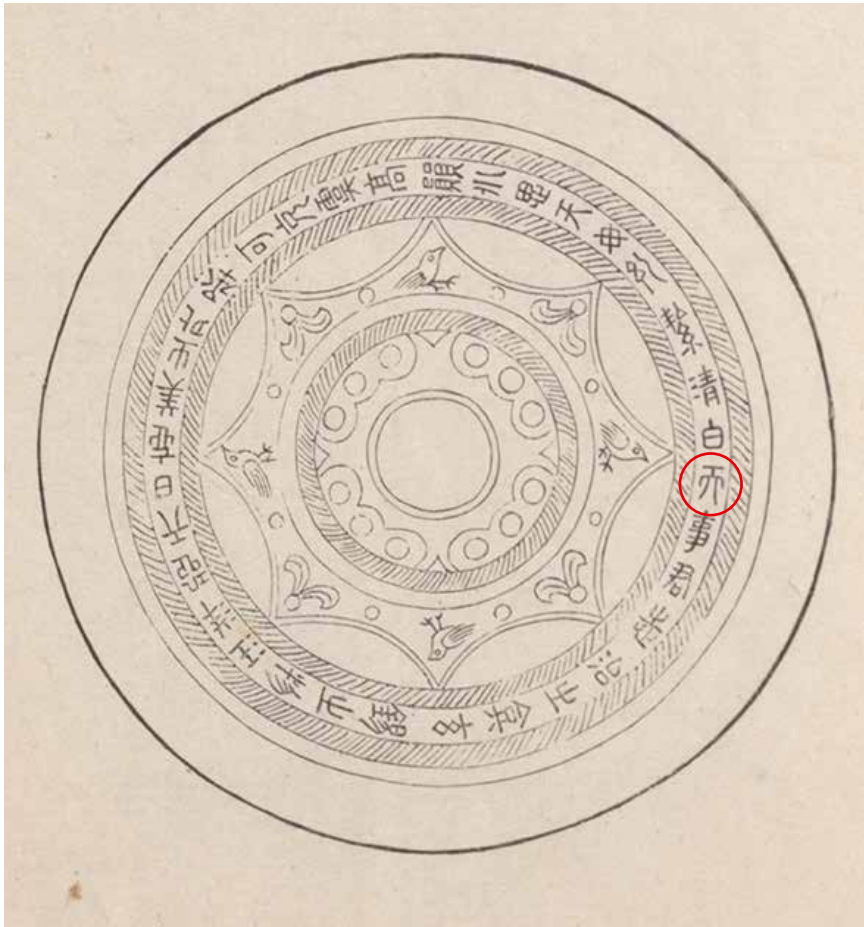


Fig. 7

Illustration of a Han dynasty mirror with *qingbai* inscription in the *Bogutu*. The seal script character for *er* 而 (misread as *tian* 天) is outlined in red. Chongxiu Xuanhe *Bogutu* [lu] 重修宣和博古圖錄 (Antiquities Illustrated of Xuanhe Hall [or Xuanhue Period], Revised), 28.36a. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Research Library, 694 E 5, vol. 5.

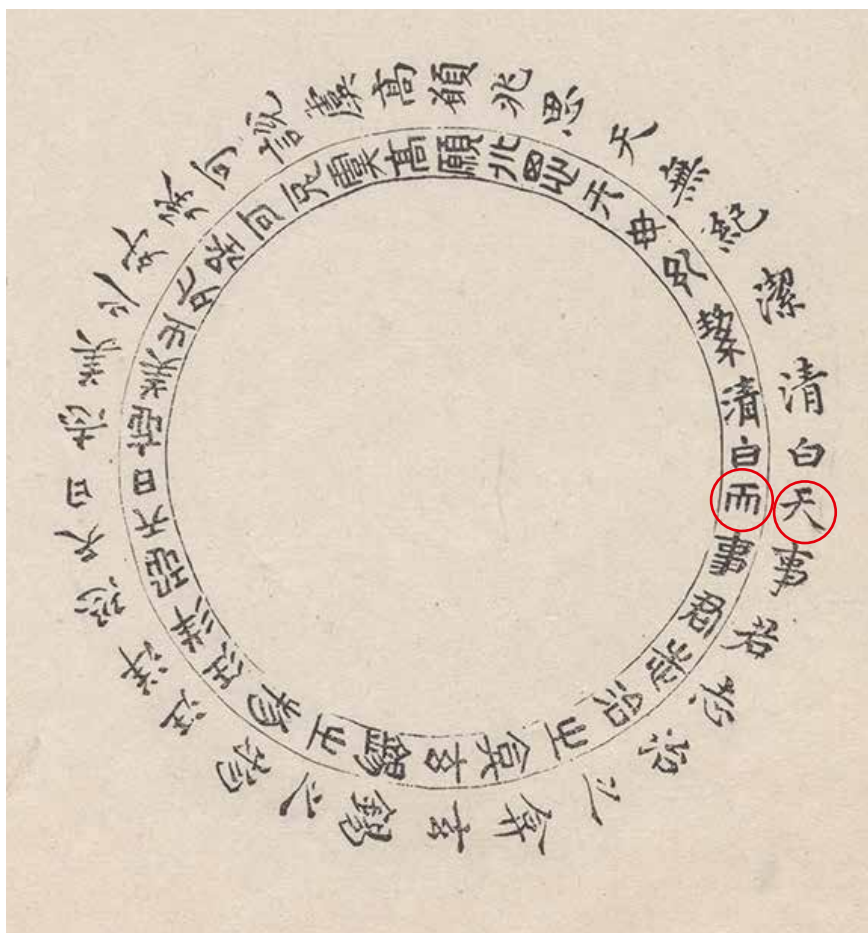
these two characters are very similar.³⁴ Someone unfamiliar with Chinese mirror inscriptions is likely to confound the two unintentionally.

Such confusion must have been the case for the compilers of *Antiquities Illustrated of Xuanhe Hall, Revised* (重修宣和博古圖[錄] *Chongxiu Xuanhe Bogutu* [lu]), or, for short, *Antiquities Illustrated (Bogutu)*.³⁵ This catalogue of the Huizong Emperor's 徽宗 (AD 1100-1126) collection of antiquities was the first to include mirrors with their inscriptions and interpretations.³⁶ According to the scholar-official Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123-1202), the *Bogutu* was 'most imperfect and ridiculous'. Comparison with the actual objects led him to conclude that 'the errors

and nonsense in it are too numerous to mention'.³⁷ Regardless of this verdict, the catalogue set standards that lasted for six centuries. It was the most comprehensive work on bronze antiquities at that time, 'a book no one interested in ancient scripts could overlook'.³⁸ The 'learned man' in China who translated the Witsen mirror probably had access to the standard antiquarian works, including the *Bogutu* (something which the similarity in visual layout of the transcriptions confirms, figs. 4 and 8). No other reading of the *qingbai* inscription is as close to Witsen's.³⁹

Since the *Bogutu* version also reads *tian* 天 (heaven) instead of the grammatical particle *er* 而, Witsen's

Fig. 8
Transcription of the *qingbai* inscription on the same Han dynasty mirror in the *Bogutu* (fig. 7). The characters outlined in red show that the character *er* 而 (inner ring) was initially correctly identified, but then misinterpreted as *tian* 天 (outer ring) by a different scribe. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Research Library, 694 E 5, vol. 5.



translator can hardly be faulted for making the same error (figs. 7, 8). Yet his subsequent rendering of *tian* 天 as God is more questionable. This creative kind of translation was, in fact, central to the Jesuits' strategy for accommodating Chinese beliefs: purportedly, the Chinese had always believed in a Lord of Heaven without realizing that this was the Christian God. This strategy aimed, ultimately, at influencing Chinese civilization from within.⁴⁰ When Witsen related his mirror to 'Saint Confucius', he seemed to have embraced the essence of that approach. A 'learned Chinese' was credited with the translation. It is possible, however, that this was a Catholic convert or that the Jesuits played an indirect role.⁴¹ In fact, information about China was often distorted

through a Jesuit lens. Witsen consulted the writings of the Flemish missionary Philippe Couplet (1623-1693) to conclude that his mirror 'was without doubt ancient, and that there was written a statement of a king, a great philosopher, or a scholarly man in their manner'.⁴² Couplet had travelled with a native Chinese assistant from Beijing to Amsterdam to publish an edition of Confucius's writings (fig. 9). In 1684 he gave Witsen, his 'good friend', a Chinese atlas and showed him an ancient Latin Bible found in East Asia, to underscore the Christian roots there (figs. 10, 11). Unsurprisingly, Witsen's own *Noord en Oost Tartarye* at times displays the Jesuit influence.⁴³

The Mirror's Original Meaning

With the mirror's religious associations being later inventions, what was its original meaning? The *qingbai* text has been interpreted as a reference to marital love, expressing an idea of loyalty and missing.⁴⁴ Mutual remembrance was one of the earliest and most common inscription motifs on bronze mirrors, often found in tombs. Mirrors were perhaps common farewell tokens – death being just one occasion of departure alongside taking up office or warfare. Witsen's specimen may have exemplified mental constancy even when separation was inevitable.⁴⁵

Numerous variations of the *qingbai* inscription have been recorded, varying in length and in the characters used.⁴⁶ Many non-standard characters are found in mirror inscriptions, including homophones and characters with missing strokes or even written backward. The characters were inscribed in two-part moulds of ceramic or stone before the mirror was cast. For reasons of space, signs were sometimes omitted or added.⁴⁷ Such a flexible approach may suggest that few words were enough to suggest the whole because the text was well known.⁴⁸ It could also indicate that the text itself was unimportant and that inscriptions served chiefly as

Fig. 9
Engraving in Philippe Couplet, *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, Paris 1687. The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands, 486 A 5.



Pater Philippus Couplet jesuit.
 Wiltloek te vngkomende uit Sina dat
 hij vinderde in eenen grotte omtrent
 een tot Romein verflag te Soen, van die
 tusschen des grottedomt aldaer zocht
 mij dit sijnde kaart bodde vdi Soen
 dat hij gultoot, den ander galdsolkijn
 kaart bodden mede van Sina, uit het
 viltloek Martini's Martini sijnd Atlas
 zocht gemaakt gelijk als mede
 dat als de zijde gaudige aetlekinge
 op de kaarten van Martini, seldt viltloek
 te Sien, hij veldde dat hij dat zocht
 kaart bodden vdi uit Martini de sijn?
 had nageliezen al voor die Soedde
 in den vdi gemaekt g. Sullest
 alle de Beschrijvinge so men in den Atlas
 over Sina leest van voort tot voort
 gemaekten in het sijnstede vdi H. S.
 deze kaart ten dach en teghe sijnst
 e. vdi dat mij viltloek en vdi
 vilmakken vdi. N. Witsen / 1684

Fig. 10

Witsen's handwritten note in the *Guang yutu* 廣輿圖 (Enlarged Terrestrial Atlas) explaining that he had received this Chinese atlas from Father Philippe Couplet, signed 1684.
 Photo: © The Hague, Museum Meermanno | House of the Book, inv. no. 115 B 001, ep_003v.

decorative modules.⁴⁹ In any case, it often seems irrelevant to search for unambiguous meanings in these inscriptions.

Ever since the *Boqutu*, however, Chinese connoisseurs have regarded inscribed mirrors as a specialized sub-field of antiquarianism. They categorized them separately from other bronzes (ritual vessels in particular). This may reflect an aesthetic of intertextuality, like the method of classifying mirrors according to the inscription's first characters (such as *qingbai*).⁵⁰ Eventually, the connoisseurship exemplified in the *Boqutu* was paralleled by the evaluation of the mirror by Witsen and his contemporaries, for which they even ordered antiquarian literature in Chinese. As will become clear below, the European scholars' interest was sparked by the fact that this antiquity could be seen and

touched. However, as most of them were philologists, their main effort went into decoding the inscription.

A Han Dynasty Origin

Bronze mirrors can be dated most securely when their archaeological context remains. The qualities of the alloy, the casting and other metallurgical processes provide other indications.⁵¹ Most of this information is lacking for the Witsen mirror. An attempt to date it is further confounded by the fact that Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) mirrors were often copied in medieval China, mostly in the Tang (AD 618-907) and Song (AD 960-1279) periods. Copies were not necessarily intended to trick consumers but were sometimes archaizing recreations made with sincere reverence for the past.⁵² Craftsmen reused old moulds or made new ones by taking

direct impressions of ancient mirrors.⁵³ The claim that the Witsen mirror is a twelfth- to fourteenth-century copy of a Han original of the second century AD is, however, unconvincing.⁵⁴

Certain features distinguish later works from authentic Han specimens. The central knob of the later versions is usually smaller and flat instead of convex. The clear contours of original Han inscriptions make way for blurred characters. Whereas Han mirrors were

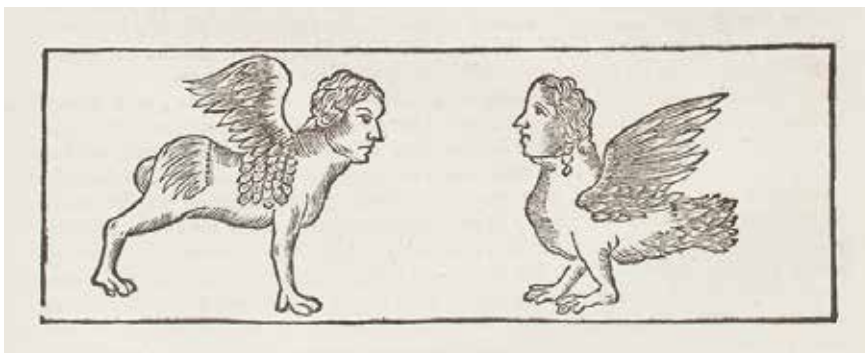
of 'white bronze', which was fragile and brittle, Tang and Song dynasty brass copies contained a large proportion of zinc, prone to rust.⁵⁵ A final mark of authenticity in linked arc mirrors is the border position relative to the surface, particularly the steepness of the slope from border to inner edge.⁵⁶ The shading on Witsen's illustration suggests a sizeable convex central knob. The clearly contoured characters likewise refer to a genuine

Fig. 11
'General Map [of China]', *Yudi zongtu* 輿地總圖 in Witsen's Chinese atlas, the *Guang yutu* 廣輿圖 (Enlarged Terrestrial Atlas).

Photo: © The Hague, Museum Meermanno | House of the Book, inv. no. 115 B 001_002r_001v.



Fig. 12
 'Tartar Sphynxes'
 found with the
 Witsen Mirror,
 in *Noord en Oost
 Tartarye*, Amsterdam
 1705, p. 749.
 The Hague, National
 Library of the
 Netherlands, 61 c 5.



Han object. Witsen's mention of a 'steel' mirror, its fragility and rustless appearance may all indicate that it was cast of white bronze during the Han dynasty.⁵⁷ It is difficult to ascertain the steepness of the slope between the border and the inner edge on the basis of the image. Modern excavations, however, have yielded many *qingbai* mirrors that are practically identical to the Witsen mirror and have been dated to the Western Han period (see fig. 6).⁵⁸ We therefore argue that the mirror should be dated in the first century BC–first century AD.

There is very little information known about the locations of bronze mirror manufacture within this time-frame. Archaeologists only recently unearthed the earliest known mirror-casting workshop, in Linzi (a district of the modern city of Zibo in Shandong). It was active from at least the third century BC to the Western Han dynasty, and has yielded mirror moulds with linked arc motifs (although not the *qingbai* inscription).⁵⁹ There must have been many more workshops elsewhere that have not been discovered. In the absence of other evidence, Linzi is currently the only plausible starting point in the Witsen mirror's global trajectory (see fig. 2).

Buried and Unearthed in Siberia

The caption to Witsen's illustration notes that his mirror came from 'a certain grave near Verkhoturye' in the

middle Ural mountains (modern-day Russia). It arrived in Amsterdam with a small golden sculpture of a four-legged winged animal with a human head.

Noord en Oost Tartarye illustrates this in a woodcut print, reporting that both objects came from 'an ancient burial place where one has found human bones alongside, under a *kurgan* or tumulus' (fig. 12).⁶⁰ Additional 'Tartar' jewellery is depicted in even more detail. These must have been the objects 'found in the temples and graves of the Chinese Tartars and others', mentioned in the 1728 inventory of Witsen's collection (fig. 13).⁶¹

Reportedly, the Siberian curiosities were discovered at a latitude of 60° north.⁶² A large map in Witsen's book on 'Tartary', or the lands of the nomadic peoples, specifies this location (figs. 14, 15).⁶³ Here modern archaeologists have confirmed burials with metal artefacts belonging to different Eurasian cultures. At a crossroads of transcontinental migration, the area was home to tribes without a written record. The Sarmatians, who replaced an earlier Scythian group, are among the groups associated with the period from the second century BC to the fourth century AD, when Witsen's mirror was made.⁶⁴ His other 'Tartar' objects have been identified as Sarmatian and Scythian gold, some as old as the seventh century BC (see fig. 13).⁶⁵ Unfortunately, it is not possible to say whether these items were buried

together, and when. Modern excavations south-west of the area Witsen described have revealed many Sarmatian burials including a rich necropolis at Lebedevka dated to the second to third centuries AD. These graves, mostly of one or two individuals, contain ob-

jects imported from west and east such as amphorae, fibulae and even a Western Han dynasty mirror.⁶⁶ It is possible that Witsen's mirror was deposited around the same period – remaining buried for 1500 years before it was found and sent to Amsterdam.



Fig. 13
 'Golden jewels
 unearthed in the
 ancient Tartar graves
 in Siberia', *Noord
 en Oost Tartarye*,
 Amsterdam 1705
 (illustration added
 in 1785), following
 p. 748.
 Photo: © The Hague,
 Museum Meermanno
 | House of the Book,
 inv. no. 107 A 002.

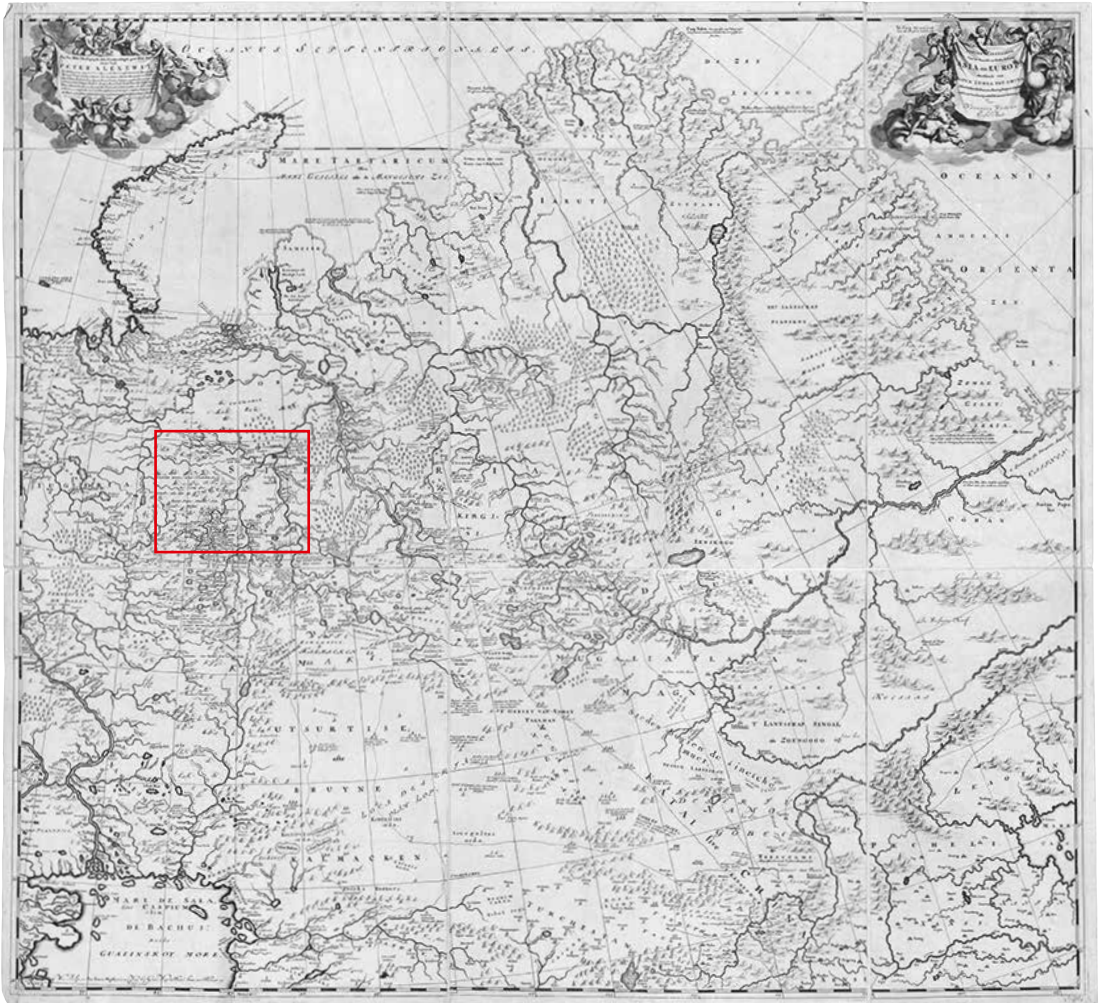


Fig. 14
NICOLAAS WITSEN,
*Map of North and
East Tartary*,
Amsterdam 1687.
The area where the
mirror was buried
is outlined in red.
Photo: © Isaac Massa
Foundation
Amsterdam –
St Petersburg,
State Library.

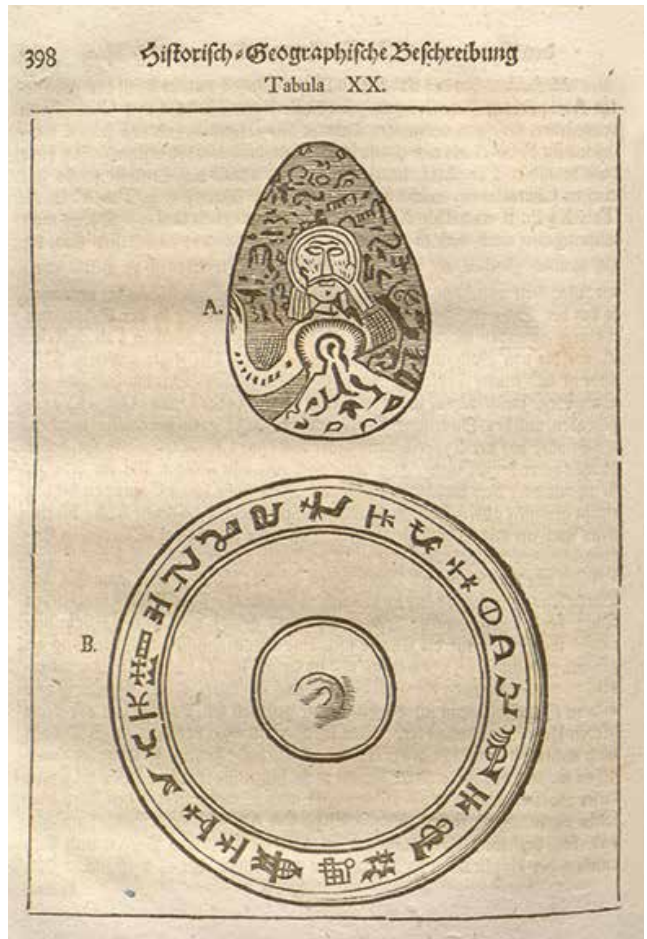
Fig. 15
Detail of fig. 14
showing Verkhoturje,
Tobolsk and the
60°N parallel (ten
degrees higher than
on modern maps)
outlined in red.
Photo: © Isaac Massa
Foundation
Amsterdam –
St Petersburg,
State Library.



60°N →

Chinese mirrors in Siberian tombs were far from unique. They have been found throughout the Eurasian steppe, where they arrived by way of interactions along the different Silk Routes that began around the second century BC.⁶⁷ Conversely, Siberian artefacts have been found inside ancient Chinese dynastic borders, probably the result of technological exchange, marriage alliances and other ethnic intermingling.⁶⁸ On the battlegrounds of the different Eurasian tribes it is not always clear who was putting on pressure from the East. Perhaps the mirror was originally given to a Han Chinese when he departed for the so-called Han-Xiongnu wars (first century BC – first century AD). From there it may have travelled westward along the northern branch of the Silk Route, as a commodity or gift.⁶⁹ Different ancient cultures of the steppe and the Great Chinese Plain allotted mirrors apotropaic properties, before and after death. They were often placed on the deceased's breast with the reflecting side upward. All we can say about the archaeological context of the Witsen mirror is that it was probably deposited in a second-century grave of one of the nomadic tribes, to protect the dead and as a farewell token.

What is documented is how Witsen acquired his finds. Apparently, the locals who opened the graves were interested solely in gold and silver. It was only because he offered more than the metal value that Witsen was able to prevent them from melting the objects.⁷⁰ His Dutch contact in Russia, Andreas Winus (1641-1717), had arranged for a sudden stream of burial goods on the order of Tsar Peter the Great (1672-1725).⁷¹ In Verkhoturye, Winus had observed saltpetre vapour coming from a mound. Farmers who opened it – saltpetre was a valuable ingredient of gunpowder – found not only the mirror but also idols, jewellery and other silver artefacts. Remains of the corpse were nearby, wrapped in a shroud.⁷²



Witsen's learned contacts discussed these details. As we shall see, they speculated about the mirror's origin in regard to their traditional historical framework, which was centred on the biblical Middle East. Their attempts to interpret this new piece of the scholarly puzzle proved wide-ranging. This was in large measure due to the quality of the engraving (fig. 3). In 1730 a similar mirror, found in the same area as Witsen's, was included in Philip von Strahlenberg's (1676-1747) *Das Nord- und Östliche Theil von Europa und Asia*. The author, who had lived in Siberia for a decade, noted that 'many hundreds' of these mirrors were found in graves nearby. Von Strahlenberg's engraving, however, was of inferior

Fig. 16
Metal mirror found near Irbit (Siberia), from Philip von Strahlenberg, *Das Nord- und Östliche Theil von Europa und Asia*, Stockholm 1730, p. 398. Regensburg, Staatliche Bibliothek.

quality, no basis to even attempt a translation, and it does not seem to have impressed European scholars (fig. 16).⁷³

The Witsen Mirror in the Republic of Letters

The first to recognize the Witsen mirror's importance was Gijsbert Cuper. One of the foremost antiquarians in the Low Countries, he had made his fame studying Egyptian religion. In one of his portraits he features with a statue of the deity Harpocrates, to which he devoted two books (fig. 17).⁷⁴ His collection included a few Chinese votive statues that may have been furnished by Witsen.⁷⁵ Cuper was Witsen's most faithful correspondent, and their communication also involved objects such as tea, porcelain and images:⁷⁶ detailed pen drawings of Indian Buddhas and other bronze idols survive.⁷⁷ In 1704 Witsen sent his friend 'two copies of the little dish that has been found in Siberia deep under ground, I think [the writing] is ancient Chinese and have already sent it to Batavia for a translation'.⁷⁸ Almost a year later the Dutch version and the engravings followed.⁷⁹

These inspired Cuper to write a four-folio epistle focusing on the mirror's purported connection to Confucius. To him, the object expressed Confucian humility before God, a virtue without parallel in Western philosophy. 'If I ponder the explanation that was sent you, I admit that Confucius was a great man, who has recognized only one God': although Socrates and Confucius had been contemporaries, the latter 'has been held in great esteem to the present day'. In fact, Cuper had read with admiration a French translation of Confucius's ethics, so 'grounded on the nature and qualities of God and man'.⁸⁰ Cuper now hoped that a more detailed interpretation of the mirror would contribute to the ongoing Chinese Rites debate. This controversy concerned the 'Saint Confucius' for-

mula and the related search for parallels between Catholic and Chinese traditions (the Rites controversy ended with the Papal condemnation of these parallels).⁸¹

To spread the word, Cuper offered to mobilize his network: 'With your assent I shall forward the explanation of the mirror to Rome and this will certainly add to your fame there, if any further increase is indeed possible, as scholars will see to what trouble you will go to understand what is hidden from all.'⁸² But Witsen apparently changed his mind, urging his friend to keep the translation secret for a while and focus on the engraving. This was on the one hand to avoid other 'scholars in Germany, London and Paris immediately publishing this [translation] in their journals under their name', before the second edition of *Noord en Oost Tartarye* appeared. On the other hand it would be a test of his contacts' learning, aimed at provoking further

Fig. 17
JAN DE BAEN,
Portrait of Gijsbert Cuper [Cuper is dressed in a 'japone rok' (Japanese robe); the statue on the right is Harpocrates], c. 1680.
Oil on canvas,
133 x 112 cm.
Deventer,
Gemeentecollectie,
h2010-0900.
Photo: rkd,
The Hague.



interpretations 'so that these wise gentlemen speculate upon it and explicate it according to their knowledge'.⁸³ This strategy worked. Cuper apparently received a bundle of the engravings of the mirror's reverse: when his contacts, in turn, forwarded the engraving to others, additional questions of origin, function and meaning were addressed.⁸⁴

For these scholars, who saw philology as their central occupation, the Chinese inscription was the main point of contention – though most of them had no knowledge of the language. Yet the work's foremost attraction lay in the increasing relevance of material objects as scientific proof around 1700: the ideals of *Realphilologie* (philology of things) and 'ocular inspection' to complement literacy.⁸⁵ Cuper always emphasized to his correspondents that he had touched the mirror with his own hands and seen it with his own eyes, and deliberately sent out the engraving without the translation. Throughout the decade leading to his death in 1716, he kept bringing up the image to his learned contacts.

Although the mirror broke when Cuper came to inspect it once again, the engraving ensured its afterlife throughout a Europe-wide network that eventually reached back to East Asia. Tracing this route not only completes the object's cultural biography but also illuminates the agency of material culture, even after the disappearance of the physical object itself, to mobilize wide-ranging scholarship and in some cases even affect a world view. European scholars had been excited about Chinese antiquity ever since 1650, when Witsen's friend Isaac Vossius (1618-1689) had, on the basis of Chinese scholarship, doubted the validity of the Bible as a historical source. The Hebrew text could not accommodate a continuous civilization going back to 2900 BC (the Universal Flood having taken place in 2349 BC).⁸⁶ Now this mirror, 'one of the greatest antiquities

that we have here from those lands', seemed to offer the first factual, hands-on proof of the Middle Kingdom's origins – set to confirm or explode the Eurocentric account of world history.⁸⁷

The multi-faceted discussions about Witsen's mirror therefore revolve around two main questions. First, how did the age of Chinese culture compare to the Western classical tradition, in relation to other supposedly 'primeval' civilizations such as Judaism? Furthermore, for the European philologists this 'priority problem' was intricately tied to questions of language. If Chinese was as old as the European languages or even older, how was it related to the primitive language, spoken by Adam before the Babylonian Confusion? As will become clear, the two themes of *ancient chronology* and *universal language* came together in the comparison of China to Egypt.

The Priority Problem: Chinese and European Chronologies

According to Guillaume Bonjour

'I myself have held it in my hands in Amsterdam ... and seen with my own eyes ... a plate inscribed with ancient Chinese letters, of an unknown or mixed metal ... When you or others desire the plate itself, I will put serious work into acquiring its image and description.' These are Cuper's words to Guillaume Bonjour (1670-1714) in Rome.⁸⁸ The mirror features in no fewer than twelve letters to this young Augustinian friar, along with references to practical matters, such as auctions of antiquities in Amsterdam, and theoretical ones regarding chronology. After having asked 'the mayor of Amsterdam if he wanted to send me the dish, found in a grave in Siberia, that was depicted and described', Cuper expressed the 'hope that the Roman Oedipuses will clarify these mysteries for us'.⁸⁹

This appeal was inspired by Bonjour's reputation as a scholar of oriental languages, albeit those of the Middle

East. At a young age, he had made his name with a study of the Coptic language. Coptic was deemed essential for understanding the origins of civilization as it was recognized (correctly) as the last language in which the Egyptian hieroglyphs were written. It seemed to be a link between ancient and more recent Middle Eastern history. This must have been on Cuper's mind when he proposed consulting a colleague at the University of Franeker who worked on the shared origins of Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and Syriac.⁹⁰ For Bonjour, linguistic pedigrees were a means of defending the biblical chronology against the doubts of someone like Vossius, and this is where Chinese drew his interest.

The engraving of the mirror arrived safely in Rome, annotated with a Latin translation of the Dutch caption (now in the Biblioteca Angelica). Bonjour replied to Cuper that he had discussed the object with Bishop Artus de Lionne (1655-1737), a missionary in Guangzhou and Fujian in China. The bishop, who had returned to Rome in 1702, received the engraving of the Witsen mirror.⁹¹ He duly confirmed that 'Chinese matrons are wont to use similar mirrors', but could not provide a translation, pointing out that modern characters diverge from ancient ones:

There are four kinds of Chinese characters, one modern and commonly used, three primordial and ancient and already discontinued from use in daily writing for a long time: that the characters inscribed on the disk or mirror are the ancient and discontinued ones: but some of them are similar to the modern ones, and of those four, one means *king*, another *heaven*, another *sun*, another *emperor*: but that he could not interpret the writing because he didn't know the others.⁹²

Cuper now sent back the translation furnished by Witsen.⁹³ He asked for further reactions from Roman scholars

to this 'symbol of one of the most ancient Chinese emperors, from around the time of Confucius, a very learned and pious man'.⁹⁴ In early 1706, Bonjour wrote from the monastery of Montefiascone, where he had discussed the object with De Lionne and 'two Chinese' travelling in his company on their way to France.⁹⁵ One of these was the adventurous Arcade Hoang (Huang Jialüe 黃嘉略, c. 1680-1716), born in Xinghua in Fujian, who had accompanied the bishop in Rome. It must have been Hoang who pointed out that translating the character *tian* 天 (heaven) as 'God' was so controversial. Bonjour writes:

'This monument [the Witsen mirror] often mentions God, which truly surprises me. For the Chinese have no word to designate God simply and uncontroversially. But they either use the composite name *Shangdi* which means the Supreme Emperor, or they adhere to the word *Tian*, for the visible Heaven, which they venerate at present. Since Artus de Lionne and his two Chinese observed that the monument praises the character that designates Heaven, I think we can interpret Heaven to mean God.'⁹⁶

Hoang was apparently unable to correct Witsen's comparison of God with water, which is not obvious in the original text.⁹⁷ It inspired Bonjour to a semantic digression on how the heavens, water and the Divinity are similar in their clearness and beauty. He refers to a variety of Latin and Greek authors and also Confucius, in the Jesuits' translation:

'These words merit attention: "God is as beautiful as clear and liquid water". The Hebrews call the Heavens *Shamaim*, or *Sham-maim*, which means "this water". As the Church Fathers testify, the Holy Scriptures celebrate everywhere heavenly waters and so do even the pagans, such as Nonnus of Panopolis in

the sixth book of the *Dionysiaca* ... Therefore the God of the Chinese in this Chinese inscription is, to my mind, *Tian*, “as beautiful as clear and liquid water”, namely the visible Heaven ... or the beauty that the Chinese inscription compares with the clarity and liquidity of water. I am completely convinced that the Chinese, in the past and now, attributed divinity to the visible Heaven. In describing the beauty of their God as the beauty of water, they appear similar to those pagans who attributed divinity to water. Propertius called the waters divine ... Virgil spoke of holy springs.⁹⁸

What follows is a slew of references to Anastasius the Sinaite, Saint Augustine, Carolus Magnus, Cuper’s own book *Harpocrates* and finally an appeal to freedom of interpretation: “There’ll be no lack of lovers of allegories, tropes and figures who will translate the Chinese inscription in another manner.”⁹⁹ Cuper’s reply, unsurprisingly, focuses on Egypt: a digression on the name of Osiris and no fewer than nine types of the deity Harpocrates ‘whose name’, the author says, ‘I so much enjoy explaining’.¹⁰⁰ This exchange makes extensively clear how, for these authors, an antiquarian frame explains their interest in China. Their collaboration on ancient oriental languages – ranging from Coptic, Syriac, ‘Punic’ and ‘Egyptian’, to Chinese – aimed at the antiquarian completeness that was necessary to establish the accurate chronology of the world.

To Bonjour, who devoted his life’s work to chronology, the question of how to reconcile a Chinese antiquity with the biblical history seems to have inspired a rigorous change in his ambitions. That same year he suddenly left the Augustinians in Rome to join the Chinese mission.¹⁰¹ This was, in the words of his only biographer, a ‘perplexing’ decision. Not long before, Bonjour’s scholarly acclaim had resulted in his honorific membership of the Papal Commission for the Reform of

the Calendar. His star was rising and ‘nothing in ... Bonjour’s studies until 1707 could have predicted his decision to become a missionary-scientist’; moreover, ‘nothing indicates that religion was particularly involved’.¹⁰² In fact, whereas Bonjour’s earlier work had focused on the Middle East, his only demonstration of interest in East Asia was his correspondence about the Witsen mirror.¹⁰³ It therefore seems likely that the arrival of this ‘monument’ of Chinese antiquity was at least a factor in this fateful shift.

It was one of the ironies of history that Bonjour’s credits in Catholic chronology determined his success in Beijing, where he was set to work on the imperial calendars. These had to confirm the legitimacy of the rule of the Kangxi Emperor 康熙 (1661-1722). As the Son of Heaven, the emperor should be able to demonstrate how his commands aligned strictly with the celestial bodies. Bonjour was sent on a number of scientific journeys to the corners of the empire (Mongolia, Xinjiang and the Burmese border). Among the missionaries in China, he held a special position indeed as the only non-Jesuit to become so deeply involved in scientific research. He was also one of the very few missionaries who were widely known for their scholarship before they left Europe.

The trajectory of Bonjour’s departure confirms the importance of the mirror. On his way to an English ship bound for China, he continued to correspond about the object and even visited Witsen in Amsterdam. On 6 December 1707 he wrote to Cuper from Düsseldorf, ‘I should not hide further from you that I have departed from the city of Rome to China ... Soon I will proceed to Amsterdam ... If only I could meet you in Deventer.’¹⁰⁴ Cuper was only too willing as so many of his questions had still remained unanswered, regarding the antiquity of the Chinese language in particular:

'I ask you urgently to organize your business so that you can come to me from Amsterdam ... The Chinese language comes to my mind: you know that it consists in few sounds, most monosyllabic; I remember furthermore reading somewhere that it has almost not changed in many centuries ... I therefore dare to ask you to inquire and finally teach me, by coming here or by writing, whether the literate people and the common Chinese use a different language, and how much labour and time one has to spend on the characters. The mirror, of which I sent you the engraving earlier, seems to dissuade me, because the Chinese in Batavia themselves have confessed that it contains various words they don't know.'¹⁰⁵

Bonjour's visit to Amsterdam was one of those moments when Catholic missionaries and VOC officials set aside religious differences when sharing knowledge about East Asia.¹⁰⁶ 'After speaking briefly to him,' Witsen realized 'that he is very versed in oriental languages and Chinese matters ... The missionaries of the Holy See are in our lands blackened in coal; nevertheless, out of love for such a remarkable man, earned solely by learning ... I gave him letters of recommendation for the governors of Batavia and the Cape of Good Hope.'¹⁰⁷ Upon arriving at the Cape, on 13 September 1708, Bonjour wrote a hasty note to Cuper. He hoped to be able to answer his questions from Hugli in Bengal where he expected to stay for some time: 'I haven't forgotten the information that you would like to have about China, if I am lucky enough to arrive there.'¹⁰⁸

It seems plausible that Bonjour's shift from the Middle East, his core business until 1707, to East Asia was sparked by his confrontation with the Witsen mirror: a visible and tactile proof of the Chinese antiquity that threatened to upset the accepted

Christian chronology he was taking such pains to defend. The aftermath of the correspondence confirms how a deeply felt concern with chronology inspired his choice. In 1708 Cuper lamented to the Augustinian friars in Rome that his friend had left for China, still amazed at 'how such a unique and sophisticated knowledge of oriental languages ... could fall unto a single man, and a young one at that ... he taught with many examples that Sacred History agrees with the profane one'.¹⁰⁹ Alluding to the letter from the Cape, he remained certain that Bonjour would establish how Chinese antiquities support the Hebrew Bible's veracity: 'I am certain that he will explain to us ... the magnitude and significance of the antiquities of the Chinese, and elaborate from there on the proofs in his dissertations that so admirably confirm the Hebrew chronology.'¹¹⁰

On his journey, never to return to Europe, Bonjour was thus bothered by the casuistry of his friend, who continued to send letters by way of his VOC contacts.¹¹¹ But in 1714 Cuper wrote of his fear 'that something bad has happened to Bonjour in China, because I receive no letters from him': he had read in an English newspaper that the emperor had killed all missionaries and taken their possessions.¹¹² In the year of Bonjour's death, Cuper remained adamant that, were his friend ever to have returned, he would have solved the priority problem between Europe and China.¹¹³

Leibniz, Bouvet, Visdelou and Bignon on the Nature of the Chinese Language

For members of the Republic of Letters, the key to China's antiquities lay in its script. Witsen and Cuper both corresponded with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) in Hanover, who was Europe's greatest Sinophile and had great expectations of a mutually beneficial 'commerce of light' between

East and West.¹¹⁴ The exchange with Witsen from early 1704 on gives a glimpse of the philosopher's interest in the Chinese characters. He thought they were ancient logical symbols that expressed the structure of reality much more clearly than European languages did.¹¹⁵ Witsen, typically, answered that due to lack of time he had forwarded the letter to an Amsterdam mathematician 'qui entend ces matieres'.¹¹⁶ Yet this central concern explains Leibniz's interest in the Witsen mirror and its translation: ideas on the essence of language and thought itself were at stake.

Leibniz first asked Cuper for an image. The latter confirmed that he had 'touched with his hands and seen with his eyes' the 'metal mirror inscribed in Chinese, as far as I can judge about such an obscure matter'.¹¹⁷ Leibniz then forwarded the engravings to the Royal Mathematicians, the elite Jesuit scientists sent by Louis XIV to China.¹¹⁸ First to receive the mirror was Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730) in Beijing, who had become personal tutor to the Kangxi Emperor. His biography of the emperor had become a European best seller. For Leibniz, however, Bouvet's main discovery was the hexagrams of the *Yijing* 易经 (*Book of Changes*) that he interpreted as a notation system binary logic (fig. 18). The Witsen mirror seemed to hold a similar secret.¹¹⁹

Leibniz also sent the engraving to Bouvet's colleague Claude de Visdelou (1656-1737) in Guangzhou.¹²⁰ The latter replied after nine years, having meanwhile been expelled by his Jesuit superiors (because he had criticized their rapprochement with the Chinese). It was not until he arrived in Pondicherry in South-Eastern India that he had occasion to analyse the Witsen mirror.¹²¹ Interestingly, he related the object to Northern Vietnam, a new French mission area. 'The marks are without doubt Chinese, of the kind that is used for reliefs. I recognize some; quite a few are misplaced or





unknown to me. In this fashion the Tonkinese adapt most characters to their needs,' he wrote to Leibniz.¹²²

Leibniz, Bouvet and Cuper discussed the Chinese script more intensively with the Abbé Jean-Paul Bignon (1662-1743) in Paris.¹²³ As Royal Librarian, the abbot ordered thousands of Chinese volumes from the Jesuits. He was also confronted with the Witsen mirror. The origin of his expertise became clear when Cuper inquired about 'votre Chinois' who was, 'with another able person, working on a Chinese Grammar'.¹²⁴ This must have been the aforementioned Arcade Hoang who had exchanged Rome for Paris. He became a member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres and ultimately married a Frenchwoman, never to return to China.¹²⁵ His collaboration with Bignon ensured that the latter was credited with making Sinology possible in the European Republic of Letters, even though he himself had no understanding of the language.¹²⁶ It is therefore striking that Bignon developed (in contrast to Leibniz and Bouvet) a negative view of Chinese civilization. In his discussion about the Witsen mirror, he did not support the greater antiquity of China and the presumed merits of its language.

Fig. 18

The diagram of the *Yijing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*) hexagrams that Joachim Bouvet sent to Leibniz in 1701. The Arabic numerals were added by Leibniz. Hanover, Leibniz Archive, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek – Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek.

Cuper begins by suggesting to Bignon (1710) that the Tartars have subjected the Chinese and enlisted them in their armies: 'You have seen in the case of the Chinese Mirror that the [Chinese] have been in this area, and it is certain that the Khans of Tartary have repeatedly become masters of the northern part of China.'¹²⁷ On the basis of the Witsen mirror, he concludes that an ancient inscription (from Sri Lanka) is actually Chinese, but of the kind of ancient characters that are no longer recognized.¹²⁸ Finally, he proceeds to the thesis that Chinese characters were more ancient than Egyptian hieroglyphs: Chinese was the Adamic language, in which God had spoken to the first man when he gave names to all things.¹²⁹

Bignon, however, is doubtful (he is sure 'Chaldaic', or Aramaic, is older than Chinese) even though he is aware that the Chinese have a history of 'more than forty thousand years since the foundation of their monarchy' (was this just a numerical slight?). He criticizes a civilization that 'during all those years has made so few discoveries in the arts and sciences'. Yet it is language that is Bignon's main point of interest:

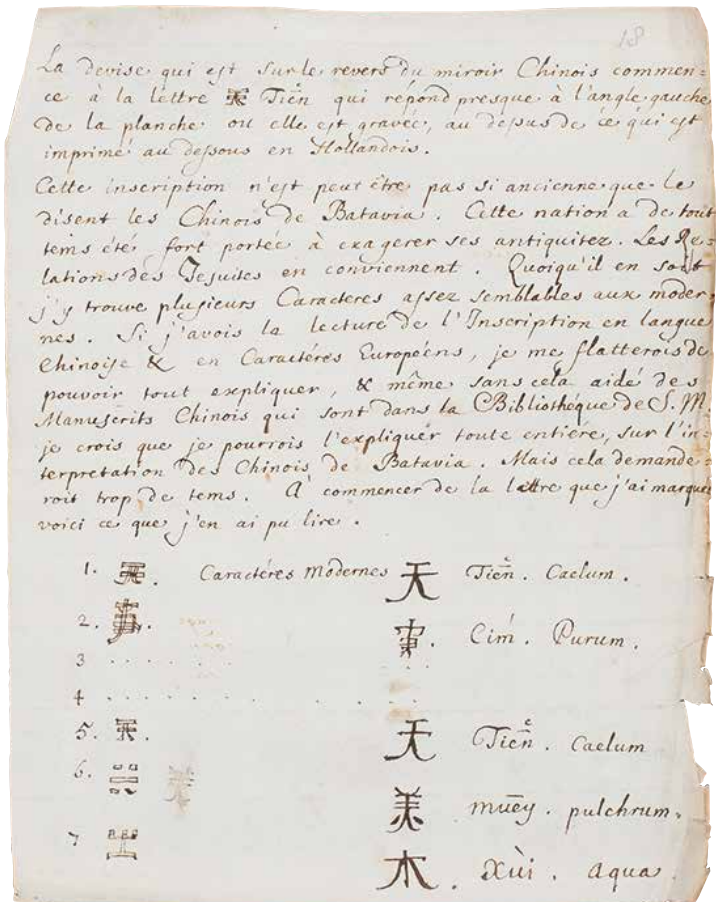
'their language is an assemblage of words without order or connectives ... I think it is filled with difficulties, and that is also the sentiment of our Chinese [Hoang] ... I would not dare to defend the assumption that this nation has ever had letters that are no longer known today. The hypothesis is really not to my liking. There has never been a people more attached to their habits than the Chinese, and in the history of this mighty realm one sees nothing that has been innovated, neither in the characters nor in the language'.¹³⁰

Bignon has the final word, highlighting his disbelief that the great number of monosyllabic words is proof of truly primordial status. The Chinese, lazy

as they may be due to the 'chaleurs du climat qu'ils habitent', demonstrate 'prompt understanding: they grasp things with half a word', which explains the monosyllabic character of their speech.¹³¹ In the debate on the nature of the Chinese language, the Witsen mirror could apparently support different arguments: from Leibniz's Utopian stance to Bignon's pragmatic scepticism.

Sperling and De la Croze Compare China to Egypt

In 1705 Otto Sperling the Younger (1634-1715), a legal scholar at the Copenhagen Chivalric Academy, received a copy of the Witsen mirror with the translation. The exchange that followed



spells out how the object came to its end. Cuper told him how, when he desired to see it once again, Witsen 'brought it from his Museum [i.e., cabinet] to the room in which he was wont to receive me, and before I could assist, it fell from his hand and broke into ten to twelve pieces': even though it landed on a tapestry, it was too fragile because of the nature of the alloy.¹³²

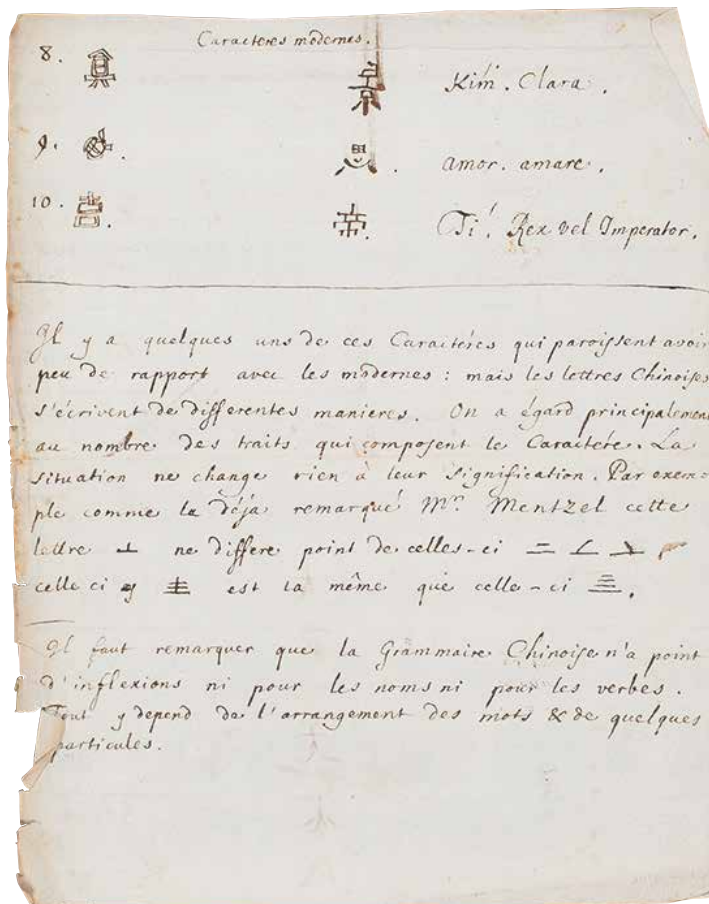
Sperling regretted the demise of 'that Chinese steel dish or mirror', but was consoled by the fact that the inscription seemed to support a comparison between ancient China and Egypt. This comparison, in fact, remained popular throughout the eighteenth century. It seemed to provide an answer to the aforementioned questions raised by

China's history and language. Sperling referred to Athanasius Kircher who, in *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652-1654), claimed to have deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphs in relation to other oriental languages.¹³³ With similar self-conceit Kircher had progressed to his encyclopaedic *China Illustrata*, which had become the most-read book on China of the seventeenth century. It portrayed Chinese civilization as grafted on to an Egyptian foundation.

As Cuper's main interest was Egyptology, this comparison with China would keep him occupied for the last eight years of his life. He found a like-minded correspondent in the Berlin librarian Mathurin de la Croze (1661-1739). Depending on VOC connections for Chinese books, the latter had amassed the largest European collection of Sinica.¹³⁴ Although he was very negative about Kircher, 'the greatest impostor and most barefaced liar the Republic of Letters has ever produced', De la Croze was likewise certain about the Egyptian origin of Chinese language, art and civilization.¹³⁵

At the end of 1708 Cuper sent to Berlin his last remaining copy of the engraving of the Witsen mirror, the translation and a summary of Bonjour's interpretation. He now expected that the Chinese books in the Prussian Royal Library would shed light on whether a Chinese army, embassy or exiles had been responsible for the mirror's presence in Siberia, and he ruminated on the ability of modern Chinese to decipher its script.¹³⁶ De la Croze's first reaction was surprisingly dismissive. 'This inscription cannot be as ancient as the Chinese of Batavia say. That nation [China] has always greatly exaggerated its antiquities.'¹³⁷ Later he confirmed his doubt that the mirror displayed a script no longer used today, as he himself was, apparently, able to make a working translation at first sight, which he added on a separate folio (fig. 19):

Fig. 19
De la Croze's translation of some characters on the Witsen Mirror. Undated attachment (c. 1710-13) to a letter to Gijssbert Cuper. The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands, KW 72H9, 1, fol. 18rv.



'I have immediately recognized the two first letters and some others that are no different from today's letters, as you can see from the paper attached to this letter. If I would have had the reading of the Chinese – I mean the pronunciation in European letters – instead of [Witsen's] explanation (that is certainly a too drawn-out paraphrase), I would have tried to give a literal translation in Latin or French. For the rest I see nothing surprising in [the mirror] in regard to where it has been found. From the times of Genghis Khan and his successors, the Chinese and Tartars have mingled substantially ... furthermore I have suspected that this nation came from Egypt, not only because of the hieroglyphics.'¹³⁸

De la Croze goes on to emphasize the Egyptian origin of Chinese civilization, pointing out, for instance, that Chinese dragons were actually crocodiles, and that the stork was a symbol for medicine in both Egypt and China.¹³⁹

A final exchange discusses the Witsen mirror in relation to the supposed Jewish presence in China. De la Croze suggests that the Jesuits (whose reports he deems untrustworthy) mistook Muslims for Jews.¹⁴⁰ Cuper is less certain, arguing that Judaeo-Christian migrations may have peopled first China and then Siberia: 'because [Witsen's] mirror, found in a grave, testifies that the [Chinese] people have been there more than 1800 years ago, and the histories testify that the Chinese have occupied Siberia and the bordering land more than 1000 years ago, and that they have sent colonists.' For Cuper, the penetration of Christians to East Asia had already been proven by the aforementioned Chinese Bible that Father Couplet had shown to Witsen.¹⁴¹

By this point, scholars in the Netherlands were in serious need of someone who could properly translate Chinese. Cuper consulted the orientalist Adriaen Reland (1676-1718) who had in turn engaged 'a certain Frenchman named Masson' in Utrecht. Mr Masson prom-

ised to translate some of the hundred Chinese manuscripts that Reland owned but could not read. He also announced the writing of a dissertation on the Chinese language that argued its affinity to Hebrew.¹⁴² Yet in early 1714, De la Croze lambasted the Frenchman, 'frankly believing that he does not know the elements of the Chinese language'.¹⁴³ He eventually called Masson's *Dissertations Chinoises* 'worthy of compassion': this text apparently argued that the Chinese characters derived from the 'primitive' signs with which the first man wrote in Hebrew or another primal, Adamic language.¹⁴⁴ De la Croze's stern words of criticism are surprising, coming from someone who had been arguing for the past four years that Chinese characters developed from Egyptian hieroglyphics. For him, the Witsen mirror still confirmed the traditional historical account, with the Middle East as the origin of civilization.

Conclusion

Of the many millions of works of Chinese material culture that reached the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not one gave rise to so much discussion as the Han Dynasty mirror from Nicolaas Witsen's collection. This specimen was both exotic *and* an antiquity. Moreover, its various aspects were extraordinarily well documented in text and image: the circumstances of its excavation, its material and visual properties, its inscription and the translation. The combination of, on the one hand, an object to be seen and touched – physical proof of the antiquity of Chinese civilization – and, on the other, a text to be subjected to the rigours of European philology, made this a highly attractive object of scholarly speculation.

Witsen's own statements on the mirror's origin and meaning were remarkably scrupulous estimates. In contrast, the discussions that followed for a decade were more speculative,

as few of the scholars involved had any knowledge of Chinese. The only check on the validity of their claims took place when Arcade Hoang stepped in. Witsen himself also arranged for a meeting with a Chinese visitor, the medical doctor Zhou Meiye 周美爷, who joined Johannes van Hoorn upon his return to the Netherlands in 1709. He could 'read and write everything in Chinese' and, incidentally, spoke Dutch 'as well as a Dutchman'. Yet Witsen did not bring up his mirror, which had broken four years earlier (moreover, as he wrote to Cuper, he had something else on his mind: how Chinese medicine could assist in his failing health).¹⁴⁵

One historian has identified the essence of Witsen's approach as the concern with the increasingly problematic biblical story of early history including the Fall, the Flood and Babel. 'With Leibniz and Cuper he speculated on the shared roots of the languages that were spoken all over the known world ... he was deeply fascinated by the supposedly symbolic nature of hieroglyphs and Chinese characters.'¹⁴⁶ As Witsen's own *Noord en Oost Tartarye* had revealed, Asia was a much more complex place than had previously been realized, hard to capture within a single narrative. His ancient mirror posed questions not only about Chinese migrations to Siberia but

also about the spread of Judaism and early Christianity in Asia and about the nature of the Chinese script. How were the characters related to the Adamic language? Was there a common Egyptian origin for Chinese and European civilizations? The most pressing issue to Witsen, Cuper and their contemporaries was how to salvage European chronology. If East Asian civilization was indeed older than the Western one and even the Flood, this would substantially modify the Eurocentric self-image.¹⁴⁷

The Witsen mirror figured as a significant piece in the puzzle of the history and geography of a world that was stretching, and exceeding, the limits of the Western imagination. Among the Chinese wares that were increasingly common in Dutch households, this object was the single most evocative one in terms of China's antiquity, language and civilization. The range of the discussions about this object illustrate to what extent networks of information connected Europe to East Asia and the new questions this posed (see fig. 2). The mirror was therefore both a repository of, and a reflective surface for, the global circulation of knowledge that had come into being around 1700 in its material and mental dimensions. Amsterdam, 'that very famous emporium of the world', was one of its central nodes.¹⁴⁸

NOTES

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1 'Ick kan haast aen V.Weled. niet betuyghen, hoe seer dat het mij doet, dat ick als oorsaaken, dat soo een kostelijk stuck, en overblyfsel van de Chinesen oudtheit, dat ongeluck is overkoomen', Gijsbert Cuper to Nicolaas Witsen, 3 November 1705, University Library, Amsterdam (hereafter: UBA), Be 36, fol. 91v. See also below, note 132.

2 Undated description of Witsen's collection by Cuper, Royal Library of the Netherlands, The Hague (hereafter: KB), 72C31, fol. 164r.

3 *The Catalogus van de uitmuntende en zeer vermaarde konst- en natuurkabinetten ...*

- naargelaten door den Wel Ed: Heer en Mr. Nicolaas Witsen, Amsterdam 1728, mentions nine drawers filled with 'Orientaalse ... heiligdommen en reliquien'; 'Tartarische, Chinese en andere Afgoden'; 'Chineese, Mogolse, en Japanse miniaturen, tekeningen, prenten'; 'Chineesche gedrukte Caarten'; 'Chineese Penetentaren met Couleuren'; etc. See M. Peters, *De wijze koopman. Het wereldwijde onderzoek van Nicolaas Witsen (1641-1717), burgemeester en VOC-bewindhebber van Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 2010, pp. 378-79, 456-57. On Witsen's scholarly interests see P. Rietbergen, 'Witsen's World: Nicolaas Witsen (1641-1717) between the Dutch East India Company and the Republic of Letters', L. Blussé et al. (eds.), *All in One Company: The VOC in Biographical Perspective*, Utrecht 1986, pp. 121-34.
- 4 Isaac Vossius and Joachim von Sandrart discussed Chinese painting. T. Weststeijn, 'Vossius' Chinese Utopia', in E. Jorink and D. van Miert (eds.), *Isaac Vossius (1618-1689) between Science and Scholarship*, Leiden/Boston 2012, pp. 207-42.
 - 5 L.S. Yang, 'An Inscribed Han Mirror Discovered in Siberia', *T'oung Pao* 42 (1953), pp. 330-40; E. Luobo-Lesnitzenko, 'Imported Mirrors in the Minusinsk Basin', *Artibus Asiae* 35 (1973), pp. 25-61, 330-40; J. van der Waals, 'Wankelend wereldbeeld: onderzoek naar taal, geloof en tijd in rariteitenkabinetten', in R. Kistemaker et al. (eds.), *De wereld binnen handbereik: Nederlandse kunst- en rariteitenverzamelingen 1585-1735*, Zwolle 1992, pp. 135-52.
 - 6 As a young man, Van Hoorn had been part of a widely published trade embassy to Beijing (1666).
 - 7 The VOC did not establish a trading post until 1729, but earlier *vrijburgers* (free citizens) from Batavia were trading regularly with Guangzhou, a centre of arts and crafts production. See F. Hertroijs, *Hoe kennis uit China naar Europa kwam: de rol van Jezuïeten en VOC-dienaren*, Amsterdam 2014 (PhD diss. Vrije Universiteit), p. 102.
 - 8 'Een geleerde onder hen heeft het vertaalt', Witsen to Cuper, 20 October 1705; published in J.F. Gebhard, *Het leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz. Witsen (1641-1717)*, Utrecht 1881, no. 21, vol. 2, p. 306.
 - 9 'dien spiegel na Romen en elders gesonden, om de paters jesuiten te vragen of sij de characters konden uytleggen, nimant was die het konde doen, self die lange jaeren in Sina hadden gewoont, bekenden sulx niet te kunnen doen, alleen dagt hen het gebroken Sinees te sijn, ik sont het dan na Batavia alwaer meer als tiendusent Sinesen sijn, nimant verstaet het, dog de generael dede het overbrengen na Sina om aen geleerde Sinesen te vertonen, en die explicatie te versoecken, so als geschiede, de schotel is dan gemaekt voor achthondert jaer, en het is sekerlijk out Sinees, nu meest onbekent'. Witsen to Cuper, 4 November 1705; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 22, vol. 2, pp. 308-09.
 - 10 N. Standaert, 'The Transmission of Renaissance Culture in Seventeenth-Century China', *Renaissance Studies* 17 (2003), pp. 367-91, esp. p. 369; P.N. Miller, 'Comparing Antiquarianisms: A View from Europe', in P.N. Miller and F. Louis, *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China*, Ann Arbor 2012, pp. 103-47, esp. p. 128.
 - 11 'Wil Godt int aenstaende jaer sal ik meerder verklaeringen uyt Indien van dese Sinesche wijsheyt bekomen, men heeft mij provisioeneel twintig of dertig diergelijke devisen van koningen en geleerde luyden geprent in het out, en tegelijk in het hedendaeghs Sinees toegesonden'. Witsen to Cuper, 20 October 1705; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 21, vol. 2, p. 307.
 - 12 'un livre out il y avoit beaucoup des copies de ces miroirs, et meme celuy la, qui a ete trouve en Siberie; que les plus anciens miroirs étoient marques de linies entrelassees, et que c'étoit la plus ancienne écriture. J'ay vu ce livre, et j'y ay trouvé tout ce que Mr. Witsen m'avoit dit, et je ne pouvois pas assez admirer cette rareté, et la diversitez des caractères, qui s'y rencontrent'. Cuper, undated description of Witsen's collection, KB 72C31, fol. 144r.
 - 13 M. Keevak, *The Story of a Stele: China's Nestorian Monument and Its Reception in the West, 1625-1916*, Hong Kong 2008.
 - 14 'een Spiegel van Stael, ruim een span in de midlyn groot, der gedaente als hier nevens de verkeerde zyde word verthoont, en my toegezonden is, wezende de andere zyde glat gepolyst, zoo als de Sinesche en Japansche Spiegels noch heden uit zeker aert van gemengt Stael worden gemaekt: men ziet'er oude Sinesche Letters en Geschrift aen'. N. Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, Amsterdam 1705, p. 750.
 - 15 The Swedish officer Philipp von Strahlenberg owned two Chinese bronze mirrors while exiled to Siberia, but he gave them away before returning to Europe in 1730. See note 73.
 - 16 'Eyndelijk met het laetste schip van Archangel ... sent men mijn een ront metael schoteltje dat in Siberien in een grafstede is gevonden, van gedaente als het andere dat ik hebbe,

- daer staen oude Sinesche letteren op, so ik gisse meer als dusent jaer out, want sij sijn van gedenkwaerdige andere die UEd. heeft gesien welcke out sijn over de agtien hondert jaer. Sij sullen in afschrift UEd. werden toegesonden, en ik salse na batavia doen overgaen ter vertalinge'. Witsen to Cuper, 10 January 1715; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 66, vol. 2, p. 427. Witsen sent Cuper two engravings, 7 November 1715, no. 75, p. 441. The drawing shows a version of the *tonghua* inscription in 36 characters, which was (like the *qingbai* inscription, further discussed below) common on so-called linked arc mirrors of the Western Han dynasty. The transcription and translation are based on B. Karlgren, 'Early Chinese Mirror Inscriptions', *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 6 (1934), pp. 9-79, esp. pp. 23-4:
 凍治銅華清而明
 I refine and work the flower (essence) of the copper, it is pure and bright
 以之為鏡宜文章
 From it I make a mirror, it is right that it should have (it is suitable for) a decoration
 延年益壽去不羊
 May you have extended years and increased longevity; may [the mirror] eliminate what is baleful
 與天毋極如日之光
 May you be as unlimited as Heaven; [the mirror] is like the light of the sun;
 千秋萬歲長不一[?]
 May you have a thousand autumns and ten thousand years; may you have joy without end.
 Comparison with other recorded *tonghua* inscriptions shows that the last two characters should not be 不一 but rather 樂未央.
 See Ibid., p. 73, and Tian Min 田敏, *Handai tongjing mingwen yanjiu yi xiangsi jiyu guiji wen jing minwen weilu* 漢代銅鏡銘文研究—以相思、吉語、規矩紋鏡銘文為例. Inscriptions on Han Bronze Mirrors', *Shijiazhuang* 2012 (Master's thesis, Hebei Normal University), p. 17-8.
- 17 S.E. Cahill, 'All Is Contained in Its Reflection: A History of Chinese Bronze Mirrors', in L. von Falkenhausen (ed.), *The Lloyd Cotsen Study Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors Volume I: Catalogue*, Los Angeles 2009, pp. 13-63, esp. pp. 24-25.
- 18 M. Rupert and O.J. Todd, *Chinese Bronze Mirrors: A Study Based on the Todd Collection of 1000 Bronze Mirrors Found in the Five Northern Provinces of Suiyuan, Shensi, Shansi, Honan and Hopei, China*, Peiping 1966, p. 40. Kong Xiangxing 孔祥星 and Liu Yiman 劉一曼, *Zhongguo Tongjing Tudian* 中國銅鏡圖典, Beijing 1992, pp. 230-36.
- 19 Changshashi Bowuguan 長沙市博物館 (eds.), *Chu feng Han yun. Changshashi bowuguan cang jing* 楚風漢韻. 長沙市博物館藏境, Beijing 2010, pp. 16-17. Examples measuring up to 18 cm are also known, e.g. Li Dewen 李德文 and Hu Yuan 胡援 (eds.), *Lu'an Chutu Tongjing* 六安出土銅鏡, Beijing 2008, cat. no. 138. According to Witsen, his mirror's diameter measured over a *span* (the distance between the thumb and little finger of an outstretched hand); Cuper wrote to Sperling that it was 'slightly larger than the image' (see below, note 132).
- 20 'Het is bijzonder dese letters syn al over de duysent jaer verout, en de gemene man kan se gants niet lesen, het is een devies (symbolium) van een der oude Sinesche keyzers, omtrent de tijt van de so geleerde en vrome Confutius, van wien men met meer reden als eertijds een ander van Plato en Seneca uytriep, O Heylige Confutius'. Witsen to Cuper, 20 October 1705; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 21, vol. 2, p. 307.
- 21 'Sancte Confuci, ora pro nobis', exclaimed the libertine philosopher François La Mothe le Vayer (1588-1672) in his *Vertu des païens* (1641). P. Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715*, Paris 1961, p. 21. As early as the late sixteenth century, some lines of the Confucian Classic *Da Xue* (*The Great Learning*) had appeared in A. Possevino, *Bibliotheca Selecta quae agit de Ratione Studiorum*, Rome 1593, vol. 1, p. 583. The first Dutch translation was P. van Hoorn, *Eenige voorname eygenschappen van de ware deugd, voorzichtigheydt, wysheydt en volmaecktheydt, getrocken uyt den Chineschen Confucius*, Batavia 1675.
- 22 D.E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, Honolulu 1985, remains the standard work.
- 23 'God is zuiver, rein, en onbesmet in zyn geheel./ God is zoo schoon, als klaar en helder water./ Iemand door een Koning, of Vorst bemint en in veele zaaken gebruikt werdende, moet de zelve aanzien als zyn God: zich wachtende andere te beledigen, want zulk doende zoo zal het hem gaan./ Als water dat op en afloopt./ Maar wanneer een Koning iemand tot Staat verheft, en ziet dat zyn gedrag goed en wel is, zoo verheugt by hem in zyn Hert zoo groot als de geheele Zee./ Men is bang voor zyn Heer als men quaad doet, maar als men goed en regt wandeld, zoo is het Hert altoos verheugt./ En zoo schoon als het schynsel der Zonne./ En wanneer men als dan by de Menschen zal aangezien worden als een God op Aarde, om dat er niemand Gods gelyken is'.

- Witsen, op. cit. (note 14), p. 750. According to the sinologist J. Duyvendak, the translation's last sentence is unfinished; see Yang, op. cit. (note 5), p. 340. The characters have been matched with translated lines based on the phonetic transcription at the bottom of Witsen, op. cit. (note 14), p. 750.
- 24 'dog UwelEdele believe te weten dat [in] de sinese schriften ieder letter een sin verbeelt en dat het studie is die sinnen uyt te leggen en te verstaen en dat de uytlegger van dese mijne spiegel op batavia niet al te seer ervaeren was, so wert geoordeelt dat er nog meer insteekt en dat er nog meer sedelessen op staen verbeelt'. Witsen to Cuper, 20 October 1705; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 21, vol. 2, p. 307.
- 25 Yang, op. cit. (note 5), p. 332, seems to assume that Witsen's transcription, although erroneous, was put in the conventional order starting with 潔清白. In reality Witsen's translator was clearly unfamiliar with the *qingbai* inscription and started the sentence in a different place.
- 26 Especially in lines 3, 6 and 8.
- 27 The translation was described as 'poetic fantasy' by M. Kühn, 'Leibniz und China', in AA.vv., *China und Europa. Chinaverständnis und Chinamode im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1973, pp. 178-79. Peters, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 399-400, more appropriately calls the translation 'incorrect'.
- 28 *jie* 絮, *qing* 清, *bai* 白, *jun* 君, *shui* 水, *yan* 奔, *xi* 錫, *wang* 汪, *yang* 洋, *kong* 恐, *ri* 日, *mei* 美.
- 29 Kircher published a Latin translation of the Nestorian Stele in 1667; see note 13.
- 30 Yang, op. cit. (note 5). Whether the inscription is called *qingbai* or *jingbai* depends on whether the first character was written with a water or rice radical left of 青. Since the character on Witsen's mirror is *qing* 清, *qingbai* will be used throughout the text to refer to this type of mirror inscription.
- 31 This translation is an adaptation of the interpretation proposed by Yang, op. cit. (note 5), made with the kind help of Barend ter Haar and Wilt Idema. For other interpretations see Yang, op. cit. (note 5), p. 340; W.P. Yetts, 'Two Chinese Mirrors', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 74 (1939), no. 430, pp. 23-28, and 74 (1939), no. 432, p. 144; and Van der Waals, op. cit. (note 5), p. 301, note 20. For a more elaborate analysis see W.J.L. van Noord, 'Nicolaes Witsen's Chinese Mirror and the Logistics of Translating Han Dynasty Seal-Script at the Turn of the 18th Century', in T. de Graaf et al. (eds.), *Languages and Scripts in Witsen's North and East Tartary*, Amsterdam (forthcoming).
- 32 *Xuanxi* 玄錫 'black tin' may refer to the metal alloy or to the polishing agent and by extension the polished surface. See K.E. Brashier, 'Han Mirror Inscriptions as Modular Texts', in L. von Falkenhausen (ed.), *The Lloyd Cotsen Study Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors, Volume 11: Studies*, Los Angeles 2011, pp. 100-19, esp. 101-02, and Li Huaotong 李懷通, 'Gudai Mojingyao Kuishi 古代磨鏡藥窺視', *Zhonghua Wenhua Huabao* 中華文化畫報 5 (2011), pp. 78-81.
- 33 The Jesuits' 'untranslation' of the aforementioned Nestorian Stele was deliberately deceptive, see T. Billings, 'Untranslation Theory: The Nestorian Stele and the Jesuit Illustration of China', in E. Hayot et al. (eds.), *Sinographies: Writing China*, Minneapolis 2008, pp. 89-114. '[T]en besten doenlyk', Witsen, op. cit. (note 14), p. 750.
- 34 Compare *tian* 天 p. 40 to *er* 二 p. 200 in Zhou Ting, *Zhuanshu Zidian* 篆書字典, Sichuan sheng 1991.
- 35 *Xuanhue* may refer to the Xuanhue Hall or the Xuanhue Period.
- 36 More than one catalogue was completed; the extant one is the 'revised' one. The surviving book contains only bronzes, including bells only discovered in 1123, so it could not have been completed earlier. The last three of the thirty *juan* (chapters) are devoted to mirrors (113 in total). See P.B. Ebrey, *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong*, Seattle 2008, pp. 151-53.
- 37 R.C. Rudolph, 'Preliminary Notes on Sung Archaeology', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 22 (1963), no. 2, pp. 169-77, esp. pp. 170-71.
- 38 Ebrey, op. cit. (note 36), p. 203.
- 39 The transcription in *Bogutu* 28.36b reads 潔清白天事君志治之奔玄錫之物汪洋恐天日志美之外承可說虞高願兆思天無紀, which is strikingly close to Witsen's reading, unlike any of the other 13 *qingbai* inscriptions recorded in Ferguson's major compilation. See Fu Kaisen 福開森 [J.C. Ferguson], *Lidai Zhulu Jijin Mu* 歷代著錄吉金目, Beijing 1938.
- 40 Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) is usually credited with inventing this approach. See Mungello, op. cit. (note 22), pp. 55-67.
- 41 The first in-depth study of Chinese literati who worked closely with the Jesuits (who liked to conceive of them as converts) is R. Hart, *Imagined Civilizations: China, the West, and Their First Encounter*, Baltimore 2012.
- 42 'Mr Witsen ... a trouvé dans la Chronologie du père Couplet, qu'un Empereur il y a plusieurs siècles, avoit jusque là [i.e., Siberia] poussé ses conquêtes. Que ce miroir étoit sans doute

- ancien, et qu'il y étoit écrit un apophthème d'un Roy, ou d'un grand philosophe, ou homme a leur mode savant'. Cuper's undated description of Witsen's collection, KB 72C31, fol. 144r.
- 43 The *Guang yutu* 廣輿圖 (*Enlarged Terrestrial Atlas*) is the oldest extant comprehensive atlas of China by Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504-1564). Witsen had the manuscript of Couplet's Confucius translation in his possession for some time: 'Ik hebbe het origineel nu tot parijs gedrukt eenig tijt onder mij gehad, want Couplet was myn goede vrint.' Witsen to Cuper, 9 April 1713, Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 51, p. 364. Witsen based his *Noord en Oost Tartarye* partly on the writings of the 'Netherlandish Jesuits' Couplet and Ferdinand Verbiest; Witsen, op. cit. (note 14), vol. 1, p. 5, and p. 34. Clearly, the characterization of Emperor Kangxi (p. 9) is based on the Jesuits' accommodating stance.
- 44 Tian Min, op. cit. (note 16).
- 45 Brashier, op. cit. (note 32).
- 46 See Fu, op. cit. (note 39), pp. 1267-68, 1273-74, 1276-77, 1280, 1285, 1291, 1314, 1336.
- 47 Mirror inscriptions regularly insert the particle *er* 而, sometimes in the most random places of a sentence, see Changshashi Bowuguan, op. cit. (note 19).
- 48 Cahill, op. cit. (note 17), p. 24.
- 49 Brashier, op. cit. (note 32), pp. 110-14.
- 50 Cahill, op. cit. (note 17), p. 25, note 17.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 17. Even if there is a solid date for the burial this would only give a *terminus ante quem* for the manufacturing date, as mirrors could be collected and handed down through generations.
- 52 L. von Falkenhausen, 'Introduction', in *The Lloyd Cotsen Study Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors, Volume 11: Studies*, Los Angeles 2011, pp. 10-33, esp. p. 32. For example, a Han dynasty linked arc type mirror (with a *zhaoming* inscription) was imitated during the Ming dynasty, inscribed with a *Jiajing* reignmark of the *yimao* year (corresponding to AD 1555). Shanghai Bowuguan (eds.), *Lian xing shen ye ying zhi liang gong. Shanghai Bowuguan Tongjing Jingpin* 練形神冶瑩質良工. 上海博物館藏銅鏡精品, Shanghai 2005, cat. no. 145, p. 368.
- 53 Cahill, op. cit. (note 17), p. 19.
- 54 Luobo-Lesnitchenko, op. cit. (note 5), p. 25, note 3.
- 55 I.V. Filippova, 'Chinese Bronze Mirrors in the Hunnu Culture', *Archaeology, Ethnology & Anthropology of Eurasia* 3 (2000), pp. 100-08, esp. p. 101.
- 56 Rupert and Todd, op. cit. (note 18), p. 40; Sun Shudao 孫守道, 'Xichaogou gu mu qun xi Han tong jing duandai yanjiu' 西岔溝古墓群西漢銅鏡斷代研究', *Liaohai wenwu xue kan* 文物學刊 1 (1995), pp. 79-85, esp. p. 84.
- 57 It is, of course, possible that the illustrator chose to omit rust marks.
- 58 See Changshashi Bowuguan, op. cit. (note 19), cat. nos. 48, 53; Han Bin 韓彬, Feng Guofu 馮國富 and Cheng Yunxia 程云霞, *Guyuan Tongjing* 固原銅鏡, Yinchuan 2008, cat. nos. 56, 73; Li and Hu, op. cit. (note 19), cat. nos. 136-38; and Kong and Liu, op. cit. (note 18), p. 240; Su Qiang 蘇強, 'Guo Boguancang xi Han Xinmang tongjing de leixing yu fenqi' 國博館藏西漢新莽銅鏡的類型與分期', *Zhongguo Guojia Bowuguan guan kan* 中國國家博物館館刊 5 (2013), pp. 124-40, esp. p. 130.
- 59 Yang Yong 楊勇 et al., 'Shandong Linzi Qigucheng Qin Han zhujing zuofang yizhi de fajue' 山東臨淄齊故城秦漢錯鏡作坊遺址的發掘', *Kaogu* 考古 6 (2014), pp. 21-36.
- 60 'in zeker graf by Vergaturia in Sibierien', 'Een ander Afgoden-beeld, ... is my uit Siberien toegezonden, 't geen mede uit een oude Begravenis-plaets, daer men Menschen doods-beenderen by vond, onder een Kurgan, of groote heuvel.' Witsen, op. cit. (note 14), pp. 749-50.
- 61 'Goude Cieraden zo in de Tempels en Graven der Chineese Tartaren gevonden als anderzints (16 nos.)', in the 1728 inventory (see note 3).
- 62 'De plaets daer de Siberiersche curieusheden sijn ontdekt, is omtrent op sestig graden noorder breete.' Witsen to Cuper, 10 January 1715; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 66, p. 425.
- 63 Actually, at a latitude of 60°N one mainly finds forests and swamp and no ancient burials. Witsen's error can be explained by the fact that on his map the 60° parallel appears ten degrees above the position in modern maps. M. Zavitochina, 'De Siberische collectie van Peter de Grote', in R. Kistemaker et al. (eds.), *Peter de Grote en Holland*, Bussum 1996, p. 203; M.P. Zavitochina, 'K voprosue o vremeni i meste formirovania Sibirskoj kollektcii Petra I', in G.N. Komelova (ed.), *Kult'ura i iskusstvo petrovskogo vremeni*, Leningrad 1997, pp. 63-9.
- 64 L. Koryakova and A.V. Epimakhov, *The Urals and Western Siberia in the Bronze and Iron Ages*, New York 2007, pp. 221-22.
- 65 Personal communication by Nikolay Kradin and Alexey Tishkin.
- 66 Koryakova and Epimakhov, op. cit. (note 64), pp. 246-49. The mirror bears no inscription

- but is, like the Witsen mirror, of the central arc type or linked arc pattern decoration.
- 67 See, for example, Filippona, op. cit. (note 55), Luobo-Lesnitchenko, op. cit. (note 5), and T. Törbat, 'A Study on Bronze Mirrors in Xiongnu Graves of Mongolia', in U. Brosseder and B.K. Miller (eds.), *Xiongnu Archaeology: Multidisciplinary Perspectives of the First Steppe Empire in Inner Asia*, Bonn 2011, pp. 315-25. On the plural 'Silk Routes' see L. von Falkenhausen, 'Notes on the History of the "Silk Routes." From the Rise of the Xiongnu to the Mongol Conquest (250 BC-AD 1283)', in V.H. Mair (ed.), *Secrets of the Silk Road*, Anaheim 2010, pp. 58-68. A recent publication concerning Chinese artefacts crossing the Eurasian steppe along the Silk Routes, travelling as far as the Crimea, is AA.vv., *De Krim: gouden geheimen van de Zwarte Zee*, Zwolle 2014.
- 68 See K.M. Linduff, 'Why Have Siberian Artefacts Been Excavated within Ancient Chinese Dynastic Borders?', in D.L. Peterson et al., L.M. Popova and A.T. Smith (eds.), *Beyond the Steppe and the Sown: Proceedings of the 2002 University of Chicago Conference on Eurasian Archaeology*, Leiden/Boston 2006, pp. 358-70.
- 69 Koryakova and Epimakhov, op. cit. (note 64), pp. 249-50.
- 70 Peters, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 396-97. On the melting of the objects for their material value see Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 22, vol. 2, p. 308, and Witsen to Cuper, undated (c. September-December 1710), no. 35, vol. 2, p. 328.
- 71 Witsen dedicated *North and East Tartary* to the Peter the Great and gave him a copy; on their relationship see Kistemaker, op. cit. (note 63). It may not be coincidental that the Tsar's 'paper museum' contains several inscribed Chinese mirrors, similar to Witsen's specimen (cat. nos. 1232, 1237, 1240 and 1241 of the *Icones operum Chinensium*). See M.L. Menshikova, 'Chinese and Oriental Objects', in R.E. Kistemaker et al. (eds.), *The Paper Museum of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, c. 1725-1760*, Amsterdam 2005, pp. 248-55.
- 72 Peters, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 395-97; Cuper to De la Croze, 4 December 1708; G. Cuper, *Lettres de critique, d'histoire, de littérature ... écrites à divers savans*, Amsterdam 1742, no. 7, p. 19. The reference to saltpetre may have been intended to deflect charges of intentional grave robbery.
- 73 For a discussion of both mirrors see Li Xueqin 李學勤, *Si hai xun zhen* 四海尋珍, Beijing 1998, pp. 289-94. '[E]ine Metallene oder von Klockenspeiße gegossene Platte ... ist zwischen den Irbyht- und Toboll-Strohm in einem Todten-Hügel gefunden worden ... Von dieser Sorte findet man viel hundert in denen dortigen Gräbern'. P. von Strahlenberg, *Das Nord- und Östliche Theil von Europa und Asia*, Stockholm 1730, p. 399. Von Strahlenberg, a Swedish officer, lived as a prisoner of war in Tobolsk from 1711 to 1721. Irbit is 300 km from Verkhoturys.
- 74 G. Cuper, *Harpocrates seu explicatio imagunculae*, Amsterdam 1676; *Harpocrates et antiqua monumenta*, Utrecht 1693. He had seen the silver Harpocrates statue, found in Nijmegen, in Johannes Smetius's collection.
- 75 'Idola Sinensia', sold in 1716 for 1 guilder and 18 stivers, see the record of the auction of Cuper's possessions in KB 72H29, cf. 72C32. These may have been similar to the Chinese statues that were excavated in 2013 near Cuper's house. The excavation report is due to be published by E. Mittendorff et al. in *Rapportages Archeologie Deventer* 45 (forthcoming).
- 76 Witsen to Cuper, 26 November 1707; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 27, p. 317. See also 20 August 1710, no. 33, p. 326; 29 November 1712, no. 46, p. 349.
- 77 Peters, op. cit. (note 3), p. 298.
- 78 'Hiernevens twee dubbelde van het schoteltje dat in Siberien diep onder de aerde in een grafstede is gevonden, ik sie het aen voor out Sinees, en heb het reets na Batavia om vertaling gesonden'. Witsen to Cuper, 8 December 1704; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 20, vol. 2, p. 305. We have not been able to locate the copies (probably similar to the 1715 drawing, fig. 5) in the surviving correspondence.
- 79 Witsen to Cuper, 20 October 1705; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 21, vol. 2, p. 306.
- 80 'als ik die uijtlegginghe, soo U.Weled. is toe-gesonden, overweeghe moet ik bekennen, dat Confutius is geweest een groot man, ende dat hij erkent heeft maar eenen Godt, ende dat nae sijn doot eerst de groove afgoderije is gekomen in dat schoon en kostelijk landt ende het dunckt mij seer aenmerckelijk, dat op den eygensten tijdt bij de Griecken is geweest Socrates, en bij de Chinesen Confutius, doch dese heeft meer navolghers gehadt, en is tot nu toe in groote weerde gebleven ... Ick heb voor dezen met vermaak sijn leven, off sijne morale gelesen, getrocken uit een grooter boeck, tot parijs ... gedruckt [i.e., Jean de la Brune, *La Morale de Confucius*, Paris 1688]. Ende mij staat voor,

- dat daer in soo schoon sedelessen waaren, als van een mensch soudē kunnen voor-
 koomen, gegrondt op de natuūre en eygen-
 schap van Godt en van den mensch'. Cuper
 to Witsen, 3 November 1705, UBA Be 36,
 fols. 90r-91v.
- 81 'die groove en schandelijkcke affgoderije is
 in een landt gekoomen, waar in Confutius
 schijnt alleen geleert te hebben een oneijndigh
 en Goddelijk wesen, die niettegenstaande die
 affvalligheit, daar nu en van outs op soo eene
 sonderlinghe jae Goddelijke maniere geeert
 wert, waar over dan tusschen de sendelinghen
 van de Roomsche Kerk soo veele twijsten
 zyn geresen'. Cuper to Witsen, 3 November
 1705, UBA Be 36, fols. 90r-91v. On the
 controversy see D. Mungello (ed.), *The
 Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and
 Meaning*, Nettetal 1994.
- 82 'Ick sal met Uwe Edelheits goetvinden
 senden nae Romen de uijtlegginge van de
 Spiegel en sal aldaer sekerlijk Uwe Ed.
 naam noch in grooter weerden soo men
 die vermeerderen kan gehouden werden,
 als nu albereyts is, om dat de Geleerden
 sullen sien wat voor moeyte deselve belieft
 te neemen, om te kunnen verstaan, het gheen
 aen alle ver-borghen is'. Cuper to Witsen,
 3 November 1705, UBA Be 36, fol. 91v.
- 83 'de geleerden in Duytsland, tot Londen
 en Parijs, het zelve aenstonts in haere
 journaelen op hun eigen naem aent licht
 soudē geven', 'opdat sij heeren geleerden
 daerop speculeeren en sulx explicceeren
 na haer verstant', Witsen to Cuper,
 20 October 1705; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8),
 no. 22, vol. 2, p. 309.
- 84 In 1710 Cuper asked for additional images
 of the 'in Siberien gevonden rariteyten' to
 forward to Rome and Berlin; Cuper to Witsen,
 11 November 1710, UBA Be 50, fol. 145r.
- 85 The term *oculare ispezione* was used by Carlo
 Cesare Malvasia in 1686, see T. Weststeijn
 (ed.), *Art and Knowledge in Rome and the
 European Republic of Letters, 1500-1750*,
 Turnhout 2014, p. 4 and passim.
- 86 T. Weststeijn, "'Spinoza sinicus: An Asian
 Paragraph in the History of the Radical
 Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of
 Ideas* 68 (2007), no. 4, pp. 537-61.
- 87 'het Chinees spiegel off schootel ... is dit
 een van de grootste oudheden, die men uit
 die landen alhier heeft', Cuper to Witsen,
 3 November 1705, UBA Be 36, fol. 90r.
- 88 'Ipse Amstelaedami lancem et unam
 icunculam manibus tractavi, et oculis
 meis vidi apudi illustrem virum Niculaum
 Witsen, Reipublicae illius consulem', 'lanx
 et incognito vel mixto metallo literis Sinicis
 vetustis inscripta; ... Quod si vel te ipsum
 vel alios desiderium teneat videnti etiam
 lancem, ego id operam dabo seriam, ut
 eandem pictam atque exscriptam accipiam'.
 Cuper to Bonjour, 15 June 1704;
 G.J. Hoogewerff, *Bescheiden in Italië omtrent
 Nederlandsche kunstenaars en geleerden in
 Italië, derde deel*, The Hague 1917, no. 13,
 p. 66. Cuper only wrote to Witsen on 30
 December 1704 that he had sent Bonjour the
 engraving of the mirror, UBA Be 35 fol. 88.
 Bonjour was also known as Favre or Fabri
 (possibly his mother's name).
- 89 'Rogavi illustrem Reipublicae Amstelaedamen-
 sis Consulem Nicolaum Witsen, uti ad me
 mittere velit lancem in sepulchro apud
 Siberios inventam pictam et exscriptam; ...
 et spero Oedipos Romanos nobis pate-
 facturos hac mysteria'. Cuper to Bonjour,
 26 December 1705; Hoogewerff, op. cit.
 (note 88), no. 15, p. 69. The reference to
 'mysteries' was disingenuous as Cuper
 already had a translation. He pressed
 Bonjour twice (8 January 1705 and
 14 February 1705) for an answer.
- 90 'spero te accepisse litteras ... Nec non lancis
 in Siberia repertae ectypos, et tandem ex
 iisdem te percepisse, quid doctissimus
 Rhenferdus una mecum, uti a te fiat,
 somnoperē exoptat'. Cuper to Bonjour,
 27 May 1705; Hoogewerff, op. cit. (note 88),
 no. 17, p. 72. This colleague was Jacob
 Rhenferd (1654-1712), whose *Rudimenta
 grammaticae harmonicae linguarum orien-
 talium* remained unfinished. We have been
 unable to find a reference to the mirror in
 the correspondence between Cuper and
 Rhenferd in the KB.
- 91 Bonjour to Cuper, 16 June 1705, KB 72H20.
 The engraving is in Rome, Biblioteca
 Angelica, ms. 395, c. 19. Cuper told De la
 Croze that he made sure De Lionne had
 'copies [of the engraving] both in Rome and
 in Paris'. Cuper to De la Croze, 19 November
 1708, KB 72H18.
- 92 'Ectypum disci aeri incisum misi Romam ad
 episcopum Rosaliensem, apud Sinas vicarium
 Apostolicum, qui respondit matronas
 Sinenses uti solere similibus speculis, et esse
 characterum Sinicorum quator genera, unum
 recens et usitatum, tria prisca et vetusta
 et ab usu quotidianae scriptionis iam diu
 intermissa: insculptos disco vel speculo
 characteres reserve potius illos priscos et
 inusitatos: esse tamen nonnullos hodiernis
 similes, quator quorum unus significat
 Rem, alius Coelum, alius Solem, alius
 Imperatorem: sed propter ignoratorem
 aliorum se non posse scripturam inter-

- pretari'. Bonjour to Cuper, 16 June 1705, KB 72H20. Here again we see misinterpretation of seal script characters, reading grammatical particle *er* 而 as the character *tian* 天 (heaven). The character for sun *ri* 日 is there (although here it should be interpreted to mean 'day') and 'emperor' and 'king' were probably read into the character *jun* 君 which means lord, but this character only features in the inscription once, so it is puzzling where the second interpretation came from. Perhaps the (incorrectly) transcribed character *song* 嵩 was misread as *di* 帝 (emperor).
- 93 Cuper to Bonjour, 22 August 1705; Hoogewerff, op. cit. (note 88), no. 18, p. 73.
- 94 'symbolum unius ex vetustioribus imperatoribus Chinesium, circa tempus Confutii, viri docti valde et pii'. Cuper to Bonjour, 8 December 1705, Hoogewerff, op. cit. (note 88), no. 19, pp. 74-75. The letter includes an excerpt from Witsen's letter (see note 8) translated into Latin. Cuper pressed Bonjour again on 6 March 1706, no. 20, p. 76.
- 95 'Cum Episcopus Rosaliensis, ejusque duo Sinae, observaverint laudato in monumento Characterem qui Coelum denotat, putarem Interpretem posuisse Deum pro Coelo', Bonjour to Cuper, 15 February 1706; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), pp. 21-22.
- 96 'Deum iterum ac saepius nominat monumentum hoc, quod maxime miror. Nam Sinae nullum norunt vocabulum, quo simpliciter et absolute Deum nominent. Sed vel usurpant nomen compositum *Xam-ti*, quod significat supremum Imperatorem, vel adhibent nomen *Thien* proprium Coeli materialis, quod hodie colunt. Cum Episcopo Rosaliensis, ejusque duo Sinae, observaverint laudato in monumento Characterem qui Coelum denotat, putarem Interpretem posuisse Deum pro Coelo'. Bonjour to Cuper, 15 February 1706; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), pp. 21-22. The concept of *coelum materiale* (visible Heaven) was often opposed to *coelum immateriale* in regard to the Chinese mission. Cf.: 'duas isti Coelum subjectas esse notiones: primum namque hac voce intelligi Coelum materiale, quod Sinice *Yue him*, *Chi Tien*, dicitur, quod oculis cernimus et cuius effectus quemadmodum et solis, lune, ac stellarum, experimur. Coelum immateriale accipi, quod *Yeu ou Him Tien* vocatur, figure omnis expers, omniumque rerum fontem et originem, ideoque a mundi Creatore e Opifice minime diversum'. AA.vv., *Memorie istoriche della controversia de' culti Chinesi*, s.l. 1700, p. 28.
- 97 In line 2 of Witsen's transcription there is no character to signify water, only those signifying 'clear', 'pure' and 'heaven' (interpreted as God). The comparison with water may have been added because the transcription of line 4 contains the character *shui* 水 (water). (In the official full *qingbai* inscription this would actually have been a version of the character *huan* 驪 but it has become illegible in Witsen's engraving.) In Classical Chinese, pronouns, subjects, and verbs are often omitted when they are inferable. The translator may have decided that this was the case in line 2 and therefore inferred 'water'. Another option is that Witsen's translator made the same error as De la Croze later (see note 138 and fig. 19), who transcribed the seal script character for the particle *zhi* 之 as *shui* 水 (water). However, this character is not in line 2 of the text, where the translator mentions 'water'.
- 98 'Juvant conjecturam haec verba: Deus est tam pulcher, uti clara et liquida aqua. Hebraei vocant Coelos *Shamaim*, quasi *Sham-maim*, hoc est Illic aquae. Caelestes aquas celebrant passim sacrae paginae, agnoscunt liberaliter Sancti Patres, admiserunt Gentiles ipsi, e quorum fabulis Nonnus in sexto Dionysiacorum ... Deus ergo Inscriptionis Sinicae est meo judicio Sinarum *Thien tam pulcher uti clara et liquida aqua*, utpote Coelum materiale ... sive illius pulchritudinem, quam Sinica Inscriptio aequiparat cum claritate et liquidate aquae ... Mihi persuasissimum est Sinas aequo olim ac hodie, tribuisse divinitatem Coelo materiali. Quod pulchritudinem Dei sui pulchritudine aquae descriperint, similes se prae buerunt illis gentilibus, qui Divinitatem attribuebant aquae. Divinas dicit aquas Propertius ... Fontes sacros Virgilius', Bonjour to Cuper, 15 February 1706; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), pp. 21-22.
- 99 'Non deerunt amatores Allegoriarum, troporum, figurarum, qui alio traducant Inscriptiorem Sinicam'. Bonjour to Cuper, 15 February 1706; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), p. 22.
- 100 Cuper to Bonjour, 5 January 1707, in Hoogewerff, op. cit. (note 88), no. 21, p. 78.
- 101 U. Baldini, 'Guillaume Bonjour (1670-1714): Chronologist, Linguist, and "Casual" Scientist', in L. Saraiva (ed.), *Europe and China: Science and the Arts in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Singapore 2012, pp. 241-94.
- 102 Ibid., p. 241.
- 103 Some of Bonjour's notes in the Biblioteca Augustiniana in Rome (ms.lat. 633) and his *Antiquitas temporum* (ms.lat. 49) mention works on Chinese history and language.
- 104 'cogit me plane ut te amplius non celem meum ex urbe Roma discessum ad Sinas ...

- Modo pergo Amstelodamum ... Utinam possem convenire te Daventriam'. Bonjour to Cuper, 6 December 1707, KB 72H29.
- The meeting did take place, see note 113.
- 105 'rogoque te vehementem in modum, ut ita res tuas velis constituere, ut Amsteladamo ad me possis excurrere. ... Sed venit mihi in mentem lingua Sinica, eam scis constare ex paucis vocabulis, et maximam partem monosyllabis; memini me alicubi legisse, illam propterea vix a multis saeculos mutata esse; id quod contrarium caetero quin omnibus eventit aliis. Quare equidem petere a te audeo ut eam in rem inquirere deligenter velis, et me vel redux vel per litteras docere, quid hujus tandem rei sit, et an gentis politae sapientes non teneantur aliam linguam, quam qua vulgo Chineses utuntur, discere, operamque suam et tempus impendere characteribus. Mihi certe contrarium suadere videtur speculum, cuius ad te ectypum misi olim, cum ipsi Chineses, qui in Batavia Indiae consistunt, fassi sint varias eo incognitas voces contineri'. Cuper to Bonjour, 16 January 1708, KB 72H29.
- 106 Hertroijs, op. cit. (note 7). Earlier, Cuper himself lobbied with Witsen to send missionaries to the East on VOC ships, Witsen to Cuper, 7 August 1706, see Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 23, p. 311.
- 107 'Ipsum eruditum esse, et linguarum orientalium, imo rerum Sinensium versatissimum, brevi temporis colloqui percepi ... Missionarii Romanae sedis atro apud nos carbone sunt notati, nihilominus amore insignis talis viri, qui de studiis tantum meretur ... dedi ipsi litteras commendatitias ad gubernatorem generalem Bataviae, et promontorii Bonae spei'. Witsen to Cuper, undated (1708); Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 28, pp. 318-19. Cuper had asked Witsen to welcome Bonjour and provide a recommendation for the Cape, 23 December 1707, UBA Be 36, fol. 98v.
- 108 'Comme le temps presse pour me rembarquer, je me reserve de vous les marquer avec quelques reflexions, que j'espere vous envoyer d'Ougly dans le royaume de Bengale, ou je serais obligé de séjourner quelque temps ... Je n'ay pas oublié les notices que vous souhaitez avoir de la Chine, si j'ay le bonheur d'y arriver'. Bonjour to Cuper, 13 September 1708, KB 72H29.
- 109 'quomodo tam singularis et tam recondita eruditio linguarum ... Orientalium cognitio cadere potuerit in unum virum, et quidem juvenem valde ... res Aegyptiacae et temporum ratio ... multis exemplis docuisse Sacram Historiam cum profana consentire'. Cuper to Adeodatus Nuzzi, 18 February 1708; Hoogewerff, op. cit. (note 88), no. 90, p. 94.
- 110 'quamquam certus sim eum nobis explicaturum ... antiquitates Chinesium, quae utique magni etiam ponderis sunt, et unde deprompsit in dissertationibus suis argumenta, quibus sacri codicis Hebraei ratio temporum mirifice firmatur'. Cuper to Nuzzi, 25 August 1709; Hoogewerff, op. cit. (note 88), no. 90, p. 96.
- 111 'Cum navibus, quae ultimo hoc anno petent Indias Orientales, scribam ad eum'. Ibid.
- 112 'Bonjourio mali quid accidisse in China vereor, quia nullas ab eo literas accipio'. Undated note in Cuper's handwriting following the letter of 13 September 1708, KB 72H29. Reference to a London newspaper of 5 February 1714.
- 113 'que les langues Chinoise ou l'Egyptien ne soient les plus anciennes ... si le pere Bonjour nous estoit rendu, je m' imagine, qu'il ne seroit pas d'un de ces sentiments, et qu'il pourroit decider cette contestation'. Cuper to Bignon, 10 June 1714, KB 72H7. See Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), pp. 330-31, cf. p. 326, Cuper to Bignon, 23 February 1714: 'Je souhaiterois de tout mon coeur que le scavant Pere Bonjour fut ici; il entend parfaitement cette Langue [Egyptienne] et le Chinois, comme j'ai appris par ses Lettres, par ses Livres, & même par sa conversation, ayant eu l'honneur de le loger chez moi pendant quelques jours'.
- 114 'Commercia inquam doctrinae et mutuae lucis', Leibniz to Giovanni Laureati, 12 November 1689. See G.W. Leibniz, *Leibniz korrespondiert mit China*, Frankfurt am Main 1990, p. 11. Cf. Hertroijs, op. cit. (note 7), p. 132.
- 115 'une nouvelle manière d'Arithmétique que j'avois inventée, qui ... au lieu de nos dix caracteres ne se sert que de deux 0 et 1 ... C'est que les anciens caracteres du célèbre Fohy, un des premiers princes des Chinois qui a vécu bien avant 3000 ans ... sont justement cette Arithmétique'. Leibniz to Witsen, 2 March 1704, see G.W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Göttingen 2013, 1st series, vol. 23, no. 101, p. 141.
- 116 Witsen to Leibniz, 6 June 1704, referring to César Caze d'Harmonville (1641-1720). Ibid., no. 292, pp. 405-06.
- 117 'manibus tractavi et oculis meis vidi Aprili proximo Amstelaedami ... lanx ex metallo litteris, si quid judicare possum de re tam obscura, Chincis inscripta'. Cuper to Leibniz, 10 September 1704. Ibid., no. 500, p. 704.

- 118 Cuper sent Leibniz the image on 10 April 1705, see G.W. Leibniz, *Der Briefwechsel mit den Jesuiten in China (1689-1714)*, Hamburg 2005, p. 757.
- 119 J. Bouvet, *t'Leven en bedrijf van den tegenwoordigen Keiser van China*, Utrecht 1699; F. Perkins, *Leibniz and China*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 116-18.
- 120 Leibniz to Bouvet, 18 August 1705, and Leibniz to Visdelou, 20 August 1705, Leibniz, op. cit. (note 118), no. 57, pp. 486, 494.
- 121 The French authorities did not permit Visdelou, who left China in 1709, to return to Europe. J. Witek, 'Claude Visdelou and the Chinese Paradox', in *Actes du vie colloque international de Sinologie de Chantilly*, Taipei 1995, pp. 371-85.
- 122 Visdelou to Leibniz, 9 February 1714; Leibniz, op. cit. (note 118), no. 70, p. 605.
- 123 C. von Collani (ed.), *Eine wissenschaftliche Akademie für China. Briefe des China-missionars Joachim Bouvet S.J. an Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz und Jean-Paul Bignon über die Erforschung der chinesischen Kultur, Sprache und Geschichte*, Stuttgart 1989.
- 124 Hoang's partner was probably Etienne Fourmont (1683-1745) or Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749).
- 125 'votre Chinois et une autre personne habile travialleront à une Grammaire Chinoise', Cuper to Bignon, 4 March 1713, Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), no. 36, p. 298; see also 10 June 1714, no. 48, p. 331. Cf. J. Spence, 'The Paris Years of Arcadio Huang', in *Chinese Roundabout. Essays in History and Culture*, New York 1992, pp. 12-24.
- 126 'ce sera à Monsieur l'Abbé Bignon que la République des Lettres après bien d'autres obligations aura encore celle-cy de luy avoir procuré et des livres de la Chine et des moyens de les entendre', Fourmont to De Prémare, 17 September 1727; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Mss. Archives 68, fols. 60-61; C. Leung, *Etienne Fourmont (1683-1745): Oriental and Chinese Languages in Eighteenth-Century France*, Louvain 2002, p. 139.
- 127 'Vous avez vu ... par le Miroir Chinois, que les premiers ont été dans ces quartiers; & il est constant que les Chams de Tartarie se sont par reprises rendus maitres de la partie Septentrionale de la Chine'. Cuper to Bignon, 7 October 1710; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), no. 22, p. 251.
- 128 'Puisque les Chinois ont été maitres de cette Isle, je m'imagine, ... que ce sont de vieilles Lettres de ce Peuple, qu'il n'entend pas aujourd'hui lui-même. Telles sont les Lettres qu'on a trouvées dans un Sepulchre en Sibirie écrites sur un Miroir de Metal, qui est entre les mains de Mr. Witzen, & dont je vous ai, si je ne me trompe, envoyé copie, il y a long-tem[p]s'. Cuper to Bignon, 23 June 1714; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), no. 49, p. 334.
- 129 Cuper to Bignon, 23 February 1714; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), no. 45, p. 326. Cuper's reference to an Englishman who saw Chinese as 'la Langue originaire du Genre humain' is to J. Webb, *Essay Endeavouring the Probability that the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language*, London 1669.
- 130 'Rien n'a plus l'air d'un paradoxe que l'opinion de ceux qui donnent à la langue Chinoise la prérogative de l'ancienneté sur toutes les autres généralement. Je sçais bien que ces peuples comptent plus de quarante mille ans ... Est-il glorieux à une nation que se picque d'esprit d'avoir pendant tant d'années fait si peu de découvertes dans les Arts, et dans les sciences[?] ... Leur langue est un assemblage [illegible] de mots sans ordre, et sans liaisons ... Pour moi je la crois remplie de difficultés, et c'est aussi le sentiment de notre Chinois. ... Sçavoir si cette nation a eu autrefois des lettres qui ne sont plus connues aujourd'hui, c'est ce que je n'entreprendrai pas de défendre. Cette hypothèse cependant ne ferait gueres de mon gout. Jamais peuple n'a été plus attaché à ses usages que celui de la Chine: et dans l'histoire de ce puissant royaume, on ne voit pas qu'il ait été rien innové, ni dans les caractères, ni dans la langue'. Bignon to Cuper, 12 July 1714; KB 72H7, fol. 408.
- 131 'J'ai bien de la peine à croire que le grand nombre de monosyllabes soit une preuve secure de l'ancienneté d'une langue ... Ne pourroit on pas dire que cela vient uniquement de la paresse, et de la vivacité des orientaux. Les chaleurs du climat qu'ils habitent les rendent extrêmement mols. Mais en mesure ils ont la conception fort prompte, et entendent les choses à demi mot. Cela pose il est aisé de comprendre que les monosyllabes, ont deü, et doivent estre fort à la mode parmi ces peuples'. Bignon to Cuper, 24 February 1715; KB 72H7, fol. 441r.
- 132 'Vidi iterum Amstelaedami lancem illam, est aliquantum pictura major, sed dole mecum infortunium quod illi objectum est. Illustr. Witzenius eam ex Musaeo in cubiculo, quo me recipere constituerat, intulerat, et antequam adessem, e manu ejus cecidat, fractaq[ue] est in 10 vel 12 frustra, licet caderit in tapetas ex [illegible] molli factos; adeo fragilis erat, ex quibuscunque [illegible] demum metallis (neque enim unius generis

- est) fuerit conflator'. Cuper to Sperling, 29 November 1705; KB 72C45, fols. 92r-95r. Fols. 96r-97v contain excerpts from Witsen's letter to Cuper, 20 October 1705, see note 8.
- 133 'Doleo profecto non mediocriter fatum chalybis istius, sive lancis, sive speculi istius Sinensis ... Sed consolatur me ejus explicatio, quae licet Kirckerianae [sic] valde similis sit, quam in Oedypo suo tractat'. Sperling to Cuper, 16 January 1706; KB 72C45, fol. 98v.
- 134 De la Croze to Cuper, 18 April 1711; KB 72H19. De la Croze lobbies for Bourguet, a French merchant in Venice. Cf. Peters, op. cit. (note 3), p. 288.
- 135 'le plus grans imposteur & le plus hardi menteur que la Republique des Lettres ait jamais produit'. De la Croze to Cuper, 16 January 1713, KB 72H19, fol. 24v.
- 136 Cuper to De la Croze, 4 December 1708, KB 72H18; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), vol. 7, pp. 18-19.
- 137 'Cette inscription n'est peut être pas si ancienne que le disent les Chinois de Batavia. Cette nation a de tout tem[p]s été fort portée à exagerer ses antiquitez'. De la Croze to Cuper, KB 72H19, 1, fol. 18r (undated attachment, c. 1710-13).
- 138 'J'ai reconnu d'abord les deux premieres lettres & quelques autres, qui ne different en rien de celles d'aujourd'hui, comme vous verrez dans le papier que j'ai joint a cette lettre. Si au lieu de l'explication, qui est assurément une paraphrase trop étendue, j'avois eu le lecture en Chinois, je veux dire le pronociation écrite en lettres Européennes, je me serois bien fait fort d'en donner une explication litterale en Latin, ou en François. Au reste je ne vois rien de surprenant dans cette piece, par rapport au lieu où elle a été trouvée. De tems de Cinghis Cam & de ses successeurs les Chinois & les Tartares ont été assez confondues ensemble ... J'ai soupçonné autrefois que cette nation venoit d'Egypte, non seulement à cause des Hieroglyphiques', De la Croze to Cuper, undated (c. 1710-13), KB 72H19, vol. 1, fol. 17.
- 139 De la Croze to Cuper, 27 September 1709, KB 72H18, fol. 34v.
- 140 De la Croze to Cuper, 17 January 1711, KB 72H19, fol. 5v.
- 141 'car son Miroir, trouvé dans un tombeau temoigne que ce dernier Peuple y a été il y a plus de 1800 ans, & les Histoires témoignent, que les Chinois ont occupé il y a plus de mille ans la Sibirie & le Pays voisin, qu'ils y ont envoyé des Colonies ... & Mr. Witsen me mande que ... le Jesuite Couplet lui a montré devant quelques personnes une Bible Latine manuscrite, trouvée chez les Idolatres. Le Christianisme des Siberiens est prouvé encore'. Cuper to De la Croze, 1 May 1712; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), no. 32, p. 107-08. Witsen himself was more cautious: this Bible might have been taken to China by Marco Polo, Witsen to Cuper, 8 February 1714; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 56, p. 374.
- 142 Reland to Cuper, 11 February 1712, KB 72H11. '[Masson] demeure proche d'Utrecht, et il s'entend ou Chinois: car Mr. Reland me mande, que nous aurons une Dissertation de sa façon sur cette Langue'. Cuper to De la Croze, 19 October 1712; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), no. 33, pp. 108, 113. Cf. P. Masson, 'Dissertation critique sur la langue Chinoise', in J. Masson and S. Masson, *Histoire critique de la république des lettres*, Utrecht 1712-18, vol. 3, pp. 29-106, vol. 4, pp. 85-93.
- 143 'Je vous dirai franchement que je ne crois pas qu'il sache les éléments de la langue Chinoise'. De la Croze to Cuper, 27 March 1713; KB 72H19, fol. 29v. Cf. Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), p. 127.
- 144 Masson based his theory on the radicals which are up to the present day used to order Chinese characters in a dictionary. Modern scholarship uses the 214 Kangxi Radicals, De la Croze mentions a total of 320. 'les Dissertations Chinoises sont dignes de compassion ... on pourroit refuter Geometriquement son systeme, en faisant voir par l'art combinatoire le resultat des 320. mots radicaux Chinois comparez avec les 5640 mots Hebreux de l'ancien Testament ... La langue Chinoise ne peut pas être une langue Originale'. De la Croze to Cuper, 14 January 1714; KB 72H19, fols. 1v-2r.
- 145 'Dien Sinesen Heer konde alles lesen, en schrijven, dat Sinees was'. Witsen to Cuper, 5 December 1710; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 36, pp. 332-35; F. Valentijn, *Oud en nieuw Oost-Indiën, derde deel*, The Hague 1858, p. 539 (first ed. Dordrecht/Amsterdam 1724-26).
- 146 E. Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age, 1575-1715*, Leiden/Boston 2010, p. 327.
- 147 Weststeijn, op. cit. (note 86).
- 148 'Amstelaedamum, celeberrimum illud orbis terrarum emporium'. Cuper to Bonjour, 16 January 1708, KB 72H29.