The Global Trajectory of Nicolaas Witsen’s Chinese Mirror
van Noord, W.J.L.; Weststeijn, M.A.

Published in:
The Rijksmuseum Bulletin

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
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." 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. On show were Indian and Ceylonese votive sculptures, Chinese and Japanese paintings, and jewellery, maps, books and ceramics. 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...
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. 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. 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). 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. As he told Cuper, ‘a learned man among [the Chinese] has translated it’: ‘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.’

Strikingly, while Witsen and Cuper not only valued the object’s historical
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 Sineelse taale (ten besten doenlyk was) overgezet tot Batavia, den 22 December 1704 en by de Sinezen geschat over de 1800 Jaaren oul te zyn.

In de binnenste omteck by A. ziet men de letteren zij also op de spiegel vertoovan, soode getuige letteren by de Sinezen gebruikelik gezeet voor veel even.

In de buitenste omteck by B. zijn de bedenkelagens de Sineelse letteren tot verklaring van het oude schrijfe tien nevens gestelte.

Onderricht hoe de Sinezen de Letteren in het omschrift lezen en uitpspreken.


Ten bij kie kie. Dat is. God is saiver, rein en onbekomt en zyn gekiel.

Lijeong pik tien. Dat is. God is zoo schoon, als klaar en helder water.

See kien see tien. Behoud. Iemand der een Koning of Vorst benint en in veel zaken gehoord weertende, men de zelver aanzien als zijn God; zich steedsende onder el kledigen, wanneer deelde zee tad het hun geaen.

See tien tien. Als wuyer dat op en afloopt.


Maar wanneer een Koning iemand tot Staat verheist en zie dat zijn gedrag goed en wel, soo onthoudt kon kan zijn zyn, twee een gedeelte de gehoore, tien.


Hij, is koeen wie zijn, uiter als men geadt dat, maar als men goed en roog, wanneer de zee is het stier als verheest.


En zoodeur at het Schapen der Zoonen.

Goei tien tien tien. Tik tien tien tien tien.

En wanneer men als den by de Amandelen zal ongesien worden als een God geheer, om dat er niemand Gods geluen is.
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’.

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.

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 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. 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.

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 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. 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,

11. Fig. 4
‘Explanation of the inscription in the circle of the aforementioned metal mirror’, in N. Witsen, Noord en Oost Tartarye, Amsterdam 1705, following p. 750.

12. The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands, 6i c 5.

13. The Nestorian Stele. Witsen received another, similar object in 1715, of which a drawing, but not a translation, survives in his correspondence (fig. 5).

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.

15. This book may well have been the Chongxiu Xuanhe Bogutu (see below) or a similar work.

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. 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,

17. The Nestorian Stele. Witsen received another, similar object in 1715, of which a drawing, but not a translation, survives in his correspondence (fig. 5).
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* 錦弧紋.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 global trajectory of Nicolaas Witsen’s Chinese mirror

The mid- to late Western Han period (206 BC-AD 8). 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!”’ 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’. 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. 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 mono theistic paean:

天無紀絜
God is pure, immaculate and wholly untarnished.
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.

水之弇明
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.
外承之嵩
And then amongst men one shall be regarded as a God on Earth, for there is none [more?] equal to God.

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. Apparently, the translator sought meaning in an unstructured stack of seal script characters without knowing where the first sentence starts in the circular inscription. 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. However, this is not to say that the poetic licence was complete. In fact, some of the sentences contain acceptable translations of individual characters. Witsen’s publication appears to be the first attempt to translate a Chinese antiquity into one of the European vernaculars.

Later scholars have identified the inscription on the Witsen mirror as a variant of the so-called qingbai or jingbai type. 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.
潔清白而事君
Making without blemish my pure
whiteness to serve you,
怨陰驩之弇明
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,\(^\text{32}\)
恐疏遠而日忘
I fear that I will be estranged and day
by day be forgotten.
慎糜美之窮皚
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’.\(^\text{33}\) 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 \(er\)
(\(er\) misread as \(tian\) 天)
is outlined in red.

Chongxiu Xuanhe
Bogutu [lu] 重修宣和博
guigu [lu] (Antiquities
Illustrated of Xuanhe
Hall [or Xuanhe
Period], Revised)
\(\text{28.36a.}\)
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum
Research Library,
694 E 5, vol. 5.
these two characters are very similar.\textsuperscript{34} Someone unfamiliar with Chinese mirror inscriptions is likely to con-
found 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).*\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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’.\textsuperscript{37} Regardless of this ver-
dict, 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’.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{39}

Since the *Bogutu* version also reads *tian* 天 (heaven) instead of the grammatical particle *er* 而, Witsen’s
translator can hardly be faulted for making the same error (figs. 7, 8). Yet his subsequent rendering of 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. 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. 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’. 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.

**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. 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.

Numerous variations of the *qingbai* inscription have been recorded, varying in length and in the characters used. 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. Such a flexible approach may suggest that few words were enough to suggest the whole because the text was well known. It could also indicate that the text itself was unimportant and that inscriptions served chiefly as
decorative modules. In any case, it often seems irrelevant to search for unambiguous meanings in these inscriptions.

Ever since the Bogutu, however, Chinese connoisseurs have regarded inscribed mirrors as a specialized subfield 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). Eventually, the connoisseurship exemplified in the Bogutu 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. Most of this information is lacking for the Witsen mirror. An attempt to date it is further confounded by the fact that Han dynasty 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. Craftsmen reused old moulds or made new ones by taking...
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.\(^5\) 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.\(^5\) 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.\(^5\) The shading on Witsen’s illustration suggests a sizeable convex central knob. The clearly contoured characters likewise refer to a genuine

---

Fig. 11
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 timeframe. 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 objects imported from west and east such as amphorae, fibulae and even a Western Han dynasty mirror. 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.
The area where the mirror was buried is outlined in red.

Photo: © Isaac Massa Foundation Amsterdam – St Petersburg, State Library.

Fig. 14

NICOLAAS WITSEN, Map of North and East Tartary, Amsterdam 1687.

Fig. 15
Detail of fig. 14 showing Verkhoturye, 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.
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. Conversely, Siberian artefacts have been found inside ancient Chinese dynastic borders, probably the result of technological exchange, marriage alliances and other ethnic intermingling. 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. 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. His Dutch contact in Russia, Andreas Winius (1641-1717), had arranged for a sudden stream of burial goods on the order of Tsar Peter the Great (1672–1725). In Verkhoturye, Winius 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.

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 Ostliche Theil von Europa und Asia, Stockholm 1730, p. 398.

Regensburg, Staatliche Bibliothek.

Fig. 16
Metal mirror found near Irbit (Siberia), from Philip von Strahlenberg, Das Nord- und Ostliche 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-
interpretations ‘so that these wise gentlemen speculate upon it and explicate it according to their knowledge’. 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.

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. 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). 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.

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. 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’.

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. 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. 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.’

Cuper now sent back the translation furnished by Witsen. 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’. 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. 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.’

Hoang was apparently unable to correct Witsen’s comparison of God with water, which is not obvious in the original text. 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 man-
ner.’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 collabor-
ation 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 ‘monu-
ment’ 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 depart-
ure 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 Amster-
dam ... 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.’

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. 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.’ 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.’

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’. 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.’

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. 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. 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.

**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. 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. Witsen, typically, answered that due to lack of time he had forwarded the letter to an Amsterdam mathematician ‘qui entend ces matieres’. 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’. Leibniz then forwarded the engravings to the Royal Mathematicians, the elite Jesuit scientists sent by Louis XIV to China. 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* (Book of Changes) that he interpreted as a notation system binary logic (fig. 18). The Witsen mirror seemed to hold a similar secret.

Leibniz also sent the engraving to Bouvet’s colleague Claude de Visdelou (1656-1737) in Guangzhou. 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. 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 dis-
cussed the Chinese script more
intensively with the Abbé Jean-Paul
Bignon (1662-1743) in Paris.123 As Royal
Librarian, the abbot ordered thou-
ousands 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 aforemen-
tioned 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 understand-
ing 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.’ 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. 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.

Bignon, however, is doubtful (he is sure ‘Chaldaeic’, 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.’

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. 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 imposter 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):
‘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.’

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.

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. 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.

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 promised 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. Yet in early 1714, De la Croze lambasted the Frenchman, ‘frankly believing that he does not know the elements of the Chinese language’. 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 prim- eval, Adamic language. 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.

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

* The authors are members of the research project The Chinese Impact: Images and Ideas of China in the Dutch Golden Age at the University of Amsterdam, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. They owe a debt of gratitude to Lloyd de Beer, Biqing Ouyang, Marten Jan Bok, Lucrezia Botti, Jan van Campen, Trude Dijkstra, Barend ter Haar, Wilt Idema, Jing Zhichun, Nikolay Kradin, Bruno Naarden, Sascha Priewe, Su Wenjie and Alexey Tishkin for their help in preparing this article. Any mistakes are of course their own.

1 ‘Ick kan haast aen V.Weled. niet betuijghen, hoe seer dat het mij doet, dat ick als oorsaak ben, dat soo een kostelijk stick, en overblyf sel van de Chinesen oudtheijt, 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 natuurbabinetten ...


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. Hertrofts, Hoe kennis uit China naar Europa kwam: de rol van Jezuiten 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; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 22, vol. 2, pp. 308-09.

9 ‘dien spiegel na Romen en elders gesonden, dat die konde doen, zelff die lange jaeren in Sina hadden gewoont, bekenden sulx niet te konnen doen, alleen dat hen het gebroken Sinees te sijn, ik sonte het dan na Batavia alwaer meer als tienduens Sinees sijn, niman verstaet het, dog de generael dede het overbringen na Sina om aen geleerde Sinees te vertonen, en die explicatie te versoeken, so als geschiede, de schotel is dan gemaakt voor achttienhondert 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.


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 estoient marques de linies entrelassees, et que c’etoit la plus ancienne escriture. J’ay vu ce livre, et j’y ay trouve tout ce que Mr. Witsen m’avoyt dit, et je ne pouvois pas assez admirer cette rareté, et la diversitez des caracteres, qui s’y rencontrent’. Cuper, undated description of Witsen’s collection, KB 72C31, fol. 144r.


14 ‘een Spiegel van Stael, ruim een span in de midlyn groot, der gedaente als het andere dat ik hebbe, van gedaente als het andere dat ik hebbe, 

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 mij een ront metael schoteltje dat in Sibieren in een grafstede is gevonden, van gedaente als het andere dat ik hebbe,
daer staen oude Sinesche letteren op, so ik gissse meer als dusent jaer out, want sij zijn van gedenkwerde andere die UEd. heeft gesien welcke oude sijn over de agtien hondert jaer. Sij sullen in afschrift UEd. werden toegesonden, en ik saalse 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. Karlgreen, ‘Early Chinese Mirror Inscriptions’, Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities 6 (1934), pp. 9-79, esp. pp. 23-4:

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 ‘but rather’. See Ibid., p. 73, and Tian Min 田敏, Hanhai tongjing mingwen yanjiu yizhi tongjing mingwen yanjiu yi xiangsi jiyu guiju (Handai tongjing mingwen yanjiu yizhi tongjing mingwen yanjiu yi xiangsi jiyu guiju wenjing minwen weili 漢代銅鏡銘文研究—以相對照的方式考察銘文資料) (Master’s thesis, Hebei Normal University), Han Bronze Mirrors’, Shijiazhuang 2012 (Master’s thesis, Hebei Normal University), p. 17-8.


The translation was described as ‘poetic’ by M. Kuhn, ‘Leibniz und China’, in A.A.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’. Yang, op. cit. (note 5), p. 322, seems to assume that Witsen’s transcription, although erroneous, was put in the conventional order starting with 清清白。In reality Witsen’s translator was clearly unfamiliar with the qingbai inscription and started the sentence in a different place.

Especially in lines 3, 6 and 8.


jie 清, bai 白, jun 君, shui 水, yan 奕, xi 西, wang 汪, yang 洋, kong 恐, ri 日, mei 美.

Kircher published a Latin translation of the Nestorian Stele in 1667; see note 13.

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 清清, qingbai will be used throughout the text to refer to this type of mirror inscription.


The transcription in Bogutu 28.36b reads 澄清白天事君志治之奞玄錫之物汪洋恐天日志美之耳承 可敘虞高願兆思天無紀, 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 历代著錄目, Beijing 1938.

Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) is usually credited with inventing this approach. See Mungello, op. cit. (note 22), pp. 55-67.

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.

‘Mr Witsen ... a trouvé dans la Chronologie du père Couplet, qu’un Empereur 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 apóptegme d’un Roy, ou d’un grand philosoph, ou homme a leur mode savant’. Cuper’s undated description of Witsen’s collection, KB 72c:31, fol. 144r.


44 Tian Min, op. cit. (note 16).
45 Brashier, op. cit. (note 32).
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).
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 II: 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).


57 It is, of course, possible that the illustrator chose to omit rust marks.
59 Yang Yong 孫勇 et al., ‘Shandong Linzi Qi guchuchin Qin Han zhidui zuoyizhi de fajue’ 山東臨淄齊故城秦漢铸銅作坊遺址的發掘’, Kaogu 考古 6 (2014), pp. 21-36.
60 ‘in zeker graf door Vergaturia in Siberien’, ‘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 to Cuper, 10 January 1715; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 66, p. 425.

61 ‘De plaets daer de Siberiersche curieusheden zijn ontdekt, is omtrent op sezig graden noorder breete.’ Witsen to Cuper, 10 January 1715; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 66, p. 425.
62 ‘De plaets daer de Siberiersche curieusheden zijn ontdekt, is omtrent op sezig graden noorder breete.’ Witsen to Cuper, 10 January 1715; Gebhard, op. cit. (note 8), no. 66, p. 425.
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.


69 Koryakova and Epimakhov, op. cit. (note 64), pp. 249-50.


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 Klockenspieße gegossene Platte ... ist zwischen den Irbyhur- und Toboll-Strohm in einem Todten-Hügel gefunden worden ... Von dieser Sorte findet man viel hundert in denen dortigen Grabern’. P. von Strahlenberg, Das Nord- und Ostliche 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 Verkhoturye.

74 G. Cuper, Harpocrates seu explicatio imagunculae, Amsterdam 1676; Harpocrates et antiqua monumenta, Utrecht 1693. He had seen the silver Harpocrates statue, found 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 72H129, 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.


78 ‘Hiernevens twee dubbelde van het schoteltje dat in Siberien diep onder de aerde in een grafstede is gevonden, ik sie het aen voor uit 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.


80 ‘als ik die uijtlegginghe, soo U.Weled. is toege -
het Chinees spiegel off schootel ... is dit T. Weststeijn, "Spinoza sinicus: An Asian
The term In 1710 Cuper asked for additional images 'de geleerden in Duytsland, tot Londen ...
Ick sal met Uwel Edelheits goetvinden die groove en schandelijkcke affgoderije is ...
Ubah Be 36, fols. 90r-9iv. On the controversy see D. Mungello (ed.), The

82 'Ick sal met Uwel Edelheits goetvinden senden nae Romen de uijtlegginge van de Spiegel en aldara sekerlijk Uwel Ed. naam noch in grooter weerdon 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 geen aen alle ver-borghen is'. Cuper to Witsen, 3 November 1705, UBA Be 36, fol. 91v.

83 'de geleerden in Duystsland, tot Londen en Parij, het zelve aenstonts in haere journelaen op hun eigen naam aent licht souden geven', 'opdat sij heeren geleerden daerop speculeeren en sulx expliceeren 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 ocularre 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.


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 'Ipsa Amstelaedami lancem et unam icunculam manibus tractavi, et oculis meis vidi apudi illustrem virum Nicolaum 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 kunstaars 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 'Rogavillustrem Reipublicae Amstelaedamen-sis Consulem Nicolaum Witzem, uti ad me mittere velit lancem in sepulchro apud Siberios inventam pictam et exscriptam; ... et spero Oedipos Romanos nobis patefacturos 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 lansis in Siberia repertae ectypos, et tandem ex iisdem te percepisse, quid doctissimus Rhenferdus una mecum, uti a te flat, sommopere 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 orientalium 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 72H120. 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 ‘Ectympum disci aeri incisum misi Romam ad episcopeum Rosaliensem, apud Sinas vicarium Apostolicum, qui respondit matronas Sinenses uti solere similibus speculis, et esse characterum Sinicorum quator genera, unum recens et usitatum, tria priscas et vetusta et ab usu quotidianae scriptionis iam diu intermissa: insculptos disco vel speculo 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 kunstaars 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).

93 'Ipsa Amstelaedami lancem et unam icunculam manibus tractavi, et oculis meis vidi apudi illustrem virum Nicolaum 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 kunstaars 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).

94 'Rogavillustrem Reipublicae Amstelaedamen-sis Consulem Nicolaum Witzem, uti ad me mittere velit lancem in sepulchro apud Siberios inventam pictam et exscriptam; ... et spero Oedipos Romanos nobis patefacturos 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.

95 'spero te accepisse litteras … Nec non lansis in Siberia repertae ectypos, et tandem ex iisdem te percepisse, quid doctissimus Rhenferdus una mecum, uti a te flat, sommopere 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 orientalium remained unfinished. We have been unable to find a reference to the mirror in the correspondence between Cuper and Rhenferd in the KB.

96 Bonjour to Cuper, 16 June 1705, KB 72H120. 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.

97 ‘Ectympum disci aeri incisum misi Romad 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 priscas et vetusta et ab usu quotidianae scriptionis iam diu intermissa: insculptos disco vel speculo 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 kunstaars 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).
pretari’. Bonjour to Cuper, 16 June 1705, KB 72 H 20. Here again we see misinterpretation of seal script characters, reading grammatical particle er 而 as the character tian 天 (heaven). The character for sun 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 唐 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 Chinensis, circa tempus Confutti, viri docti valde et pi’. 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 Rosaliensi, 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 cujus effectus quemadmodum et solis, lune, ac stelliarum, experimur. Coelum immateriale accipi, quod Yeu ou Him Tien vocatur, quod omnis exper, omniumque rerum fontem et originem idque a mundi Creatore et Opifice minime diversum’. A.A.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 環 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, agnoscent liberaliter Sancti Patres, admiserunt Gentiles ipsi, e quorum fabulis Nonnus in sexto Dionysiaco- rum ... Deus ergo Inscriptionis Sinicæ est meo judicio Sinarum Thien tam pulcher uti clara et liquida aqua, utpote Coelum materiale ... sive illius pulchritudinem, quam Sinica Inscriptionio aequiparat cum claritate et liquiditate aquae ... Mihi persuasissimum est Sinas aque olim ac hodie, tribuisse divinitatem Coelo materially. Quod pulchritudinem Dei sui pulchritudine aquae descripserint, similis se praebuerunt illis gentilibus, qui Divinitatem attribuebant aquae. Divinas dicit aquas Proprietus ... Fontes sacros Virgilii’, Bonjour to Cuper, 15 February 1706; Cuper, op. cit. (note 72), pp. 21-22.
99 ‘Non deerunt amatores Allegoriarum, troporum, figurarum, qui alio traducant Inscriptionem 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.
102 Ibid., p. 241.
103 Some of Bonjour’s notes in the Biblioteca Augustiniana in Rome (ms.lat. 63) and his Antiquitas temporum (ms.lat. 49) mention works on Chinese history and language.
104 ‘cogit me plane ut te amplius non celer meum ex urbe Roma dixessum ad Sinas ...

111 'Cum navibus, quae ultimo anno petent Indias Orientales, scribam ad eum'. Ibid.

112 'Bonjourio mali quid accidisse in China vereor, quia nullas ab eo litteras accipio'. Undated note in Cuper’s handwriting following the letter of 13 September 1708, KB 721H29. Reference to a London newspaper of 5 February 1714.

113 'que les langues Chinoise ou l’Egyptien ne soient les plus anciennes ... si le père 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 721H7.

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.
120 Leibniz to Bouvet, 18 August 1705, and Leibniz to Visdelou, 20 August 1705, Leibniz, op. cit. (note 118), no. 57, pp. 486, 494.
122 Visdelou to Leibniz, 9 February 1714; Leibniz, op. cit. (note 118), no. 70, p. 605.
124 Hoang’s partner was probably Etienne Fourmont (1683-1745) or Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749).
127 ‘Vous avez vu ... par le Miroir Chinois, que les premiers ont ete 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 ‘Puisse les Chinois ont ete maitres de cette Isle, je m’imagine, ... que ce sont de vieilles Lettres de ce Peuple, qu’il n’entend pas aujourd’hui lui-meme. Telles sont les Lettres qu’on a trouvées dans un Sepulcre en Siberie ecrites 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-temps’. 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 scris bien que ces peuples comptent plus de quarante mille ans ... Est-il glorieux à une nation que se pique 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. ... Scavor 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 hypothese cependant ne ferait gueres de mon gout. Jamais peuple n’a esté 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 esté 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 extremement 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 deu, et doivent estre fort a la mode parmi ces peuples’. Bignon to Cuper, 24 February 1715; KB 72H7, fol. 441r.
132 ‘Vidi iterum Amstelaedami lancem illam, est de scavoir 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 hypothese cependant ne ferait gueres de mon gout. Jamais peuple n’a esté 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 esté rien innové, ni dans les caractères, ni dans la langue’. Bignon to Cuper, 12 July 1714; KB 72H7, fol. 408.
est) fuerit conflator’. Cuper to Sperling, 29 November 1705; KB 721H45, 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 lancia, sive speculi
istius Sinensis … Sed consolatur me ejus
explicatio, quae licet Kirckrianae [sic] valde
similis sit, quam in Oedypo suo tractat’.
Sperling to Cuper, 16 January 1706; KB 721C45, fol. 98v.

134 De la Croze to Cuper, 18 April 1711; KB 721H19.
De la Croze lobbies for Bourguet, a French

135 ‘le plus grans imposteure & le plus hardi
menteur que la Republique des Lettres
ait jamais produit’. De la Croze to Cuper,
16 January 1713, KB 721H19, fol. 24v.

136 Cuper to De la Croze, 4 December 1708,
KB 721H18; 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 721H19, 1, fol. 18r
(undated attachment, c. 1710-13).

138 ‘J'ai reconnu d'abord les deux premières
lettres & quelques autres, qui ne différent
en rien de celles d'aujourd'hui, comme vous
verrez dans le papier que j'ai joint à 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 soupconné
autrefois que cette nation venoit d'Egypte,
non seulement à cause des Hieroglyphiques’,
De la Croze to Cuper, undated (c. 1710-13),
KB 721H19, vol. 1, fol. 17.

139 De la Croze to Cuper, 27 September 1709,
KB 721H18, fol. 34v.

140 De la Croze to Cuper, 17 January 1711,
KB 721H19, 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 temoignent,
que les Chinois ont occupé il y a plus de
mille ans la Siberie & le Pays voisin, qu'ils
y ont envoyé des Colonies ... & Mr. Witzen
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), n. 56, p. 374.

142 Reland to Cuper, 11 February 1712, KB 721H11.
[‘Masson] demeure proche d’Utrecht, et il
s’entend ou Chinois: car Mr. Reland me
mande, que nous aurons une Dissertation
da façon sur cette Langue’. Cuper to
De la Croze, 19 October 1712; Cuper, op. cit.
‘Dissertation critique sur la langue Chinoise’,
in J. Masson and S. Masson, Histoire critique
de la republique des lettres, Utrecht 1712-18,

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 721H19, 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 Disserta-
tions Chinoises sont dignes de compassion
... on pourrait refuter Geometriciquement 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 Original’. De la
Croze to Cuper, 14 January 1714; KB 721H19,
fols. iv-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 orbita
terrarum emporium’. Cuper to Bonjour,
16 January 1708, KB 721H19.