

China in Belgium: From a religious, economic and political interest, to the development of an academic discipline

Mieke Matthyssen and Bart Dessein

Ghent University, Belgium

Part one

When the famous French philosopher François-Marie Arouet Voltaire (1694–1778), in his «*Orphelin de la Chine. Tragédie en cinq actes et en vers*» (*Orphan of China. Tragedy in Five Acts and in Verse*), published in 1755, declared that the stony heart of Genghis Khan was softened by the moral purity of the gentle Chinese, and, in his «*Essais sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*» (*Essays on the Customs and Spirit of Nations*) of 1756, stated that the history of civilization begins with the Chinese state, he witnessed of an age-old admiration for and fascination with Chinese culture.¹ This overall positive perception of China that characterized the first half of 18th century Europe mainly was the outcome of the Christian missionaries who, in their publications, presented the Chinese as potential Christian converts. Especially French Jesuits who dominated the Christian missions in the early 18th century drew a positive picture of Chinese civilization in an attempt to convince King Louis XIV (reign: 1643–1715) to support their cause.²

Prior to the documents of these Jesuit missionaries, our knowledge and imagination of the Far East derived from the accounts of the Franciscan friars who were active when China was ruled by the Mongolian Yuan dynasty (1271/1279-1368). The most famous of these Franciscan friars may be William of Rubruck (ca.1210–ca.1270), a Flemish Franciscan who had arrived in the

¹ Spence, Jonathan, “Western Perceptions of China from the Late Sixteenth Century to the Present”, In *Heritage of China. Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*. Edited by Paul S. Ropp, Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 1990, p.4.

² See Gernet, Jacques, *Le Monde Chinois*. Paris: Armand Colin, [1972]1990, p.453.

Mongolian capital Karakorum in 1254, i.e. a few decades before the Mongols included China in their empire.³ Europe's fascination and knowledge of China undoubtedly also derived from such works as Marco Polo's fantastic «*Le devisement dou monde*» (*The Description of the World*). This work was the most comprehensive account of the East, and particularly of the court of Khubilai Khan, known to the West up to his time.⁴

Apart from through missionary activities, our early knowledge of China was also the result of commercial contacts. Starting from 1715, also Flemish merchants started to make voyages to the Orient, with a view to develop trade with China. Chinese tea, silk and porcelain were imported in Flanders. In 1723, the 'General Imperial India Company' was established in order to regulate the trade with China.

This brings us to a first of what could be regarded as five phases in the history of Chinese Studies in Europe: the period in which European knowledge of China highly depended on reports of adventurous merchants and of Christian – Franciscan and Jesuit – missionaries in the Far East. As especially the Jesuit missionaries were active in China in a period in which Neo-Confucianism was the official orthodoxy, it comes as no surprise that the first Chinese works that were translated into a Western language – Latin – were the Confucian “Four Books”, «*Lunyu*» 论语, «*Mengzi*» 孟子, «*Daxue*» 大学, and «*Zhongyong*» 中庸. In 1686, this translation was published as «*Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*» (*Confucius, Philosopher of China*) in Paris by the Jesuit Philippe Couplet, a native of the 'Belgian' city of Mechelen.⁵

³ On William of Rubruck and his *Itinerarium*: see Morgan, David. *The Mongols. The Peoples of Europe*. Cambridge MA and Oxford: Blackwell, [1986] 1990, pp.25-26.

⁴ The most recent extensive study on Marco Polo is: Vogel, Hans-Ulrich, *Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues*, Leiden: Brill, 2012.

⁵ See Wilkinson, Endymion. *Chinese History. A New Manual*. Harvard University Asia Center. Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 375. The territories of what was to become Belgium in 1830, were then part of the Spanish Netherlands. Other early translations of Confucian classics were a French translation of the «*Shujing*» 书经 by

With the First Opium War (1839–1842) and the ensuing ‘Unequal Treatises’, a second phase in European Chinese studies set in. The ‘Treaty of Nanjing’ of 1842 not only brought about that missionaries were given the right to freely preach in China, but it also enhanced possibilities for trade and economic activities, thus bringing in an increasing number of European merchants and enterprises to China. In the wake of the economic initiatives of the major European countries, and deprived of its trade with China as a result of the division in 1830 between the Northern (the Netherlands) and the Southern Netherlands (part of Belgium), also the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent commercial and diplomatic missions to China. In 1890, the steel mill Cockerill was the first Belgian company that became closely involved in the foundation of an iron and steel mill in Hanyang. Cockerill would, in 1905, also become engaged in the building of the Beijing-Hankou railway.⁶

In this period, Europe’s fascination for the Orient, and Chinese studies, further upsurged with a series of famous archaeological missions to Central Asia. In the early 20th century, Central Asian cultural artefacts and manuscripts in Sanskrit, Kuchean, Agnean, Khotanese, Sogdian, Uighur, Tibetan, and

Antoine Gaubil S.J., entitled *Le Chou-king: Un des livres sacrés des chinois*, published in 1770 in Paris with Tilliard (See Wilkinson, *op.cit.*, p.375). Around the same period, also a first historical work – equally impregnated with Neo-Confucian thinking – was translated into French: between 1777 and 1783, the Jesuit Joseph F. Marie Antoine de Moyriac de Mailla published his 13 volumes of «*Histoire générale de la China, ou Annales de cet empire; traduite du Tong-kian-kang-mou*» (*General History of China, or Annals of this Empire; Translated from the Tong-kian-kang-mou*) in Paris with Pierres et Clousier (See Wilkinson, *op.cit.*, p.619). As mentioned in the title, this work was based on the *Tongjian Gangmu* 通鑑綱目, compiled by pupils of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) from the latter’s «*Zizhi tongjian*» 資治通鑑, a work that covers Chinese history from 403 BCE to 959 CE.

⁶ On the role of Cockerill in railway building in China: see Chang, Jui-te, “The Beijing-Hankou Railroad and Commercial Developments in North China, 1905-1937. A Case Study of the Impact of Belgian Investment in China”, In *The History of the Relations between the Low Countries and China in the Qing Era (1644-1911)*. Edited by Vande Walle, W.E. and Golvers, N. Leuven Chinese Studies XIV. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003, pp.461-486.

Chinese, were brought to London, Berlin, Paris, Tokyo, and Saint Petersburg.⁷ It is also in this period that the European term ‘sinology’ was coined. Following those late 19th and early 20th century Chinese intellectuals who saw in a reevaluation of ancient Confucian texts – the so-called ‘Hanxue’ 汉学 Movement – the solution to revive China in its confrontation with European forces, also European academic sinology originated with the study of classical Chinese texts, much in accordance with and using the methodologies of Latin and Greek studies. As a logical consequence, early academic European sinology was above all a philological study, focusing on Chinese philosophical, historical and literary works.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Belgian universities did not yet have departments of Chinese studies. Starting from 1904, publications on China had been collected by the ‘Société d’études sino-belge’ (Society for Sino-Belgian Studies), and it is from within this institute that, in 1929, the ‘Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises’ / ‘Belgisch Instituut voor Hogere Chinese Studiën’ (Belgian Institute for Advanced Chinese Studies) was established. The institute was housed within the premises of the ‘Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire’ / ‘Koninklijk Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis’ (Royal Museums for Art and History) of Belgium. The creation of this institute was the outcome of the efforts of the Chinese parliamentarian Han Ruijia 韩瑞家 to promote organizations for scientific collaboration between China and the different capital cities of Europe (Han Ruijia had close contacts with Emile Vandervelde (1866–1938) and Kamiel

⁷ After the Swedish Sven Anders Hedin (1865–1952) had travelled through the Central Asian region starting from 1885 and had, in 1899, discovered the ancient Buddhist and erstwhile Chinese garrison city Loulan on the skirts of the Taklimakan desert, the first officially sanctioned European archaeological mission was led by Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943) in 1900–1901. German expeditions led by Albert Grünwedel (1856–1935), Georg Huth (1867–1906), and Albert von le Coq (1860–1930) followed. British expeditions were led by Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943), French expeditions by Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), Japanese expeditions by Kozui Ōtani (1876–1948), and Russian expeditions by Dmitri Klementz (1847–1914) and Serge Oldenburg (1863–1934). See Jong, J. W. de. *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*. Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica No.33. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1987, pp.38-39.

Huysmans (1871–1968), two members of the ‘Belgische Werkliedenpartij’ (Belgian Workers’ Party), the later Belgian Socialist Party), and, ironically, of the financing through the indemnity China had to pay as an outcome of the ‘Boxer Movement’.⁸ In 1931, the first issue of the journal *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques*, initiated by the buddhologist Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869–1938), was published. At first a journal, the publication was later, under Étienne Lamotte (1903–1983), changed into a monograph series.

With Louis de La Vallée Poussin (Ghent State University) and Étienne Lamotte (Catholic University of Louvain), we touch upon one of the major research fields of traditional Belgian academic sinology: Buddhist studies. It is, indeed, around the turn of the 20th century that, following a plea for the establishment of studies of Oriental languages at Belgian universities by Earl Charles Frédéric Auguste Woeste (1837–1922), member of the Belgian Catholic Party, universities started to establish chairs for the study of China, and that a third phase in the development of Chinese studies started.⁹ In the beginning years of sinology as a university discipline in Belgium, no full programs were offered yet. Rather, specialists in Chinese studies were attached to other departments, depending on the precise research focus of the concerned staff member: departments of classical studies (Latin and Greek), history, art, linguistics. At Ghent State University, Louis de La Vallée Poussin was, in 1900, commissioned with an optional course in Sanskrit. He, however, also made major contributions in the field of sinological studies through his research on Chinese Buddhist texts. In 1926, Carl Hentze was appointed to the chair of the optional course of ‘Chinese Archaeology and Art’, and, in 1937 also to the

⁸ On the establishment of the Belgian Institute for Advanced Chinese Studies: see Durt, Hubert, “Les soixante-quinze ans de l’Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises”, In *Institut belge des hautes études chinoises. Belgisch instituut voor hogere Chinese studiën. 1929-2004*. IBHEC/BIHCS, 2004, pp.11-14.

⁹ See “Plechtige Opening van het Hoger Instituut voor Oosterse, Oosteuropese en Afrikaanse Taalkunde en Geschiedenis”, *De Brug. Tijdschrift van de Rijksuniversiteit te Gent*. Extra-nummer, juli 1958, p.7.

chairs of ‘History of South and East Asian Art and Boundary Areas’ and ‘Classical Chinese Language’ at Ghent State University.

As this had been the case at Ghent University, also at the Catholic University of Louvain, where Oriental studies had been restricted to the Bible languages of Hebrew, Arabic, and Armenian, and, since the 19th century, Manchu, Chinese studies entered through Buddhism.¹⁰ The direct cause, however, was one of the major developments in Belgian education policies: the recognition of Dutch as language of higher education in Flanders instead of French, a non-native language for the majority of the Flemish population. Already in 1911, a bill to make Dutch the language of education in the Flemish part of Belgium, had been introduced in the Belgian parliament. This proposal met with fierce opposition but was, finally, approved in 1930. While Ghent State University had, by law, to change its language, the Catholic University of Louvain, a non-state university, continued to teach in French. Disagreeing with the language change, the French speaking Louis de La Vallée Poussin quit Ghent State University, and his equally French speaking pupil Étienne Lamotte moved to the Catholic University of Louvain.¹¹

In 1958, Ghent State University was the first Belgian University to establish a department for oriental studies, offering BA, MA and PhD programs: the ‘Higher Institute for Oriental, East-European, and African Linguistics and History’. In political Belgium, the struggle for recognition of Dutch as language of higher education continued, and, in 1968, also the Catholic University of Louvain had to exchange French for Dutch. One of the outcomes was that in the French speaking part of Belgium, a new French speaking university was established: Louvain-la-Neuve (New Louvain). The famous Étienne Lamotte

¹⁰ See Vaermen, Benedicte, “Sinologie aan de Katholieke Universiteit van Leuven: een overzicht van onderwijs en onderzoek”, In *Institut belge des hautes études chinoises. Belgisch instituut voor hogere Chinese studiën*. 1929-2004. IBHEC/BIHCS, 2004, p.79.

¹¹ See Dessein, Bart, “La Vallée Poussin, Louis de (1869-1938)”, UGentMemorie. <http://www.ugentmemorie.be/personen/la-vallee-poussin-louis-de-1869-1938>.

moved from (old) Louvain to this new institute. This created the possibility to establish a new center in now Dutch speaking (old) Louvain: the center for ‘Studies of the Far East’, in which, in 1979, a sinological department was created, offering BA, MA and PhD programs.¹² With the establishments of sinological centers at Ghent State University and at the Dutch speaking Catholic University of Louvain, we enter the fourth phase of Chinese studies in Belgium: the period of traditional academic sinology, offering full programs that focus on the classical Chinese language, philosophy, literature and history.

Obviously, China studies in Belgium have been influenced by developments in China itself. China’s changing position in the world, and the enhanced possibilities of academic exchange and cooperation have, especially since the 80s of the 20th century, reshaped Belgian sinology. One such change is that where modern language skills had remained marginal into the 70s, training in ‘*putonghua*’ has gained importance. China’s growing influence in world economics and politics have also partly shifted attention away from the traditional philosophical, historical and cultural domains of Chinese studies, to the economic, political, and international relations domains. Although the origin of so-called ‘area studies’ dates back already to the 1950s, it are developments in China itself that have made that ‘area studies’ have become influential in European – including Belgian – sinology, especially in the more recent period.

In the contemporary period, the period that we could see as the fifth phase of Belgian sinological studies, new specialized institutes such as the ‘Brussels Institute for Contemporary China Studies’ at the Free University of Brussels, to which recently also the ‘Brussels Diplomatic Academy’ (BDA) and the ‘Brussels Academy for China and European Studies’ (BACES) have been added, have seen daylight. These institutes are increasingly entering the field of applied research on China and political consultancy. These tendencies have not only

¹² See Vaerman, *op.cit.*, p.79.

opened up new fields of sinological research, but have also caused the traditional China expert to reconsider his academic role and his role in society.

Part two

Whereas the first part mostly deals with the history of Chinese studies and images of China in Belgium and Europe as early as the 18th century, this second part will briefly address the experiences of six Belgian, mostly Flemish, professors with different academic backgrounds in their dealings with China as from the 60s on. Professor Plasschaert and late professor Van den Bulcke are active in business and economics and related fields such as public finance, taxation, and foreign investment; professor Defraigne is an authority in the field of EU-China relations, eurozone governance and macroeconomics; professor Libbrecht is an expert in Asian and comparative philosophy; professor Storme has pioneered in the field of law education in China; professor Geeraerts is an authority in the field of International Relations and EU-China relations.¹³

Their narratives not only reflect much of what is addressed in the first part on the history of Chinese studies in Belgium, but also reveal a great deal on Sino-European relations, and on how the growing importance of China in the globalized world is perceived in Belgium and sometimes also Europe. Moreover, the many anecdotes and personal experiences offer a lively account of how studies on and academic cooperation with China evolved over the last 40 years. Regardless of their expertise, these China experts expose a few common experiences and ideas, of which we will here address a few.

¹³ The Oral Histories project in Belgium started in 2010 with the interview with professor Defraigne, and is still ongoing. Future interviews might deal with other experts in the field of law education, and with experts from other domains of Chinese studies brought up in the existing accounts, such as Chinese art experts and curators of exhibitions on Chinese art and archeology. See for the transcripts of the existing accounts, <http://politics.ntu.edu.tw/RAEC/act02.php>, entry “De, Bi, He 德、比、荷”. The transcripts of the interviews with professor Storme and professor Geeraerts are forthcoming.

To start with, a first impression of China was often based on the images and story in the world famous comic strip *Tintin and the Blue Lotus* by Belgian cartoonist Hergé (1907–1983). This story was first serialized weekly from 1934 to 1935 in the conservative Belgian newspaper *Le Vingtième Siècle*, and later became part of the series “The adventures of Tintin”. In *The Blue Lotus*, Tintin, a detective/journalist, and his dog Snowy, are invited to China in the midst of the 1931 Japanese invasion. In this turbulent period, Tintin reveals the machinations of Japanese spies and uncovers a drug-smuggling ring. Taking stance against the Japanese but also against the British occupation, the strip shows us a rather positive image of China, at least of traditional China. Professor Defraigne argues that the book in a way fights prejudices by telling a story with more empathy for the Chinese culture. The book has greatly influenced the European perception about China, and mostly in a positive sense. But when the Communist Party took over power, the perception changed. As Defraigne continues:

There was a great deal of compassion for the Chinese, especially the Christian Chinese of course. And in my area, people were rather conservative, anti-communist, but they were more opposed to Russian communism than to Chinese communism. They thought, I would say that, you know, the Chinese situation was such a difficult one, that if the Communists could do something about it, okay. The mentality of the people, they were anti-communist, but more because Russia had invaded Eastern Europe. Which we resented – very negatively. Then in China, we weren’t sure, whether this was a real disaster or not. We were sensitive to the question of religious persecution.¹⁴

The religious association with China was quite evident in those days, in particular where it concerns the Jesuits. Professor Defraigne recalls that in church – as it suits true Catholics – they had to “give money for the souls of the young Chinese”. In his village in the southern part of Belgium – and this most probably was the case in many parishes – the church organized a special program for the missionaries geared to China to help young Chinese to go to school and get a Christian education.

¹⁴ See transcript of the interview at <http://politics.ntu.edu.tw/RAEC/act02.php>.

Another first China encounter reveals a different source of inspiration. Late professor Van den Bulcke recalled when he was sixteen, at some point a cover on a special issue of Times Magazine on the Great Leap Forward drew his attention. He was especially intrigued by the fact that farmers had been told to build blast furnaces to produce pig iron to stimulate the industrial development of the country, which had ended in a complete disaster. This inspired him to give a presentation on the subject for his English course. Although it took some time before he could pick up his interest in China as a study field, China later became his main preoccupation for a very long time. This in turn resulted in many academic partnerships and exchanges, and countless visits to China.

In inquiries about how the interviewees finally ended up being professionally occupied with China in those days (the 60s and 70s) when no full programs on China Studies were available, it often turns out that this was ‘by chance’, or at least by some indirect reason. For instance, professor Libbrecht, who was a mathematics teacher, took an interest in Asian philosophy and especially Buddhism, while doing his military service. This led him to read the *Daodejing*, but despite his immediate fascination, he felt rather frustrated by only being able to read different translations of the *Daodejing* without understanding why these translations were not the same. He wanted to read the classic in its original version, and be able to understand the true Daoist philosophy. He remembers this experience very vividly:

Concretely, I started like everyone I guess, with Arthur Wailey’s German translation of the *Daodejing*. I didn’t know it was a translation from English, I bought it in Germany back then. I was in the army at the time and I was so impressed by that. Even though I didn’t understand some parts, it was still magical to me. I thought to myself, if I ever read a book at my deathbed, that would be it. I read other translations too, when I was a teacher, but they were so different from one another. I wondered how that was possible, and I thought if I would understood Chinese I could understand these differences. [...] But I also thought that I would only fully understand its meaning if I became a Daoist

myself, if I cultivated a Daoist sentiment inside. [...] And that is how it started for me, through the *Daodejing*.¹⁵

After having first engaged in Sanskrit out of an interest for Buddhism, he thus started to study classical Chinese (courses on modern Chinese were anyway not yet available). A few years later, he was invited to establish the Department of Chinese Studies at the Catholic University of Louvain. Professor Plasschaert was at some point invited to give a course in the newly emerging ‘Area Studies’ in 1965, and started to focus more and more on China out of a growing interest in comparing the Russian and Chinese plan economy model. In 1980, professor Storme participated in an official delegation to China as a member of the Senate Committee, and occasionally informed the officials that they would be able to provide high-quality assistance in reconstituting law and justice in China. In 1982, he received a telegram from the Belgian Ambassador in Beijing containing the terse message that he was invited to give further substance to the proposals he had made in 1980. And this was the start of a long, still ongoing, cooperation in the field of law studies.

Not surprisingly, another frequently recurring theme in the narratives, is the lack of reliable sources in those early pioneering days. Luckily, after the visit of Nixon to China in 1972, there was an increasing interest in China in academic circles worldwide, and gradually more reliable sources such as publications from the Library of Congress started to circulate. Still, at that time, as nothing was available digitally, it was sometimes hard to get these documents.

Despite the current availability of whatever reliable information on China, most interviewees ascribe the many ongoing misunderstandings and failing business and diplomatic relations to an enormous lack of profound knowledge on China. They argue that even in intellectual circles like academia, ignorance about China is still prevailing. Overcoming this ignorance is a prerequisite for

¹⁵ See the transcript of the interview at <http://politics.ntu.edu.tw/RAEC/comm2/InterviewBelgium%20Ulrich%20Libbrecht.pdf>.

approaching the Chinese in a spirit of openness and mutual understanding. For instance, many people are afraid of China as the Yellow Danger, but they don't take enough historical background into account to get a more nuanced perspective. In this respect, professor Defraigne wonders if it would not be more appropriate to say that it was Genghis Khan who was the real yellow danger in earlier times.

A second misperception is that few people know about the century of humiliation and the Opium War, and even less so about Tianjin as a Belgian concession. And even if people do know, they don't realize that this century of humiliation has shaped, and still does, the Chinese perception of the West, and to a great extent explains the reserved, nationalist, uncompromising attitude often exposed in diplomatic and business dealings. Also on national level, where nationalist propaganda and self-censorship rule everyday life, this century of humiliation is part of the explanation for the Chinese fear of chaos, and why China is so eager to maintain its unity and its stability. It is exactly this knowledge gap that in the last two-three decades urged many academics to set up research institutes on contemporary China, such as the abovementioned Brussels Institute for Contemporary China Studies (BICCS) (2006).

On the other hand, these China experts also consider their own knowledge of China not always sufficient, especially when it comes to culturally conditioned patterns of thinking, and the characteristically Chinese way of communicating and dealing with interpersonal relationships, as for instance visible in the relation between pupil (researcher) and teacher (supervisor). Professor Van den Bulcke observed the following about the changing nature of his academic exchanges:

I think there have been important changes, they speak better English, and so on, but still there is a characteristically Chinese mentality, or Chinese way of thinking that we

do not always understand well enough. I think I understand quite a lot, but I am still missing things, certain knowledge of the Chinese culture and philosophy.¹⁶

So despite the growing cooperation and exchange with Chinese partners, researchers and students, and the increased availability of reliable information on China, there remains to be – to a greater or lesser extent – a lack of ‘culturally sensitive’ knowledge about China. Most experts acknowledge that deeply engaging in Chinese Studies the way sinologists do, or at least familiarizing with the Chinese language, would have been the only way to deal with this cultural ignorance, and might even have opened up new doors. But even though some of them still regret not to have done this more intensively in the past, they also argue that this is such a time-consuming process, that it might have meant a re-orientation of their expertise.

Another striking theme in the history of Chinese Studies in Belgium that cannot be neglected, is the role of Ferdinand Verbiest in the history of the Jesuits in China, and the consequences this has had for Chinese studies in Belgium. Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688) was a Belgian Jesuit-astronomer serving at the Qing court. His observatory can still be visited in Beijing, and even serves as a landmark.¹⁷ Documents related to his time in China, and his own manuscript in Chinese about the astronomical instruments he had built, have proven to be very significant in the field of Chinese studies. Not only did they provide valuable historical information, but collecting these documents also gave the initial impetus to establish the ‘China Library’ in Louvain. This project was sponsored by the Ferdinand Verbiest Stichting (set up in 1982), and in the beginning days of those China pioneers, they frequently visited the library. Up

¹⁶ See transcript of the interview at <http://politics.ntu.edu.tw/RAEC/comm2/Interviewbelgium%20Van%20Den%20Bulcke.pdf>.

¹⁷ The Beijing Ancient Observatory (*Gu guan xiang tai* 古观象台) is located in the eastern part of the central boulevard Jianguomen. It is one of the oldest observatories in the world, first built in 1442 (Ming Dynasty), and expanded during the Qing Dynasty, when the Jesuits provided new and more accurate instruments.

till today, the Ferdinand Verbiest Stichting is committed to the dialogue between Europe and China, with as main focus historical research on the Belgian presence in China.

A last aspect often mentioned in the narratives, is the impact of the economic reforms as from 1987 on, when everyone already dealing with China could feel the different, optimistic atmosphere. Obviously, this positively influenced the Euro/Belgian-China relations and cooperation. From then on, research in business started booming, and cooperation between academia and business expanded enormously. Among others, in 1985 this resulted in the establishment of the China-EC Management Institute (CEMI) in Beijing (now known as the China-Europe International Business School CEIBS at the Shanghai Pudong area) by the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), and in 2002 in the Euro-China Center (ECC) of the Antwerp Management School. The latter aims at bringing knowledge on China in the universities and in business, with as main supporters Belgian multinationals such as Bekaert, Janssen Pharmaceutica (now part of Johnson & Johnson), Alcatel, and Agfa Gevaert. About ten years later, however, the Tiananmen events caused a break in many sound ongoing cooperations, and for some even meant a definite farewell to China.

Today, these experts all recognize China has excellent, high-quality institutes to cooperate with in research and education, although it still highly depends on which type of institute is at stake (private, top 50,...). That CEMI from the pioneering years has developed into CEIBS is one impressive illustration of how fast Chinese institutes of higher education have expanded, and manage to host outstanding foreign and Chinese experts and students. Another very recent example is the “Brussels Academy of China and European Studies” (BACES), set up in Beijing in 2014. Professor Geeraerts explains that BACES was the logical result of a yearlong and smooth cooperation between

Renmin University, Sichuan University, Fudan University and the Free University of Brussels.

These few insights drawn from the narratives of Belgian China pioneers, show how closely related their major China experiences and developments are to historical events. They also reveal how important it is to consider intellectual growth over time, and to see how it interacts with historical and social events worldwide.

To conclude, we would like to quote one of the interviewees, professor Plasschaert, when he expresses the importance of mutual understanding and sound knowledge of one another:

All in all, there is still too little disposition in Europe to understand China, in its traditional components and its profound transformation that unsettles even many Chinese. In the reverse direction, the Chinese population should also become more familiar with the stupendous European cultures. Whether one likes it or not, in the present rapidly globalizing world, East and West will have to meet, whatever Kipling may have contended.¹⁸

¹⁸ See transcript of the interview at <http://politics.ntu.edu.tw/RAEC/comm2/InterviewBelgium%20Sylvain%20Plasschaert.pdf>.