Contemporary China Studies in the Netherlands

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1. The disappearance of contemporary China in Chinese Studies

After a prolonged siege, Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga) in 1662 forced the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C.) to abandon Fort Zeelandia on Taiwan. Since then, the Netherlands never had any systematic and enduring imperial, colonial or missionary involvement in China, a situation quite different from many other European powers. As other articles in this volume document, the growth of the study of China in the second half of the nineteenth century was mostly a modest offshoot of colonial involvement in the Dutch Indies. The interest of early sinologists was largely focussed on aspects of what was then contemporary China that were of practical use in dealing with Chinese subjects in the Dutch Indies: classical Chinese, southern Chinese spoken languages, translation, secret societies, law, religion. Despite these limitations, what made Dutch sinologists of this period very different from later generations was their awareness that contemporary China ought to be understood as a complex whole. Classical literati culture and the popular and vulgar realities of contemporary daily life were connected, connections that had to be understood as much through close and personal observation and study as immersion in the classics.

The end of the Chinese empire came in 1911. China’s imperial present suddenly became its traditional past. Sinology did not respond like one would expect by shifting its focus to the momentous political, cultural, social and economic transformations that constituted China’s new present. Instead of turning to China’s troubled path of modernization, sinology transformed itself into a fully professionalized and esoteric text-based academic discipline of China’s high, literate

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2 Throughout this article, the terms “contemporary China”, “modern China” and “pre-modern China” are not pinned down on particular historical periods, but are used relative to the contemporary period being described. “Contemporary China”, the subject of the article, thus is China now, regardless of whether “now” is the seventeenth or twenty-first century. This hopefully serves to highlight my main point, namely that in certain periods China specialists gained, lost and regained a professional interest in what was happening in China at that particular time, and that this had less to do with academic curiosity or priorities, but was connected to the shifting importance attached to China in Dutch society and politics.
culture imagined as purely a thing of China’s glorious past, unconnected with the messy present of the new contemporary China.

Barend ter Haar in this volume and Maurice Freedman and Harriet Zurndorfer in earlier articles already have documented this remarkable epistemological shift that is best illustrated by – but by no means limited to – the figure of J.J.M. de Groot. This shift is made even more remarkable by the fact that, in the Netherlands at least, leading figures of philological sinology in the twentieth century, such as Jan Duyvendak, Erik Zürcher and for a brief period Wilt Idema, for at least part of their career wrote and commented extensively on developments in contemporary China, while Anthony Hulsewé, Zürcher and Idema in fact received their first academic appointments as lecturers of modern Chinese or modern China. However, all of them carefully restricted their serious academic work to text-based studies of pre-modern China, although later several of them (Piet van Loon, Kristofer Schipper, Idema, ter Haar) increasingly an interest emerged in the vernacular aspects of traditional Chinese society and culture reminiscent of the sinological pioneers of a century earlier. Contemporary modern China, however, to them continued to remain out of bounds as an object of serious academic inquiry.

2. The irrelevance of contemporary China

The disappearance of contemporary China within sinology is a remarkable turn of events that continues to colour the size, shape and form of Chinese studies in the Netherlands (and many other continental European countries) even today. Some of this shift may be explained by the fact that the conceptual and methodological toolkit of sinology simply was not up to the challenges of new China’s troubled path of modernization. However, a turn to the social sciences and modern history might have helped here. Before 1911, there had been many connections between sinology and ethnology (de Groot after all had been professor of ethnology before taking up the chair in Chinese). There is no particular reason to assume that other social sciences could not also have been made to serve the purposes of Chinese studies. This in fact happened in the United States and Japan from the 1920s onward, but was only pioneered in the Netherlands in the 1970s by E.B. (“Ward”) Vermeer (1944). My own guess here is that the “philological turn” in European sinology was caused more by a combination of disenchantment with the new contemporary reality in China and the country’s insignificance on the global scene. After 1911, China foreswore the glorious traditional high culture and unique political system that had made it so special. All that remained were the poverty and backwardness of the “sick man of Asia” with the addition of a rapid descent into political chaos and, until the ascent of Japan in the 1930s, irrelevance both as an independent power and a theatre for the global and colonial preoccupations of European powers.3

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4 For the U.S. and Japan, China after 1911 was far more important than for the Europeans. For Japan, China was the first and most important target of imperial expansion. The U.S. were without a large colonial empire or explicitly colonial ambitions beyond the Philippines, but nevertheless sought to expand their influence in the Pacific. For Americans, China also was a prime focus of missionary activity. Many American China scholars in the pre- and post-Second World War period had either been missionaries themselves or had grown up in China as children of missionaries.
Dutch sinologists, so it appears, therefore could only take China seriously as an extinct civilization, but not as a country and a nation that was trying to carve out a place in the modern world. Frederik van Heek’s (1907-1987) brief involvement with China in the 1930s illustrates this point. Van Heek was trained in Amsterdam in social geography, sociology and ethnology and was to my knowledge until the 1970s the only social scientist in the Netherlands to do research in and on contemporary China. In 1935 he published a lengthy Ph.D. thesis on *Western Technology and Social Life in China* based on six months of research in China itself. The thesis was essentially about the mismatch between Chinese society and culture and western modern technology and methods of industrial production. In 1936 he published another book on the miserable living conditions of Chinese sailors stranded in the Netherlands because of the global economic depression in the 1930s.\(^5\)

As Harriet Zurndorfer has shown in an article on Dutch sinology already invoked somewhat earlier, van Heek chose to work on China out of a personal interest in the Chinese textile industry, the primary competitor of textile manufacturers like his father in the Twente region of the Netherlands. His work on poverty-stricken Chinese in the Netherlands was commissioned by the *Amsterdam Committee for Support of Destitute Chinese* (Amsterdamsche Comité voor Hulp aan Noodlijdende Chineezien), a group of Chinese-Indonesian students in the Netherlands who had taken pity on their fellow Chinese and felt they needed to know more about them in order better to come to their assistance.\(^6\)

Van Heek is mainly remembered among China scholars in the Netherlands for his book on the Dutch Chinese that remains a unique document based on first-hand sociological field research. His work on western technology in China is largely forgotten. Written in Dutch it had little or no international impact, while in the Netherlands it singularly failed to start a tradition of research on contemporary China. In his subsequent career as the founding father of the Leiden school of sociology, van Heek’s concern was with social inequality and stratification in the Netherlands. There is, as far as I am aware, no indication of a systematic interaction and dialogue on contemporary China with his sinological colleagues a few hundred yards down the road in Leiden.

Van Heek never made school as a scholar of contemporary China. China, it seems, simply did not merit systematic and prolonged inquiry by social scientists. Van Heek’s early work on China remained a curious youthful excursion, and contemporary China ultimately proved equally irrelevant to sociology in the Netherlands and the philological concerns of van Heek’s sinological colleagues in Leiden.

3. Rediscovering Contemporary China in Amsterdam and Leiden

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\(^6\) Zurndorfer, “Sociology, Social Science, and Sinology in the Netherlands before World War II: With Special Reference to the Work of Frederik van Heek,”
The shock of the “loss of China” in 1949 and the Chinese involvement in the Korean War in 1950-1953 exposed modern and contemporary China scholars in the United States to the anti-communist witch-hunts of the McCarthy era. Taiwan, new home to the Guomindang, became a major U.S. interest on the East Asian frontline against communism. Although little funding or encouragement was forthcoming during that decade, research on contemporary China at U.S. universities continued. Likewise, in Britain an interest in China continued to be sustained even in the darkest hours of the Cold War, both among the British Left and business and government. Mao had, after all, allowed Britain to retain Hong Kong, and so contemporary China never completely disappeared from British maps, minds and universities. In the late 1950s and early 1960s with the Sino-Soviet split and the escalating conflict in Vietnam, China quickly became more prominent on American and British diplomatic radar screens. Government and private funding for contemporary China began to be made available, earlier and more plentiful in the U.S.; somewhat later and more miserly in the U.K. Contemporary China scholarship in the U.S. and the U.K. quickly grew and prospered. The emphasis was very solidly on the social sciences: politics, economics, sociology and (more marginally) anthropology. Modern language training was also emphasized, but no longer connected to the philological traditions of sinological scholarship. Contemporary China studies had been reinvented as an independent field of academic research.  

In the Netherlands a similar pattern unfolded, albeit more hesitantly and on a much more modest scale. After 1949, a few scholars continued an individual interest in an aspect of contemporary China, such as M.H. van der Valk (1908-1978) at the Law Faculty of Leiden University or the diplomat M.J. Meyer (1912-1991) who both wrote on law in the People’s Republic, the Republican period and late imperial China. Otherwise, the fifties were a period without new funding or fresh scholarly talent for contemporary China studies. In 1960, Wim Wertheim from the University of Amsterdam (then still named Amsterdam City University, Gemeente Universiteit Amsterdam) and Erik Zürcher in Leiden took the lead in establishing the China Study Committee (China Studie Comité). In 1963, the Committee published a collection of introductory articles on aspects on traditional and modern China. The Committee consisted of academics, civil servants, business people and artists with an interest or expertise in China. It aimed to “further the study of, and disseminate knowledge on, modern China.” Although it is unclear what other activities this committee engaged in except for a vague mention of “lectures, conference and advice to students, travellers to

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9 Wim Wertheim and Erik Zürcher (eds.), China tussen eergisteren en overmorgen (China between the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow) (Den Haag: W. van Hoeve, 1963) The Committee also published China informatie, a periodic update on events in China. In 1986, the Documentation Centre for Contemporary China in Leiden obtained the rights to this title – and more importantly its list of subscribers – using it as a launch pad for China Information, a new scholarly journal in English. Although no longer edited in Leiden, China Information continues to thrive as one of the three or four most important international journals in the modern China field.
China and publishers,” lobbying for contemporary China research and teaching was part of its mission.

Like in many other countries but a few years later, in the Netherlands the Cultural Revolution (either 1966-1969 or 1966-1976, depending on which version of official Chinese historiography one prefers) created confusion, controversy, debate and even a modest interest in what was happening in China. Barend ter Haar’s article in this book already deals with the main events and protagonists and it therefore suffices here merely to state the most important effects of the work of the China Study Committee and the Cultural Revolution debate for the subsequent development of contemporary Chinese studies.

The first of these is that in Leiden contemporary China finally became incorporated into sinology when Zürcher secured generous government funding for a new Documentation Centre for Contemporary China in Leiden. The first four staff members of the Documentation Centre were C. Schepel, Wilt Idema, Ward Vermeer and somewhat later Lloyd Haft. Schepel continues to be known mainly as the Dutch translator of Mao Zedong’s little red book, while Idema and Haft went on to do other, more traditionally sinological things. Ward Vermeer however used his training as a sinologist and historian to become an internationally respected and widely published specialist of the economy and society of contemporary China.

We will return to the Documentation Centre, but first some words are needed on the second main outcome of the renewed importance of China in the 1960s and early 1970s. Unlike Leiden, the University of Amsterdam did not manage to establish itself as a centre for the study of contemporary China. As a bastion of the New Left in the Netherlands in the 1970s, Amsterdam would have been a natural counterpoint to more conservative Leiden. Yet this was not for lack of trying on the part of Wim Wertheim, a noted Indonesia scholar whose interest, even fascination with China gathered pace as the revolution there seemed to deepen. For Wertheim, the Maoist revolutionary experiment served as a vital counterpoint and a way out of the continued poverty, underdevelopment and exploitation in other Asian countries, chiefly Indonesia and India. Unfortunately, in the sixties the Amsterdam Faculty of Arts increasingly divested itself of its remaining commitments to non-European cultures, a move that continues to determine to this very day the shape and form of the Humanities there. Wertheim therefore argued for investment in contemporary China at the wrong place and the wrong time. He only succeeded in securing an appointment for Zürcher for one day a week (1963-1971), but only to teach Chinese language, despite the fact that the appointment had the title of “History of the ‘Far East’.” Although Zürcher apparently managed to throw in the occasional lecture or content class, this condition severely restricted the development of Chinese studies before it had even begun.  


12 The information on Amsterdam in the 1960s here is from an interview and subsequent correspondence with Otto van den Muijzenberg on 28 June 2012 and 6 July 2012. Van den Muijzenberg was Wertheim’s successor when he retired in 1972. The dates of Zürcher’s appointment in
Another factor that may have prohibited Wertheim from securing government or university funding might possibly have been the fact that his inclination was to make sweeping statements on the state of the Maoist revolution in China based on brief visits to the country in the best tradition of western fellow travelling. Under very difficult conditions that are hardly imaginable now, he tried his level best to do research when in China. The problem, however, was that he only was looking for Maoist socialism and was much less interested in China itself as a culture and society. In his last book on China written in the 1990s, Wertheim in fact confirmed as much when he wrote that “[i]n the course of the 1980s, my interest in China diminished considerably. It became increasingly clear that the tendency, already noticeable in 1979, toward a transition to a market economy and cooperation with foreign capitalist powers, would rapidly continue after 1980…With this, China lost its attraction as a large-scale, unique social and ideological experiment”.

The infamous Loes Schenk affair in 1975 should have been the final nail in the coffin of any flirtations of the New Left at institutionalization of China studies in Amsterdam. Loes Schenk-Sandbergen (1941) was a Ph.D. student of Wertheim. Her thesis on street sweepers in India included a brief section on China intended to demonstrate how much better off the poor in China were. Erik Zürcher from Leiden was co-examiner (co-referent) and a member of the dissertation committee. He must have had doubts about the quality of the thesis yet have been unwilling to confront Wertheim. At the last minute he informed the committee that he would be unable to attend the examination committee meeting and thesis defence, asking a then still very young Wilt Idema to go in his stead. After heated debate behind closed doors among the committee members, Schenk–Sandbergen was in the end given her doctorate, but not cum laude like Wertheim wanted. Already before the examination, Vrij Nederland (Free Netherlands) columnist Renate Rubenstein (Tamar) had written a scathing attack on Schenk-Sandbergen, creating a highly public debate and controversy that left a serious stain on the academic reputation of Wertheim personally and Amsterdam anthropology in general.

Yet a few years later Schenk’s doctorate had an indirect happy outcome, at least for China studies in Amsterdam. In 1978, the South and Southeast Asia Department of the

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13 A collection of essays on these study trips was published as Willem F. Wertheim, China om de zeven jaar: studiereizen naar het aardse rijk (China every seven years: study tours to the Heavenly Empire) (Berchem, Breda: EPO, 1993) The most notorious fellow traveller in the Netherlands (and France) was film director Joris Ivens, who had been Chairman Mao’s reliable propagandist since the 1930s. For the final word on Ivens, see Michel Korzec, “Joris Ivens”, Ik kan alles uitleggen (I can explain anything) (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1994), pp. 56-81.

14 “In de loop van de jaren tachtig verminderde mijn belangstelling voor China aanzienlijk. Het werd steeds duidelijker dat de tendentie die al in 1979 kon worden opgemerkt, de overgang naar een markteconomie en naar samenwerking met buitenlandse kapitalistische machten, zich na 1980 in snel tempo zou doorzetten…Hiermee verloor China voor mij zijn aantrekkingskracht als een grootscheeps uniek experiment op maatschappelijk en ideologisch gebied”, Wertheim, China om de zeven jaar: studiereizen naar het aardse rijk (China every seven years: study tours to the Heavenly Empire), p. 300.

15 Wilt Idema, personal communication 21 March 2012; Otto van den Muijzenberg, personal communication 6 July 2012.
Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology (Antropologisch-Sociologisch Centrum; A.S.C.) had to fill the vacancy left by the departure of Southeast Asianist Guus van Liebenstein. The choice was between consolidating departmental strength in Southeast Asian studies (what most of the academic staff argued for), or the appointment of a China specialist on the argument that the department could no longer ignore China’s revolution. The latter position was taken by Schenk-Sandbergen and the majority of the student representatives on the departmental management committee. A testimony to student power (and their occasional wisdom) that is now almost unimaginable, the students and Schenk-Sandbergen won. An open international search yielded the appointment of modern China historian Gregor Benton (1944). Benton was a sinologist with a Cambridge degree in Oriental Studies. Although Cambridge at the time was hardly a hotbed of modern China studies, Benton’s main research interest was in the history of Chinese Communism. As a young undergraduate student I obviously was not privy to the background and details of his appointment, but Benton must have had enough credibility as a leftist to pass muster in Amsterdam, especially with the students, despite the fact that he had very little sympathy for the Maoist dictatorship and its western supporters. His personal and academic interests in contemporary China revolved around Trotskyism, political protest, dissidence and the possibilities of democratic change. This must have been as much of a disappointment to the supporters of Maoism as it was welcomed by the many other academic staff and students whose leftist leanings did not include support for communist dictatorship.

Benton stayed in Amsterdam until 1988, after which he returned to Leeds before moving on to Cardiff in 1999 where he continued his career as a prolific author of books on Trotskyism, the Chinese Communist Revolution and – an interest he developed while in Amsterdam initially to create fieldwork opportunities for students – the overseas Chinese. He retired in 2009. In the eight years he spent in Amsterdam, Benton made a serious attempt at establishing modern China studies, encouraging students to write their MA (doctoraal) thesis on China or the overseas Chinese in the Netherlands. He also emphasized the need to learn modern Chinese – and for a while

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16 Interview with Otto van den Muijzenberg on 28 June 2012.
17 Gregor Benton, personal communication, 29 June 2012.
18 During his period in Amsterdam, Benton’s main publications included the following: Gregor Benton, Wild Lilies: Poisonous Weeds: Dissident Voices from People’s China (London: Pluto Press, 1982), Wang Fanxi and Gregor Benton, Chinese Revolutionary, Memoirs, 1919-1949 (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1980), Gregor Benton, “The South Anhui Incident,” Journal of Asian Studies, 45, 4 (1986), pp. 681-720, Gregor Benton and Hans Vermeulen (eds.), De Chinezen (The Chinese) (Muiderberg: Dick Coutinho, 1987) However, perhaps more important for China studies in the Netherlands were the many working papers that he published either alone or with one of his colleagues or students, usually in the working papers series of the Anthropological-Sociological Centre of the University of Amsterdam. They set an example, introduced new scholarship and helped us think about publishing in English as an achievable goal.
19 After van Heek’s book in 1936, research on the Chinese in the Netherlands only occasionally had been done by enterprising MA students of anthropology, but a sustained tradition of research was never established. Benton energetically went out to change this state of affairs. He particularly put much effort into the MA thesis of Henk Wubben (1942) on the history of the Chinese before the Second World War, which was published as Henk Wubben, “Chinezen en ander Aziaats ongedierte” : lotgevallen van Chinese immigranten in Nederland, 1911-1940 (“Chinese and other Asian vermin: the vicissitudes of Chinese immigrants in the Netherlands, 1911-1940) (Zutphen: De Walburg Press, 1986). The title, taken from a Dutch police document from the 1930s (hence the quotation marks and outdated spelling of “Chinezen” (Chinese) as “Chineezen”), was intended to foreground the racism of the Dutch authorities at the time. The subtlety of Wubben’s rhetorical strategy was wasted on many of the leaders of the Dutch Chinese community, who, despite repeated explanations, vehemently protested with the
even offered an introductory course himself – encouraging students such as myself to spend a year in China as an exchange student.

Slowly a modest “Amsterdam school” of modern Chinese studies emerged, increasingly also in cooperation with the Free University Amsterdam (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, in English officially called VU University Amsterdam), especially after the creation of the joint Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam (CASA) in 1987. However, apart from Margaret Sleeboom (1961), who in the end wrote a two-book (!) Ph.D. thesis under the supervision of Peter van der Veer, present author Frank Pieke (1957) who went to Berkeley, no other anthropology students have come through as China specialists in Amsterdam. Like Sleeboom, Jeroen de Kloet (1967) received his Ph.D. under the supervision of Peter van der Veer in 2001. His background was in mass communication and media studies, which is where he continued his career in the Amsterdam. CASA was somewhat more successful in recruiting Chinese Ph.D. students through the relationship of the University of Amsterdam with Xiamen University: Wang Hongshan, Li Minghuan, Song Ping and Wu Xiao An. Of these Ph.D.’s with an Amsterdam pedigree the Chinese returned to China (Li and Song to Xiamen, Wang and Wu to Peking University), while Pieke went to Leiden in 1986, moving on to Oxford in 1995. In 2004 Margaret Sleeboom was made a university lecturer at the Anthropology department of the University of Amsterdam, but soon (in 2006) she moved to the University of Sussex. After her Amsterdam doctorate, she shifted focus from academic nationalism to the social, political and economic consequences of the application of the new genetic technologies in China, India and Japan, and interest that she has continued to pursue after her move to Britain.

After the departure of Benton in 1988 the continuation of China studies in Amsterdam became precarious. China remained a concern only of Anthropology, where Leiden-trained sinological historian Leo Douw was hired on a part-time basis in 1989 (the other half of Douw’s appointment was with the Department of History of the Free University Amsterdam) to replace Benton and, as already said in the previous paragraph, Margaret Sleeboom in 2004. Together with the author of this piece on behalf of Leiden, in 1995 Douw secured major funding from the International Institute of Asian Studies for a

understandable argument that the title was disrespectful to the Chinese and risked merely confirming racist attitudes among the book’s readers.


22 The revised thesis was published as Jeroen de Kloet, China with a Cut: Globalisation, Urban Youth and Popular Music (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

project on overseas Chinese home areas (qiaoxiang) in China that funded postdocs, conferences and research, thus raising Amsterdam’s China studies profile during these otherwise lean years. However, further appointments in China studies, either in Anthropology or other disciplines, never materialized. When push came to shove, South and particularly Southeast Asia (Indonesia) were always more important. Other disciplines, until recently at least, never even had the inclination or the incentive to venture into the China field, an area far removed from their core interests and a seemingly high-risk adventure. The university’s central administration too apparently was disinclined to develop a serious and sustained strategy for the development of China studies. In retrospect, Wertheim’s inability to match Leiden’s early initiative in contemporary China studies continued to hamstring the university; the Benton appointment turned out to be a single prairie fire started during a brief period of student empowerment. For decades “China” remained Leiden’s territory, a perception that only very recently has started to shift.

Moreover, Amsterdam’s advantage of kick-starting modern and contemporary China studies through the importation of British expertise did not last long. In Leiden, the Documentation Centre for Contemporary China really only had one serious expert in the field, namely Vermeer, who built up a formidable reputation both in the Netherlands and abroad as an expert on Chinese development, agriculture and food, land use, economy and, somewhat later, law. He also continued to develop a second specialization in Chinese economic history, especially of the Qing and Republican periods. He published prodigiously and carried out numerous assignments and consultancy projects, becoming one of Europe’s leading all-round specialists on modern China. Although Kurt Radtke (1945) had joined him at the Documentation Centre and quickly developed into an equally excellent scholar, his work on Sino-Japanese relations gradually shifted more to Japan. In the end he was appointed to a chair in the Japanese studies department in Leiden.

Just one man is not enough. Moreover, trained as a sinologist and historian, Vermeer was not a social scientist. He was less inclined to engage with questions and debates in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and especially politics and international relations. It was therefore fortuitous that quite unintentionally Leiden copied the Amsterdam experience when A.J. (Tony) Saich (1953) was hired in 1982 as teaching replacement for Vermeer. This was followed by a research project (with Stefan Landsberger) on science and technology in China for the Dutch Ministry of Education and Science. Shortly afterwards he was made a university lecturer and ultimately was appointed to a personal chair of the politics and administration of contemporary China. Saich held an MSc in Economics from SOAS and had worked as a lecturer at Newcastle-upon-Tyne Polytechnic before coming to Leiden. In 1986 he received his Ph.D. from Leiden on a thesis based on the Ministry Education project. In the 1990s, Saich’s career seriously took off when senior scholars in the U.S. (Roderick MacFarquhar at Harvard, David Apter at Yale and Richard Baum at UCLA) took note of his work, inviting him over as visiting scholar and (in the case of Apter) involving

25 The thesis was published a few years later as Tony Saich, China’s Science Policy in the 80’s (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).
him in a research project of his own. On the back of his contacts and reputation in the U.S., between 1994 and 1997, Saich was appointed Representative of the Ford Foundation in Beijing. He left Leiden permanently in 1999 to take up a chair at the Kennedy School of Government of Harvard University.

The presence of Vermeer and Saich together transformed the face of contemporary China studies in Leiden, especially because very quickly further appointments were added at the Documentation Centre for Contemporary China: Woei-Lien Chong (1957) and Stefan Landsberger (1955) as documentalists and Frank Pieke (1957) as a researcher and later a lectureship. Vermeer continued his work on the economy and development of China rooted in the sinological tradition. He set up a very popular undergraduate track in Chinese business and economy (popularly called the “management variant”). Saich added expertise in the politics and international relations of China and in the British tradition of contemporary China studies. Visiting professorships of Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan (1986, en route between Kansas and the Australian National University) and Richard Baum (1990, from UCLA) added to Leiden’s shift towards orientation on Anglo-Saxon scholarship instead of the European sinological tradition. In the 1990s, with Leiden having become the leading centre for contemporary China studies in continental Europe, Ph.D. study on an aspect of contemporary China became a regular feature.

In addition to their activities in Leiden, in the late 1980s and early 1990s Saich, Landsberger and Pieke also worked on projects at the Amsterdam-based International Institute of Social History (IISH). Saich carried out a project on the IISH’s archive on Henk Sneevliet alias Maring, Comintern Representative with the Chinese Communist Party in the early 1920s, thus developing a second field of expertise in Chinese Communist Party history. Pieke created an archive of documents on the 1980s movement in Beijing that he had witnessed himself while doing research for his doctorate. Landsberger worked on his expanding collection of propaganda posters

26 The collaboration between Apter and Saich led to the publication of an important study on the Yan’an period, David E. Apter and Tony Saich, Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994).


29 Frank N. Pieke, Fons Lamboo, Hudi Tashin and Agnes Ee Hong Khoo (eds.), Inventory of the Collection Chinese People’s Movement, Spring 1989 at the International Institute of Social History.
that eventually was put on-line, making China studies in Leiden instantly recognizable to students all over the world.\(^\text{30}\)

Yet not all was well in Leiden. Vermeer and Saich could not get along. Zürcher’s (head of the China studies department until 1990) strained relationship with Vermeer and friendship with Saich added further fuel to the flames of competition and animosity between the two men. In the 1990s Saich spent long periods of time away from Leiden, either in the U.S. or in Beijing as head of the Ford Foundation. His departure, it was felt, would only be a matter of time, although in the end the author of this piece beat him to it when he left for Oxford in 1995. Landsberger replaced Pieke as university lecturer of the society of modern China, while Saich’s prolonged absence created room to hire a new lecturer of Chinese politics. International searches had, by this time, become more common and a recent Ph.D. from SOAS and former anti-corruption officer at the Independent Commission Against Corruption in Hong Kong, Tak Wing Ngo (1962) was appointed. At Leiden Ngo developed into a well-known scholar of the politics of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, editing numerous books and succeeding Woei Lien Chong as editor of China Information in 2002. In 2008, he was made Extraordinary Chair Professor of Asian History at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. In 2010, Ngo resigned from his lecturership in Leiden and took up an appointment as professor of Political Science at the University of Macau, but retained the professorship in Rotterdam.

Despite Ngo’s appointment, the final departure of Saich in 1999 left a real gap. His professorship had been a personal one and thus automatically lapsed when he left. Saich’s leaving also came at a time when many other personnel changes were happening almost all at once. At the same time as Saich, Wilt Idema (1944), professor of Chinese language and literature, likewise left Leiden for Harvard. He was quickly succeeded by his former student Maghie van Crevel (1963). The following year Barend ter Haar (1958) was appointed as the successor to Kristofer Schipper, who had replaced Zürcher when the latter retired in 1993. Both had extensive international experience before returning to Leiden (van Crevel in Sydney and ter Haar in Heidelberg) and realized that a Chinese studies programme without a senior modern China figure would internationally no longer entirely be taken seriously. They strongly supported the university’s plan to fund a new, regular chair in modern China studies to which in 2001 a German sinological historian of China, Axel Schneider (1962), was appointed. This appointment was by no means straightforward. Schneider specialized in Republican Chinese history rather than a social science approach to contemporary China. Vermeer, the internal candidate for this post, drew his own conclusions and withdrew as much he possibly could from the China studies programme at Leiden.

The first decade of the twenty-first century was a difficult time for Chinese studies in Leiden. In 2004, budget cuts required a broad reorganization of what was then still the Faculty of Arts.\(^\text{31}\) Contemporary China studies lost the lectureship of Chinese law (whose postholder Hubert van Straten (1940-2007) agreed to take early retirement)
and Vermeer’s senior lectureship. His redundancy was an acrimonious affair and put an unhappy end to the Leiden career of the university’s most distinguished and longest-serving contemporary China scholar. Fortunately, a few years later and shortly before his formal retirement, Vermeer had the opportunity to take up an appointment as professor at Turku University in Finland, enabling him to end his career on a high. These relatively lean times were also illustrated by the sudden drop in the number of completed Ph.D. theses on contemporary issues since 2001: I have been able to identify only one.32

In 2010 another budget cut made it necessary to discontinue Woei Lien Chong’s post in modern Chinese philosophy and intellectual history. But the 2000s were not only a period of retrenchment. In 2004, Stefan Landsberger was made part-time professor of the Culture of Contemporary China at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam, retaining his lectureship in Leiden for the remainder of his time. In 2008, Tak Wing Ngo was offered a very similar appointment at the School of History, Culture and Communication at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. His part-time appointment in Rotterdam freed up funds in Leiden to hire Florian Schneider, a specialist of Chinese media studies who had graduated from the University of Sheffield. A few years earlier, in 2006, Axel Schneider and Chris Goto-Jones of the Japanese studies programme had created a lectureship in the International Relations of East Asia shared between the Chinese and Japanese teaching programmes to which Lindsay Black was appointed, another Sheffield graduate and specialist of Japanese-Chinese relations. In 2006, Axel Schneider, van Crevel and Goto-Jones secured a university grant to set up the Modern East Asia Research Centre (MEARC). MEARC’s mission was to strengthen research on modern East Asia and to serve as an antidote to the reputation of Leiden as a bulwark of outdated classical research and teaching. Although university funding has since run out, MEARC continues to host external research grants and organize and publicize academic conferences and dissemination activities.

Axel Schneider left Leiden in 2009 to take up a new chair of modern China studies in Göttingen. After his departure, the China studies programme at Leiden embarked on an ambitious expansion of its contemporary China establishment. Not only was Schneider’s post continued (to which the author of this article was appointed in 2010), but a completely new professorship in Chinese economy and development was created at the same time as well. The intention behind this new post is in particular to strengthen the visibility and impact of Leiden China studies among business and government in the Netherlands, and to reignite an indispensable field of research on contemporary China that Leiden had a long tradition in, but that had been lost with the budget cuts in 2004. The appointee to the post, Peter Ho (1968), had been a long-time student of Vermeer. After his Leiden Ph.D. in 1999 he held appointments in development studies first at Wageningen and subsequently, as one of the youngest professors in the Netherlands, at the University of Groningen. In addition to his own research, Ho also very actively engages non-academic demand for specialist knowledge on China through publications, lectures, media appearances and the organization of events, including the Academic China Dialogue (Academisch China Overleg, or A.C.O.) of which he is the founder. He specializes in Chinese

development, agriculture and pastoralism, the environment, land and land use, governance and property rights, and non-governmental organizations.  

Contemporary China studies in the China programme at Leiden are not limited to the work of the social scientists and historians. Chinese language and literature professor Maghiel van Crevel’s own work on contemporary Chinese poetry and that of several of his Ph.D. students, including Anne-Sytske Keijser’s (1957) research on Chinese cinema, also fall squarely within the remit of this article, although their work will be discussed and referenced more fully elsewhere in this volume.

4 Proliferation and spread of contemporary China studies

In the previous section I have deliberately limited myself to developments at Chinese studies in Leiden and anthropology in Amsterdam. These were the two academic settings where contemporary China was rediscovered in the 1970s and that developed a sustained research and teaching programme on contemporary China. But China, and especially contemporary China, was of course much too important to remain the territory of just two places for very long. In this section, I will discuss specialized research on contemporary China by individual researchers or research groups. In the next section I will turn to a connected but separate development that took place roughly simultaneously, namely the inclusion of an aspect of China by non-specialist researchers, a process that I refer to as the mainstreaming of China studies.

I have already briefly mentioned the larger debate on Maoism and the Cultural Revolution in the early 1970s. The fascination with China did not end there and a steady stream of journalistic accounts, travelogues, photo books, memoirs, novels on contemporary China has been and continues to be published, either directly written in Dutch or (more commonly) in translation from English, Chinese or other foreign languages. The best of these are based on long-term immersion in China and make important contributions to our understanding of contemporary Chinese society, politics and culture; the worst are fantasy, superficial, or simply plain wrong.

A special mention will have to be made at this point of Michel (Michal) Korzec (1945), whose involvement in the debates and research on contemporary China is not easy to pin down in a few sentences, but could be said to pioneer the mainstreaming of contemporary China in the social sciences in the Netherlands. Korzec grew up in the Netherlands as a slight latecomer to the iconoclastic generation of the 1960s. He developed an interest in China originally mainly because many of his generation upheld China as an example of successful socialism. As the son of Polish refugees who personally had felt the iron fist of state socialism, Korzec had good cause to be


34 Excellent and important books on contemporary China written by long-term Dutch newspaper correspondents include Willem van Kemenade, China, Hongkong, Taiwan BV: superstaat op zoek naar een nieuw systeem (Amsterdam: Balans, 1996), Floris-Jan van Luyn, Een stad van boeren: de grote trek in China (Amsterdam and Rotterdam: Prometheus and NRC Handelsblad, 2004), Garrie van Pinxteren, China: centrum van de wereld (China: centre of the world) (Amsterdam: Balans, 2007) Van Luyn’s and van Kemenade’s books were translated in English as Floris-Jan van Luyn, A Floating City of Peasants: The Great Migration in Contemporary China (New York: New Press, 2008), Willem van Kemenade, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Inc.: The Dynamics of a New Empire (New York: Knopf, 1997).
sceptical, and he made it one of his many missions to uncover the truth about really existing socialism in China. His was not a brief flirtation. He made a serious attempt at learning the language and in the mid-1980s spent several years in China as a newspaper correspondent. As a university lecturer first at Delft University and since 1986 at the political science department in Leiden, he also embarked on and published academic research on social inequality and labour relations in contemporary China.35

However, academic research and publication were not his true passion. Korzec was first and foremost a polemicist, a master of the carefully crafted insult, who, as he himself put it, took a “devilish pleasure” in exposing the mendacity, pomposity and ideological rigidity of received opinion.36 As his writings were by no means limited to China, but included among many things feminism, Dutch society and politics, Eastern Europe, and the philosophy of science, in the course of time he managed to antagonize an impressive number of people in the Netherlands. Characteristically, a collection of Korzec’s essays that turned out to be his last Dutch publication before he left the Netherlands for Poland in 1997 was entitled I Can Explain Anything.37 Even Bart Tromp, long-time friend within the Dutch Labour Party and then academic high-priest of the moderate Left, started his review of the book as follows: “Michel Korzec is a great man, don’t let there be any mistake about that … But Korzec always has something to bitch about.”38

Korzec’s work on China was important because it took place outside the established centres for China studies and because he, like his ideological opposite number Wim Wertheim, explicitly put China in a comparative framework. In the eighties, Korzec was just an individual who developed China expertise pretty much on his own. In the nineties, however, the first stirrings could be detected of more structural engagement with specialist research on contemporary China elsewhere in the Dutch academe. Again, Leiden University and Amsterdam University were among the more important institutional environments where this happened, but other universities and institutions gradually developed their own China expertise as well.

Foremost among these universities is perhaps Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). EUR’s core strength is in economics, business studies and law, making its developing China programme clearly distinct from that of other universities. Like many other universities in the Netherlands and abroad, in the late eighties the EUR enthusiastically created links with Chinese universities and researchers, initially in Rotterdam’s sister city Shanghai, later elsewhere as well. In 1998, the university took

35 He received his Ph.D. at the University of Amsterdam in 1988. Part of his thesis was published as Michel Korzec, Labour and the Failure of Reform in China (London: Macmillan, 1992).
36 For Chinese studies in the Netherlands the low came with Korzec’s article in the Dutch edition of Playboy (the place of publication in itself intended to offend) that pseudonymously featured and gratuitously insulted several senior figures from Chinese studies in Leiden; Michel Korzec, “Vieze woorden (Dirty words),” Playboy (Dutch edition), February 1987 (1987), pp. 31 + 91-97.
37 Michel Korzec, Ik kan alles uitleggen (I can explain anything) (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1994) Unfortunately, translation into English loses the deliberate ambiguity of the book’s title, where “alles” can mean “everything” or “anything” and could thus be read as either an apology or a claim to omniscience. Knowing Korzec, the latter must have been his intention, hence my choice for “anything” as translation.
38 “Michel Korzec is een groot man, men vergis zich niet … Maar Korzec heeft altijd wat te zeiken.” Bart Tromp, “Over idealisten van gisteren die de hufters zijn van vandaag (On yesterday’s idealists who have become today’s bastards)”, De Volkskrant 28 January 1995.
the next step and established a China centre (the *Erasmus University China Center*) to coordinate and encourage China-related activities.

In addition to this virtual centre, the university invested in dedicated posts and specialist centres for teaching and research on contemporary China. At the School of Management in 1999, Barbara Krug (1950), a German economist and China specialist, was appointed Professor of Economics of Governance. Since her appointment, Krug has been the key member of the China Business Centre of the Erasmus Institute of Management and supervisor of nine Ph.D.’s on aspects of Chinese business and economy.\(^{39}\) In addition to Krug, Mark Greeven was hired after receiving his Ph.D. under Krug’s supervision in 2009, adding his expertise on enterprise innovation. Greeven was the EUR coordinator of the M.Sc. in Chinese Economy and Business, a degree jointly taught with the Leiden Chinese studies programme since 2009. In 2011, Greeven left EUR for an appointment at Zhejiang University in China. His replacement is Zhang Ying, a recent Ph.D. graduate in business studies from Maastricht University.

The Rotterdam China Law Centre is the third centre at EUR specifically dedicated to contemporary China. The centre was established in 2010 as part of the EUR School of Law. Its main member and director is Li Yuwen, professor of Chinese law at EUR since 2011. She received her Ph.D. in Law from Utrecht University and was a lecturer and researcher of Chinese law at Leiden University and Utrecht University. The centre’s main activities are fostering relationships with the legal profession and academic institutions in China, including work with the Chinese Scholarship Council to recruit and funds Chinese students for Ph.D. research at EUR.

Sinologist Leo Douw already has been at the *Free University Amsterdam* since 1975. After receiving his Ph.D. from Leiden University in 1991 the title of his lectureship was changed from general history to specifically non-western history. At the same time, Peter Post, a Japanese historian, was appointed at the Free University. Both Post and Douw were actively involved in the IIAS *Qiaoxiang* project in Amsterdam. However, the Free University did not follow up on the short fillip that the project provided, and Chinese studies continued its marginal existence. Change came only late in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when first Peter Peverelli (1956) and then Pál Nyíri (1972) joined the Free University. Peter Peverelli holds a double Ph.D. in Sinology from Leiden (1986) and Business Administration from Rotterdam (2000)\(^{40}\) and is a long-time consultant specializing in Chinese business. At the

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Economics and Business Studies Faculty, he established the Free University China Research Centre (Vrije Universiteit China Research Centre; V.C.R.C.). Pál Nyíri was appointed Professor of Global History from an Anthropological Perspective at the Departments of Social Anthropology and History in 2009. Recruited from Macquarie University in Australia, he held earlier academic appointments in his native Hungary and the University of Oxford. His research is on Chinese international migration and more recently tourism and other aspects of the globalization of Chinese culture and society. With these two appointments, together with the presence of Leo Douw in the History Faculty, the Free University now seems to be in a position to make its mark on contemporary China studies in the Netherlands.

Roughly during the same period, contemporary China studies at the University of Amsterdam picked up pace as well. Although the post of Margaret Sleeboom in anthropology was not continued after she left for Britain, other parts of the university have now taken the baton. With a gift from the Dr. Olfert Dapper and China Foundation, Stefan Landsberger was appointed part-time professor of the Culture of Contemporary China at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam. Jeroen de Kloet (1967) is a home-grown China specialist in the Department of Media Studies. De Kloet’s research is on popular music, in particular Chinese rock and pop music, which he has more recently expanded to include contemporary art, new media and cinema. At the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis he founded the Transasia Cultural Studies Group. Benjamin van Rooij (1973) studied both law and Chinese language and culture at Leiden University. In 2010, he moved from Leiden’s Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Development (see below) to the University of Amsterdam Law Faculty as Professor of Chinese Law and Regulation and head of the newly established Netherlands China Law Centre. Van Rooij’s research focuses on processes of lawmaking and implementation of law, with a particular focus on compliance and enforcement. The topics of his research include land management and land use planning, pollution regulation, labour law, tax collection, and food safety.

It is unlikely that the considerable number of new professorial appointments at the Free University and the University of Amsterdam were part of a deliberate strategy on the part of their central administrations. Each appointment rather seems to have been caused by the confluence of accidental circumstances, or the dawning realization to individual departments that China has become too important in the world today only to be covered tangentially in generalist research. However, with a good number of people in place now, time may have come to take a longer-term view. An exciting possibility discussed already for some time is more formal collaboration between China specialists at the two Amsterdam universities. If this were to happen, contemporary China studies in the nation’s capital would be able to reach critical mass, potentially rivalling Leiden’s establishment of contemporary China scholars.


Despite these promising developments in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and elsewhere in the Netherlands, for the time being at least Leiden University continues to be the main institutional setting for contemporary China studies. Apart from the continuing strength in contemporary China studies within the China studies programme of the Humanities Faculty already discussed at length, the Van Vollenhoven Institute at the Law Faculty and the Department of Political Science have long had an interest in specialist contemporary China expertise. At Political Science, Michel Korzec was a lecturer until his departure in 1997. After a fallow period of ten years without a China specialist, in 2007 the department appointed Daniela Stockmann (1978) a specialist of political communication and public opinion in China with a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Michigan.  Stockmann’s lectureship is in political psychology and research methodology and thus not specifically dedicated to China studies, testimony to the continuing insertion of specialist China research into the mainstream of political science in the U.S. and, one hopes, increasingly in Europe as well.

In 1995, the Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Development (VVI) received a grant from the Dutch Ministry of Education for what became the Leiden-Beijing Legal Transformation Project. Initiated by Tony Saich, then still professor of modern China studies at Leiden, the project started as a programme of legal education and training for Chinese scholars and practitioners. Chinese partners in the project were the Institute of Law at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Law School of Renmin University. The VVI argued that, for such a programme to succeed, research on recent developments in Chinese law was also required, and received funding from the Ministry for this as well. Project researchers at the VVI were Jianfu Chen (now at LaTrobe University), Yuwen Li (who moved on to Utrecht and subsequently Rotterdam), and for a brief period Benjamin van Rooij as research assistant. At a later stage of the project, the VVI decided on a long-term commitment to research and teaching of Chinese law, funding a Ph.D. position to which van Rooij was appointed. After van Rooij’s graduation, his position was continued as a full lectureship in Chinese law in 2007. As a lecturer, van Rooij taught Chinese law both at the VVI and the China studies programme in Leiden until his departure for Amsterdam in 2010.

An important contribution to China studies, including contemporary China studies, in the Netherlands continues to be made by the Leiden and Amsterdam-based International Institute of Asian Studies. Although the institute sits somewhat uneasily in the overall setup of the Dutch academic world, it has since its founding in 1993 attracted an immense wealth of Asian studies expertise and innovation to the Netherlands with its postdoctoral fellowships, visiting professorships (including the European visiting professorship in Taiwanese studies) and as host to short-term visitors. The IIAS postdoctoral fellowship scheme has not only brought many people to the Netherlands that otherwise would never have been able to come, but also regularly awards fellowships to recent Dutch Ph.D. graduates, giving them time to revise their thesis, develop a new project and in general give them a head-start on the job market. The IIAS has also regularly engaged in the funding and organization of conferences, seminars and research projects on contemporary China.

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In addition to the main centres of contemporary China studies, the two Amsterdam universities, Rotterdam and Leiden, a few other places in the Netherlands have employed or are currently still employing China specialists. At the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, a government think tank and provider of short-term courses mainly aimed at diplomats, Ingrid d’Hooghe, a sinologist, and Frans-Paul van der Putten, a historian, are both specialists of China’s international relations. At Utrecht University, an interest in Chinese law continues to exist after the departure of Li Yuwen for Rotterdam in 2010, but a new appointment dedicated to China has yet to be made. At both Wageningen Agricultural University (2000-2005) and the University of Groningen (2005-2010), Peter Ho served respectively as a lecturer and professor of development studies before taking up the Chair in Chinese Economy and Development in Leiden in 2010. Tilburg University also has an interest in contemporary China. Members of academic staff at Tilburg who work on China include Jeroen Kuilman, Henk van Gemert en G.M. Duisters, all at the School of Economics and Management. Finally, Nyenrode University, the oldest and most prestigious business school in the Netherlands, has a Europe China Centre with economist Haico Ebbers as its principal China specialist.

5. Contemporary China studies in the mainstream

The proliferation of contemporary China studies to departments and universities beyond China studies in Leiden and anthropology in Amsterdam follows logically from China’s rapidly growing importance on the world stage. The spread of China specialist expertise is however only half the story. It has been complemented by (and sometimes was simply an adjunct of) a much broader process of the academic mainstreaming of contemporary China. By this is meant not simply that China is “hot” and the flavour of the day. Mainstreaming indicates the increasing normality of China as an aspect or even chief focus of academic research and teaching: it has become increasingly difficult to speak with authority about global processes or general disciplinary questions without including considerations that pertain to China. This not only includes the humanities and social sciences, but also the biological and medical sciences, and even some aspects of engineering and the natural sciences. This process started with generalists or specialists of other areas who, first perhaps out of simple curiosity, developed projects either specifically on China or with a China component, often in collaboration with friendly China specialists, researchers in China, or Chinese graduate students to provide the necessary China-specific knowledge, access to data or local research opportunities, or simply Chinese language skills. However, as China gains in stature, it becomes more than just an adjunct to projects that are about questions, concepts, or hypotheses that have little to do with China itself (and therefore in many cases do not fit Chinese realities leading to often very peculiar or even dangerously distorted perceptions of the country). Chinese realities have increasingly become generative of specific concepts and ideas to be tested not only in China, but also elsewhere. China specialists themselves also increasingly direct their research and publications to disciplinary or comparative rather than China-specific questions. This is in particular true for certain types of research on questions on the environment, agriculture, development, health and disease, business and entrepreneurship that are still rooted in a fundamental perception of China as a developing country (thus increasingly positioning China as a
paradigmatic case of development), but a similar trend can be detected in other fields as well.

Mainstreaming of China (both by China specialists and generalists) started in the U.S. where it has gained considerable momentum, although its pace and impact varies considerably across disciplines, even within the social sciences and humanities. A Dutch scholar without a specifically China background who in a sense pioneered a disciplinary and explicitly comparative approach in the Netherlands is Geert Hofstede. As a professor of management studies at Maastricht University, Hofstede was (and remains) far removed from the mainstream of Chinese studies in the Netherlands. In the 1980s he developed a formidable international reputation for his work on cultural difference and business practices. His work included many cultures, but his observations on Asian and especially Chinese culture drew perhaps the most attention. China at the time had just begun to embark on reform and opening up, creating a strong demand (or even desire) for bite-size generalizations about contemporary China that could readily be applied when doing business in the People’s Republic. Hofstede’s model of cultural difference provided just that. His work may now come across as outdated (particularly perhaps to an anthropologist), but his is the first instance of research that included China as simply just another culture, comparable to any other culture and comprehensible in terms of a general set of concepts and ideas.

Mainstreaming of China research, particularly by generalists, makes China less directly recognizable and harder to describe than in the work of specialists. Description of this kind of research therefore does not lend itself to the highly individualized and anecdotal approach in the previous sections of this article. However, some indications of the type of mainstream research that is carried out can be gleaned from the project database of the Dutch Research Council (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO); in English formally called Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research). NWO and the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie van Wetenschappen, KNAW) have encouraged collaboration between Dutch and Chinese scholars through funding schemes for academic visits, collaborative workshops or conferences, and full project funding. For the period 2000-2011, a total of 147 grants involved China either centrally or laterally. Of these, only 23 (16%) were in the social sciences and 40 (27%) in the humanities. Even more interestingly, only 4 (3%) grants in the social sciences and 12 (8%) in the humanities had been awarded to a China specialist!

The NWO database may give a slightly distorted picture. It includes not only major research grants, but also conference and network grants. Moreover, many of the “generalist” projects only have a very modest China component. Data on current Ph.D. projects on China in the Netherlands collected by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in 2011 are without such noise. Ph.D. students, particularly those from China itself, arguably are also a major vehicle for the insertion of China into the

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mainstream of a discipline and thus a very good indicator of trends and the future shape of academic research.

According to the IIAS database of 248 current or recently completed Ph.D.’s on Asia, 53 (16%) were on China, making China the largest field just before Indonesia (50 or 15%), India (35 or 11%) and Vietnam (24 or 7%). Very interesting in the data is the distribution of China Ph.D.’s over Dutch universities. Of the 53 students nationally, 20 students were at the Agricultural University in Wageningen and 22 at Leiden University. At the Erasmus University Rotterdam (with 3 students) and the University of Amsterdam (with 2) the number of Ph.D. students clearly has not (or, in the case of Amsterdam, perhaps has not yet) keep pace with the relative weight of China-related specialist research by the academic staff. Equally important is the distribution of China research according to discipline. Each of the 53 Ph.D. projects was assigned to up to three fields. According to this breakdown, 26 were in the humanities, 21 in the pure social sciences (economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, psychology), while an applied social science (law, business, agriculture, development, environment, planning, policy, education and so on) was given 80 times.\textsuperscript{45} The disciplinary breakdown and distribution across the universities, moreover, are strongly connected. Of all China Ph.D.’s, Leiden students were concentrated in the humanities and to a lesser extent the social sciences fields (history, arts, religion, law, policy, communication, sociology, politics, economics, education, anthropology, linguistics). Wageningen students, by contrast, focused more on applied subjects, particularly those related to agriculture, the environment, development and economics.\textsuperscript{46}

The picture of China-related research in the Netherlands and its future thus seems reasonably clear. A focus has emerged in Wageningen in fields that see China as the world’s largest and most successful developing country. Research within these disciplines plays to traditional Dutch strengths in agricultural sciences, the environment, planning and development. Other applied fields, such as business or law, are spread more evenly across Dutch universities. Their interest in China is predicated on the perception of China as one of the world’s most important economies and the opportunities for careers, business, trade and investment that this brings. Another equally clear and traditional strength is in the humanities concentrated in Leiden. This is based in large part either on Leiden’s long-standing area or Oriental studies tradition or, alternatively, on the perception of China as a “natural other”, a welcome antidote to the traditional Eurocentric nature of the traditional humanities.

In this picture of a predominance of humanities and applied social science subjects, the fundamental social sciences (economics, sociology, political science, anthropology) are relatively underrepresented, although of course by no means absent. This is where particularly the large comprehensive universities in the Netherlands (first and foremost the University of Amsterdam and Free University Amsterdam, but

\textsuperscript{45} Although significant, we should perhaps not read too much into preponderance of applied subjects as many Ph.D.’s might have been listed under both a pure science discipline and an applied science discipline.

\textsuperscript{46} Data are from Meredith Holmgren, “The Asian Studies PhD Landscape in the Netherlands: Summary of Findings”, (Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies, 2012). In addition, I received some more detailed information directly from the report’s author (Meredith Holmgren, personal communication 29 June and 2 July 2012.)
possibly also Utrecht University, Radboud University Nijmegen and University of Groningen) should be able to find room to expand into (contemporary) China research.

6. Remnants of the past and challenges for the future

Contemporary China has gone in and out of fashion several times in the Netherlands. When the need for knowledge about China now was on the up, the Dutch academic establishment has responded, first in the second half of the nineteenth century, then in the sixties, followed by the eighties and most recently in the first decade of this century. However, it is surprising how slow, modest and almost lacklustre each response has been. This is only partially a matter of scale: attitudes also play an important role. Unlike the U.S., Australia, or the larger European countries, to the Netherlands China has never been terribly important.

For long periods, China was relegated to the “small arts” (kleine letteren), an esoteric subject that only one university (Leiden) could and should indulge in. This attitude has had even more serious consequences for the study of contemporary China. Unlike pre-modern China, China now could not even be presented as exotic and esoteric. Contemporary China simply was irrelevant. Although things obviously have gotten a lot better, the Netherlands never generated either the tradition or the reputation in contemporary China studies that it has in pre-modern China studies. Contemporary China specialists remain isolated individuals who developed a China interest, expertise and language skills largely on their own. Of course certain institutions and teacher-student relationships have helped, but it all remained very incidental. For its real growth and branching out into new areas of expertise, contemporary China studies repeatedly had to dip into the much deeper pools of foreign (British, German, or American trained) scholars. Conversely, because of the very small number of people involved, promising new developments or emerging traditions could easily be cut short with the departure of just one person. After the allocation of national funding for the Documentation Centre in Leiden in the sixties and seventies, growth and development of contemporary China studies has never again been a matter of planning or strategy, neither on the part of the national government nor on the part of individual universities. The only exception is the (modest) proliferation of China business or law centres, where immediate material gain is assumed, and even then such centres often are mainly a matter of individual initiative rather than a more structural commitment.

Yet the picture is not as bleak as the above paragraph might lead one to believe. Leiden has been able to sustain and even slowly expand as a permanent establishment of contemporary China expertise. Amsterdam seems finally to have reached a critical mass of contemporary China scholars. The mainstreaming of China research in Wageningen has attained a scale that remains largely unnoticed among full-fledged China scholars, but internationally might actually be the most visible part of China studies in the country. Yet for all other universities (with the partial exception of Rotterdam) China remains a rarity and luxury subject that prudent university administrators do not indulge in, an attitude that no longer is in tune with the times.

If we in the Netherlands wish to develop contemporary China studies further, we not only will have to navigate the cliffs of administrative inertia, but must also address the issue of a lack of community, communication, cooperation and division of labour.
Contemporary China studies in the Netherlands has very little coherence, let alone joined-up thinking or longer-term strategy. The Academic China Dialogue provides one platform, but is aimed at the engagement with non-academics rather than fostering a dialogue between China scholars. Again, this partly is a matter of scale: there are simply too few of us to sustain a viable academic dialogue, cooperation and specialization. However, just as important is the fact that most of us think of our work as primarily targeted at the Anglo-Saxon academic world. This attitude also informs our relationships with colleagues elsewhere in Europe, with whom we mostly interact through the English-language academic establishment.

Although it seems unlikely to happen, one possibility to ameliorate the situation might be a regional approach to that could foster a community of contemporary China scholars in, for instance, the Netherlands, Belgium and parts of Germany who are only a few hours travel from each other. Another (and possibly complementary) longer-term strategy would be further to encourage research and teaching on China based in the disciplines, either by China specialists or generalists. This is, as we have seen, a trend that already is well underway. Dedicated China centres or programmes require a considerable critical mass of students and staff to be viable. They are expensive and highly visible, and thus easy targets for future budget cuts. The appointment in a disciplinary department of a China specialist or the specialization in China by a mainstream academic researcher, on the other hand, is less risky (and they can always teach non-China courses if needed or desired).

Even more importantly, the discipline-based specialist also has other, scholarly advantages. They tend to be better at addressing, if not actively asking different questions. Area specialists, especially those working closely together with other area specialists, are driven by curiosity regarding their country or region, and naturally tend to focus on documenting detail, historical depth, and connections between different issues that only become apparent when viewing a problem from several different disciplinary angles. This is a great good that ought to be preserved and nurtured. But there is also a distinct disadvantage. Area specialists find it very hard to relate to non-region specific questions, especially those questions that play out in public debate. This is why China specialists in the Netherlands or elsewhere have only played a modest role in the big debates about China. What does the Cultural Revolution mean for the toiling masses exploited by world capitalism and merciless landlords? Will there be a China threat? Is China an alternative model of development? China specialists often find these questions awkward, beside the point, naïve, or sometimes even threatening. They are not about China, but about something else that China might (or might not of course) have a bearing on. If you are surrounded by other area specialists, you might be able to duck these questions altogether. When you are discipline-based, it is more difficult to hide from your colleagues and students, who most likely are not interested in, say, the arcane details of Communist Party organization and cadre training, but who would like to know whether that helps to understand why the party still is in power or if its rule can still be called socialist. From there the step to public debates or political engagement is a relatively small one.

A strategy of appointing more China researchers based in the disciplines also has some disadvantages. The obvious risk is the even greater erosion of any coherence and multi-disciplinarity that China-focused research may have had, creating an even more pressing need for investment in an infrastructure that ties together China
scholars based in the various disciplines and in area studies in a university or perhaps even nationally. This is, of course, the model that is well-established in many American universities and that also has spread within the U.K. It is certainly not without problems of its own, but it might nevertheless be the best way forward in the Netherlands (and elsewhere in continental Europe) if we want to develop a self-sustaining and even growing knowledge community on China that can be a partner, rather than a mere adjunct to Anglo-Saxon scholarship.