TOWARDS A BIDIRECTIONAL FRAMEWORK: DIALOGUE AND FUSION BETWEEN CHINESE AND DUTCH LITERATURE

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Abstract: While modern and contemporary Chinese literary works have been translated into Dutch with frequency, and a notable body of Dutch literature has been introduced to China since the late Qing, research on cross-cultural literary exchange is often unidirectional. However, based on prominent cases such as the Dutch translations of Lu Xun's works and Lu Xun's own translation of Little Johannes, the dialogue between Chinese and Dutch literature carries particular significance. Interactions between Chinese and Dutch writers, the multifaceted issues surrounding "Lu Xun and Little Johannes," and the integration of Dutch sinological research into Lu Xun studies in China demonstrate that a deeper-level interconnection of Chinese and Dutch literature has already occurred. Consequently, the concepts of "dialogue" and "fusion" can serve as a bidirectional framework. Adopting a bidirectional perspective helps establish a dialogic mechanism, bringing potential exchanges to light, thereby offering a comprehensive examination of Sino-Dutch literary relations over the past century.

The "dialogue" and "integration" between Chinese and Dutch literature are, first and foremost, conceptual frameworks. It encompasses the "dialogue" between the author and Dutch sinologists and a bidirectional perspective to view both the circulation of Chinese literature to the Netherlands and the introduction of Dutch literature to China, one designed to accommodate and present richer content. China and the Netherlands have each been a "minor-language" subject of study for the other, which has greatly constrained academic exchange and often led to the neglect or obscuring of relevant information. In a broader sense, research on literary relations between China and other countries has mostly been conducted within a unidirectional perspective, focusing either on the circulation of Chinese literature abroad or on the reception of foreign literature in China. Taking Lu Xun studies—a field that falls within the scope of this framework—as an example, earlier works such as *Guowai Lu Xun yanjiu wenji* 国外鲁迅研究文集 (*Collected Essays on Lu Xun Studies Abroad*, 1981) by Yue Daiyun and recent studies such as *Lu Xun yuwai bainian chuanbo shi* 鲁迅域外百年传播史 (*A Century of Lu Xun's Dissemination Abroad*, 2009) by Wang Jiaping all develop along a single direction. While this approach is justified given the vast amount of source material and the demands of thematic research—and thus carries clear academic legitimacy—it tends to result in a lack of dialogical mechanisms, failing to bring to light potential instances of exchange and integration. The following discussion elaborates on this point.

I. The "Dialogue"

The term "dialogue" is used here primarily in its original sense. Between 2016 and 2017, during a research visit to Leiden University in the Netherlands, I conducted a series of interviews with eight Dutch sinologists, engaging in dialogues on a wide range of topics. Prior to this, my knowledge of Dutch sinology was largely limited to figures such as Robert Hans van Gulik, Wilt Lukas Idema, Lloyd Haft, Maghiel van Crevel, and Michel Hockx. Upon arriving in the Netherlands, however, I was soon met with an overwhelming amount of information and encountered a far more vibrant and expansive world. One point, nevertheless, is certain: Dutch sinology has a long history, well-documented and clarified in books available in English and Chinese like *Holland's Contribution to Chinese Studies*, *Chinese Studies in the Netherlands: Past, Present and Future*, and *Helan hanxue shi* 荷兰汉学史 (*The History of Sinology in the*

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Netherlands). However, the work of recent decades still lacks sufficient, systematic sorting. In fact, since the late 1970s, Dutch sinology entered a new phase: "with academic reforms, the number of sinologists increased," and "a large-scale public demand for information about China was created, with publishers increasingly willing to publish books on 'Chinese affairs.'"(Idema, 2014, pp. 195–196) Consequently, many Chinese literary works were translated and introduced into the Netherlands, but related information has not received sufficient attention in China, and the extensive work of Dutch sinologists remains largely unknown to the Chinese audience. Based on this, my idea of interviewing sinologists arose quite naturally.

Overall, the interviews proceeded smoothly. Among the eight sinologists were the aforementioned Lloyd Haft, Maghiel van Crevel, and Michel Hockx, and the other five: Mark Leenhouts, Koos Kuiper, Anne Sytske Keijser, Annelous Stiggelbout, and Mathilda Banfield. Mark Leenhouts is currently the most prominent translator of Chinese literature into Dutch, having rendered numerous Chinese literary works. The latter four, however, are essentially unknown to Chinese readers. I had hoped to interview Silvia Marijnissen, known for her translations of modern Chinese poetry, Mo Yan's novels, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, but the plan did not materialize. During the research period, Chinese editions of notable scholarly works were published, including Professor Maghiel van Crevel's *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* and Professor Michel Hockx's *Questions of Style: Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China (1911–1937)*, both released by Peking University Press in late 2016. Additionally, Chinese writers such as Liu Zhenyun 刘震云, Xu Zechen 徐则臣, Zang Di 臧棣, and Zhu Zhu 朱朱 visited the Netherlands in 2017 for events. Through on-site observations and brief exchanges, these encounters provided fresh perspectives and content for the interview-based research.

To support the progressively in-depth interview work, a parallel effort to engage in dialogue with the history of Dutch Sinology was initiated. This primarily involved researching the reception and dissemination of Chinese literature in the Netherlands, based on documents collected at the Leiden University Library. As the largest Sinological library in Europe, Leiden's Asian Library provides a critical research infrastructure, housing a vast and distinguished collection that includes Dutch and English translations of Chinese literature, original Chinese-language texts, and important archives of former Dutch Sinologists.

Building upon the foundational exploration of Dutch Sinology, my initial research focus centered on the potential intersections between the work of Robert Hans van Gulik and Lu Xun. Van Gulik, a remarkably prolific sinologist and distinguished diplomat, offers a vast wealth of material for scholarly inquiry. As China's most important modern writer, Lu Xun's works have also been widely disseminated and studied abroad. However, information regarding their reception in Dutch has not yet been systematically organized. Dutch translations of Lu Xun's writings began around 1940, resulting in a substantial corpus: over twenty distinct publications, including anthologies and literary journals, encompassing seven individual collections and totaling more than seventy of his works. Among the archival materials examined, two items stand out as particularly unique. The first is the two-volume manuscript *Ba Jiang lubie shishu huace* 巴江录别诗书画册 (*Farewell Album from Ba River*, 1946), a collection of paintings and poems presented to van Gulik upon his departure from Chongqing. This handwritten artifact is, unequivocally, a unique original. The second is a 1966 New Year's greeting card produced in 1965 by the Amsterdam W.B. Vereniging (W.B. Association) for its members, featuring Lu Xun's short story "A Small Incident." Far from a conventional card, it was a single sheet of A4 paper, folded twice to create eight panels, professionally printed in color and illustrated with three images. As Leenhouts has observed, this distinctive design itself signals the particular stature and cultural resonance Lu Xun held within Dutch intellectual circles at the time. Discoveries such as these have added considerable depth and compelling material evidence to

the research.

Subsequently, I collected materials related to Guo Moruo 郭沫若, who confessed admiration for the Dutch philosopher Spinoza and had connections with van Gulik. I also compiled a general list of Dutch-language publications on the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature and on anthologies. As these two lines of inquiry progressed, a dialogic relationship between Chinese and Dutch literature, both contemporary and historical, gradually emerged. The main landscape of the reception and dissemination of modern and contemporary Chinese literature in the Netherlands thus came into view.

As the other facet of this research topic, the work of organizing "Dutch literature's arrival in China" commenced later. During the late Qing and Republican periods, the total number of Dutch literary works translated into Chinese was probably only around twenty, mostly indirect translations from English or German. Among these were Lu Xun's translations (based on German versions) of Frederik van Eeden's novel *Little Johannes* and two short prose pieces by Multatuli, "High Life" and "Immoral and Immodest". It was not until 1987 that the first major work translated directly from Dutch appeared: Multatuli's novel *Max Havelaar*. This was considered a new "starting point" of the Dutch-Chinese literary translation, but due to factors such as "copyright and book profits" as well as "political and cultural" concerns, this project [of translation] stagnated by the mid-1990s. (Shi & Wang, 2011) A fundamental improvement occurred after 2005, following the establishment of the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Nederlands Letterenfonds) and its strengthening of ties with China. By 2011, "Chinese publishers had purchased the copyrights to hundreds of Dutch books and translated about one hundred". (Ibid.) Now, over the past decade, the conditions have likely improved even further.

In terms of influence, Multatuli and his novel *Max Havelaar* are clearly the more prominent examples. This novel "severely indicts the colonial exploitation of the Dutch East Indies, present-day Indonesia," considered one of the most important works in Dutch literary history, a work that "not only changed Dutch politics but also Dutch literature, and this 19th-century novel remains highly readable with readers to this day." (Schiferli, 2011) Its introduction to China began as early as the 1920s with excerpts translated by Shen Yanbing (Mao Dun 茅盾), followed by two full Chinese versions after the 1980s. When contemporary Dutch scholars present their national history and culture internationally, they consistently dedicate themselves to "The Legacy of Multatuli" (Fokkema & Grijzenhout, 2007, pp. 70–75), underscoring the work's enduring and wide-ranging discursive resonance.

While this assessment holds true from the vantage point of world literature and Dutch literary history, the trajectory of literary reception within a specific national context often follows its own unique logic. Situated within the context of modern Chinese literature, the Dutch literary translation that garnered more attention, or is more worthy of discussion, is unequivocally Lu Xun's translation of *Little Johannes*. Although this classic piece of Dutch literature is no longer well-known to non-Dutch readers today, Lu Xun's translation, since its publication in 1928, "has been reprinted far more times than in any other non-Dutch-speaking country worldwide." (Lin, 2019) In fact, a considerable number of Lu Xun's own works have been introduced to the Netherlands, while his translation of *Little Johannes* stands as the most prominent instance of "Dutch literature's arrival in China." Thus, the dialogue between Chinese and Dutch literature has a particular significance.

II: The "Fusion"

In 1906, while in Tokyo, Lu Xun happened to read the fifth chapter of the German translation of *Little Johannes* and was "profoundly captivated" 非常神往 (van Eeden, 1928, p. 3). Unable to find it in local bookstores, he mail-ordered it from Germany and subsequently attempted several translations, finally undertaking the task twenty years later.

In 1969, Klaas Ruitenbeek, then an 18-year-old high school student in the Netherlands, first encountered Lu Xun's works, an encounter that altered his life. Reflecting on this

experience, Ruitenbeek later remarked:

> If I hadn't met Lu Xun in the bookstore, and realized that as an eighteen-year-old I genuinely loved this author, I probably would have ended up studying Arabic. (Ruitenbeek, 2001, p. 3)

Ruitenbeek was a researcher who benefited from the academic reforms in Dutch sinology during the 1970s, earning his PhD from the Sinology Department of Leiden University in 1989. Driven by his passion for Lu Xun, he first published Dutch translations of individual collections: *Te wapen, verhalen* (*Call to Arms* 呐喊, 1985) and *Zwerftocht* (*Wanderings* 彷徨, 1992). These were later combined into the *Verzameld werk Lu Xun* (*Collected Works of Lu Xun* 鲁迅全集, 2000), which remains to this day the most extensive collection of Lu Xun's works in Dutch. He also wrote "Lu Xun and *Little Johannes*" and translated Lu Xun's "Introduction to *Little Johannes*" into Dutch.

In his "Introduction to *Little Johannes*," Lu Xun noted with a sense of historical pathos that the Dutch author, Frederik van Eeden, was only 28 when the work was written; its German translation appeared thirteen years later, and his own Chinese version was completed a full forty years after the original—by which time Lu Xun himself was 68. He had first encountered *Little Johannes* abroad at the age of 25; for years, this story remained a private, unspoken one until the publication of Lu Xun's translation in 1928, when he was 47. By 1936, Lu Xun, in his mid-fifties, regarded it as one of his most important translations. It can be said that Lu Xun cherished the memory of *Little Johannes* persistently, his interest spanning over thirty years. Within the entirety of Lu Xun's writing and translation career, this is perhaps the most moving story. Yet, the reverberations of *Little Johannes* within the broader Chinese readership were remarkably scant. The poet Feng Zhi's 冯至 use of its concluding lines as an epigraph for his long poem "Beiyou" 北游 ("Journey to the North") may stand as the sole literary response. Furthermore, Feng Zhi's professed "fondness" for the work was later interpreted by the critic Hu Feng 胡风 as "nothing more than the translator's perplexed state of mind under the heavy pressures of the era." (Chen & Wang, 2019, p. 142) Due to this profound obscurity in its public reception, *Little Johannes*, in relation to Lu Xun, approximates a personal history tinged with secrecy.

Many Dutch sinologists came to study China through particular serendipitous encounters. For instance, Maghiel van Crevel recounts that in 1982 he "liked studying foreign languages" and was "fascinated by the Chinese language with unique characters"; because "the curriculum in the Chinese department was not limited to language alone but included Chinese history, cultural history, and topics from different eras and aspects," he was "very interested" in "these many non-linguistic topics brought by the courses." (Yi, 2019) Similarly, Anne Sytske Keijser, after graduating high school in the early 1980s with a scholarship to the University of Washington, initially "intended to study classical languages." Thwarted by course requirements, she decided to choose "a subject she had never studied before," which was Mandarin, a choice leading her to a foundational "Introduction to Chinese Literature" course taught by the Taiwanese poet Yang Mu 杨牧. (Yi, 2017) Starting from similar points of departure, the teaching, research, and translation work on Chinese literature undertaken by Dutch scholars, along with their decades-long personal experiences, gradually coalesced into visible or latent threads within Sino-Dutch literary exchange. These are simultaneously their life stories and personal landscapes. What has been transmitted back to China constitutes only a small, albeit prominent, portion, while a vast amount of information remains outside the scope of Chinese readers.

The poignant scarcity of such documented personal reverberations is exemplified in the case of *Little Johannes*. Ruitenbeek notes that the Chinese writer and translator Ye Junjian 叶

君健 was very fond of this book in his student days. (Ruitenbeek, 1993, p. 56) In 1987, Ye confirmed this in an article for the Dutch magazine De Gids, describing for Dutch readers the profound impact reading Lu Xun's translation had on him as a teenager and detailing his early interactions with Dutch intellectuals. He even noted that the author, Frederik van Eeden, was an editor of *De nieuwe Gids*, a precursor to the very magazine *De Gids*. (Ye, 1991, pp. 254–255) These interactions were so scarce! In 1998, seventy years after the publication of Lu Xun's translation of *Little Johannes*, the story of Lu Xun and this Dutch literary classic finally got attention in the Netherlands via Ruitenbeek's translation. By then, nearly fifty years had passed since Lu Xun's works first arrived in the Netherlands. It would take another twenty years, until 2018, for a relatively complete picture of the Dutch translations of Lu Xun's works to be circulated back to China for the first time.

Ruitenbeek's interpretation provided a new opportunity for Chinese readers to understand Lu Xun. While research on Lu Xun and *Little Johannes* is not extensive, numerous textual questions remain. Existing scholarship mostly concentrates on the Chinese context and Lu Xun's biography, lacking perspectives from the Netherlands, the homeland of *Little Johannes*. A particularly odd thing is that, although Lu Xun translated works by two Dutch authors from the mid-1920s onward, he frequently discussed Little Johannes but never mentioned Multatuli in his diaries, letters, or essays. Consequently, research has predominantly followed Lu Xun's own narrative cues, failing to sufficiently examine his silences, the original works, or the potential spiritual affinities between the authors.

Comparative research involving translingual texts is inherently part of Sino-foreign literary studies, yet often hindered by language barriers. Ruitenbeek has discussed the positions of the two authors translated by Lu Xun within the Dutch literary canon, the inherent differences between these two writers, and the influence of their works—particularly those not yet translated into Chinese—on Lu Xun's writing. These are aspects difficult for Chinese scholars to detect. In fact, the translation of *Little Johannes* spanned the pivotal years of 1926–27 in Lu Xun's life, bearing deep internal connections with the writing of *Wild Grass*, *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, and "Forging the Swords," which can be seen as part of Lu Xun's process of self-reflection. Given that the story of his encounter with *Little Johannes* remained untold until 1926, retracing the process from his initial encounter through translation, revisions, and final publication constitutes, to some degree, a reconstruction of Lu Xun's personal history. As the finalization of the revised translation coincided with Lu Xun's turning point in 1927, not only was the tightly interwoven story of translation, writing, and life fully unfurled, but the originally obscure foreign work was also imbued with a vital significance surpassing that of other matters; not only were scattered clues connected into a coherent narrative, but blind spots in documentation and the obscurities of life were illuminated! (Yi, 2025) Somewhat unexpectedly, it was through the discussion of a Dutch sinologist that the significant meaning of *Little Johannes* for Lu Xun was more fully substantiated.

In the study of influence within comparative literature in China's academia, there exists a kind of circular influence, or the boomerang effect, which refers to instances where a writer of a country first achieves significant influence abroad and then, in turn, circulates back to and influences their home country. The bidirectional flow between Lu Xun, the Netherlands, Little Johannes, and China closely resembles this phenomenon of circular influence. As a literary figure, Lu Xun devoted considerable effort to translation, producing a substantial body of work, and his ideas on translation have also attracted much attention. Lu Xun largely adhered to *zhiyi* 直译 (literal translation), which is, "rather faithful than smooth" 宁信而不顺, believing that translations "not only import new content but also import new modes of expression." (Lu, 2005, p. 391) In the implementation of Lu Xun's idea of literal translation, *Little Johannes* serves as a particularly meaningful example.

The reception and dissemination of Chinese literature in the Netherlands, and the arrival of Dutch literary classics in China, both elicit varying degrees of echo. If the exchanges between Chinese and Dutch scholars and writers demonstrate Sino-Dutch literary interaction and fusion

in a general sense, then the comprehensive research of various issues surrounding "Lu Xun and *Little Johannes*" (and the subsequent reintroduction of Dutch sinological research into Chinese Lu Xun studies) signifies that a deeper, more integrated form of Sino-Dutch literary fusion has occurred.

III. The Construction of a Bidirectional Framework

Given that Dutch is a less commonly taught language in China and vice versa, the scale of this literary exchange is inherently constrained. Dutch literature has maintained a modest presence in the Chinese book market, though a noticeable increase has been observed over the past decade or two. Compared with the reception of Chinese literature in the Netherlands, its reception there may be even more limited. Since the indirect translation of Mao Dun's *Schemering over Shanghai* (*Midnight* 子夜) from German into Dutch in 1939, the translated collections of Chinese literary works have included approximately 130 fiction collections, featuring about 77 authors with standalone volumes, and no more than 50 poetry collections (including prose collections by a few poets) with about 15 poets' individual volumes. Over nearly ninety years, this output remains small.

Consequently, while the two volumes of my forthcoming compilation—" Chinese Literature in the Netherlands" and "Dutch Literature's Arrival in China"—each contain substantial material and could be published separately (following the conventional unidirectional model of literary relations research), I have chosen to integrate them. This integration is based on the yet-to-be-systematized "Sino-Dutch Literary Exchanges" and the threads of dialogues and fusions contained within the topic, especially the "internal" and "external" investigations centered on Lu Xun, modern China's greatest writer. Also, to construct a framework of dialogues, the entire discussion is planned across the two aforementioned volumes, aiming to maintain the overall richness of content and structural balance. Volume One is titled "The Circulation of Chinese Literature to the Netherlands," primarily outlining the trajectories of modern and contemporary Chinese literature in the Netherlands. It is divided into two parts. Part One is "Interviews with Dutch Sinologists," comprising the eight dialogues mentioned above. Part Two is "Dissemination, Reception, and Interaction: The Reception and Dissemination of Chinese Literature in the Netherlands," including overviews of histories and anthologies of modern and contemporary Chinese literature in the Dutch world, as well as the reception and dissemination of works by Lu Xun and Guo Moruo.

Building upon the preceding discussion, the process of historical inquiry invariably involves phases of emergence, burial, and rediscovery. While some threads of intellectual exchange between Chinese and Dutch sinologists may remain elusive, and the contents of a single volume are necessarily finite, the present work achieves a comparatively complete and focused presentation of the learning, research, and life stories of eight key scholars. Recent developments further enrich this dialogue. For instance, Leenhouts's study, Leaving the World to Enter the World: Han Shaogong and Chinese Root-Seeking Literature, has been published in Chinese translation by Liao Shuwu (2020). Furthermore, the monumental Dutch translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, completed in 2021 after thirteen years of collaborative work by Leenhouts, Keijser, and Marijnissen, represents a landmark achievement. These contributions add new substance and dynamism to Sino-Dutch literary conversations, whose full implications await future scholars.

Volume Two, titled "Dutch Literature's Arrival in China," is structured into three parts. Given the relatively limited translation of Dutch literature into Chinese during the Republican era, the volume centers on the pivotal case of "Lu Xun and *Little Johannes*" as its unifying thread. Part One presents an annotated compilation of Lu Xun's translation of *Little Johannes*.

Part Two, "Lu Xun's Translation of *Little Johannes*: Chronicles, Issues, and Reception History," provides a detailed scholarly examination. Part Three, "Dutch Writers in Modern China," broadens the scope to include figures such as Multatuli and Henri Borel, alongside a survey of Dutch literature's translation and introduction in modern China, thereby furnishing a wider informational context. In terms of content, the reception and dissemination of works by Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, and others in the Netherlands finds a rough counterpart in the Chinese reading history of *Little Johannes* and Multatuli.

It is worth special mention that the complete manuscript of Lu Xun's translation of *Little Johannes*, over 260 pages, still exists. Seemingly echoing the aforementioned theme of historical obscurity, this manuscript was first opened to the public in 2014 and later included in the 2021 edition of *The Complete Manuscripts of Lu Xun, Volume 6*. Through the exquisitely printed *Complete Manuscripts*, readers can observe numerous legible revision traces, indicating that the manuscript is not the final fair copy. The revision Lu Xun began in May 1927 was likely conducted on the initial draft completed in Beijing in August 1926. Comparing the "initial draft" (1926) with the "revised final draft" (1927) reveals refinements in translation, the evolution of knowledge, and clarification of certain cultural allusions. Such meticulous revision demonstrates the importance Lu Xun attached to translating *Little Johannes*. Within the history of Sino-Dutch literary exchange, this is also an extremely meaningful historical detail. Based on this, Volume Two undertakes a meticulous scrutiny of Lu Xun's Chinese rendering of *Little Johannes* in the form of collected annotations, aiming to advance the "dialogue and fusion" of Sino-Dutch literature to a deeper level.

From the perspective of Sino-Dutch cultural exchange, Dutch sinology has a long history, with foundational works and studies on pre-modern China, such as Erik Zürcher's *The Buddhist Conquest of China,* alongside numerous monographs on Chinese literature by leading scholars like Douwe W. Fokkema, Maghiel van Crevel, and Michel Hockx, all of which have found their way into Chinese translation. However, a lacuna remains: there has been no Chinese-language publication like "Selected Works of Dutch Scholars' Research on Chinese Literature," and certainly none conceived from a deliberately bidirectional perspective. Consequently, as a first attempt to comprehensively showcase the centennial relationship between Chinese and Dutch literature, the academic validity of this discursive framework is firmly established.

Research on Sino-foreign literary and cultural relations often attracts attention due to prominent figures or phenomena. Yet, beneath these conspicuous nodes, a richer intellectual engagement quietly unfolds over time. Even between languages considered less common, like Chinese and Dutch on the scale of world literature, there persist meaningful instances of literary dialogue and fusion. While not vast in quantity, these micro-exchanges constitute narratives worthy of scholarly attention.

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