

MA Thesis

Egbert Fleuren, s1291025

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Prof dr Nira Wickramasinghe

Second reader: Limin Teh

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From pragmatic colonialism to scholarly theory:

J. J. M. de Groot's location in the history of Dutch sinology

*History, is a conscious, self-meditating
process — Spirit emptied out into Time.*

G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807).

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Preface

I have tried to make a study of the changes that sinology has experienced through time. Jan Jacob Maria de Groot is a major figure in the history of his field, whether that should be called China Studies or Orientalism. All forms of Asian Studies have felt the growing importance of *Area Studies* instead of colonialist “science”. China Studies, as a successor to ‘sinology’, is one of the most overt proofs of the success of postcolonial criticism in deconstructing the epistemologies of Eurocentric, colonialist discourse. Said’s famous book from 1978 (*Orientalism*), has pondered the question of colonialism and orientalism and has highlighted the precise nature of the models used by Western scholarship for fathoming Eastern civilizations; and, despite what scholars claim, sinology is, in this author’s opinion, an extremely orientalist science.¹

De Groot’s case is classical in its clear, problematic, stereotypical image of ‘China’. Our task is to wonder if his ideas were realistic, and if he may have influenced the history of China Studies today. In the end, this study must show the life of the man and do justice to him – but always without pandering to his reputation, deserved or undeserved, or trying to pigeonhole him. He was definitely an orientalist thinker. Of course, the Saidian doctrine is about this, claiming that the image of the East corrupts the consciousness of Eastern cultures and their value to the world – but Said’s theories are not derived from *sinology*, and many sinologists *believe them to be incompatible with the practice of sinology throughout the centuries*. This is self-evidently untrue.

If anything, then, this thesis explores the fallible nature of man’s judgment, with the constant hope to reveal the orientalist presuppositions of sinology.

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978).

Introduction

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Jan Jacob Maria de Groot: sinologist.

Jan Jacob Maria de Groot was a notable scholar of China who flourished around the turn of the century in the late 19th- early 20th century. His primary field was religion, especially religious customs in China. Because of the Dutch colonial presence in Indonesia, and their interest in training interpreters, he had close ties with the Dutch Colonial government. Our question, then, concerns two subjects: the process of taking an active stance to make sinological information useful for colonial governance policy (pragmatic colonialism) and sinology as a discipline as practiced by professors from Leiden University (“Dutch” sinology). Today, ‘China Studies’ has replaced the term sinology. In De Groot’s day, China Studies was still very much *sinology*: orientalist and elitist. The theological connection to missionary-work was very much alive. Our research question: *How does J. J. M. De Groot’s scholarship epitomize the connection between pragmatic colonialism and Dutch sinology?*

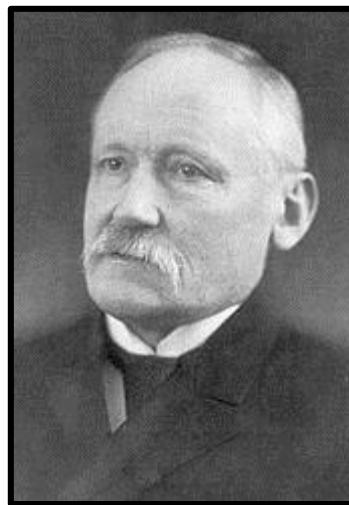


Figure 1 Jan Jacob Maria de Groot

The focus of this thesis will be on his political and academic entanglements and main theories, and the way they were realized by, in general, himself only.

Literature

De Groot has been studied mainly by Zwi Werblowsky, a Polish theologian. Unfortunately, he knows little about China, he does not specialize in De Groot's field and he has trouble, by extension, uniting the worldly aspects of De Groot's life (his importance as a scholar) with his scholarly contribution to his field of studies (the actual value of his research).

Although Zwi Werblowsky is the only real source on De Groot, his view is controvertible because of De Groot's continuous inclusion in the timelines of orientalism. The main chronologies are Werblowsky's, De Visser's (who wrote an obituary) and Idema's, i.e. the Leiden School chronology (who included him in their manifold scholarly histories of China Studies in Leiden and abroad). Werblowsky sees De Groot as a kind of monolithic genius who built great systematic treatments of world history by using insights from source material and direct experience.² His work is very well-written and full of beautiful ideas, but very few of them are in accordance with De Groot's reality. Others, like the obituary by De Visser that appeared when De Groot died, portray De Groot as a mostly introverted thinker who worked very hard.³ This is closer to reality, but does not do justice to De Groot's other life as a communicator and traveler. Finally, Blussé and Idema, both professional historians of China, see De Groot as a colonialist.⁴ This has little to no historical grounding, but serves as a foil to the other visions, because it teaches us how early 20th-century sinology survived the test of time. The argument as follows will be mostly a matter of blending all these three visions together.

An exhaustive work on the sinologists in Leiden was written very recently by Koos Kuiper, which reads as an elaboration upon Idema's paradigm.⁵ In fact, there is a constant tension within the work, because one is completely uncertain whether it is going to collapse under its own weight. Nevertheless, it has an organic way of relating the life-stories of many men who are now dead. In many ways, it is a fitting goodbye to the old world of sinology; however, as we shall see, the relevance of De Groot's message has not waned, and remains misunderstood irrespective of the amount of labor involved in describing the precise state-of-affairs that characterized his mortal existence.

² R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *The Beaten Track of Science: The Life and Work of J. M. M. De Groot* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002).

³ M.W. de Visser, *Levensbericht Van J. J. M. De Groot* (Leiden: Brill, 1922).

⁴ “[The Leiden school of Sinology's] main contribution lay in the *practical study of Chinese overseas communities* in the Dutch East Indies and their relationship to their homelands in China [my italics]”. Leonard Blussé, "Leiden University's Early Sinologists (1854-1911)," in *Chinese Studies in the Netherlands: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Wilt L. Idema (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 30.

⁵ Koos Kuiper, *The Early Dutch Sinologists (1854-1900): Training in Holland and China, Function in the Netherlands Indies* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

Methodology

The available literature provides me with several important concepts that can be used to understand De Groot's life. Mostly, my strategy has been to use the available literature in conjunction with a close reading of De Groot's accessibly-written works, mainly *The Religion of the Chinese* (lecture held for Hartford seminary in Wisconsin) and his inaugural address of 1891.⁶ However, his greatest work, *The Religious System of China*, is unavoidable; it will also be referenced on more than one occasion.⁷

A constant strain in the work of De Groot is his so-called authoritarianism. I will not subscribe to this vision, i.e. that he was a staunch conservative. Although he pandered to tradition, as I will state, he was not, in any way, a defender of any school. Instead, he worked within the tradition to find a semi-universalist message to convey to the world, and explain China not only as an orientalist construction, as 'sinography' usually seems to entail,⁸ but also as a real place in which people live and which is thrust forward through history only by the innovative genius of its greatest minds. An exemplary quote can be found in his *magnum opus*, *The Religious System of China*:

Suppose for a moment that Spanish, Swedish, Greek and British customs were grouped together without any reference to the particular country in which a peculiar custom prevails, and presented to the world as a sketch of European life in general, would not every European immediately condemn the work as ridiculous caricature? Yet, books on China are written in this way, and no single word of protest is heard; they meet with the general approval of the world, run through several editions, and Science is thrown back upon them as authorities, nay, as standard works!⁹

⁶ J. J. M. de Groot, *Over Het Belang Der Kennis Van China Voor Onze Koloniën Uit Een Politiek En Wetenschappelijk Oogpunt* (Leiden: Brill, 1891); *The Religion of the Chinese* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910).

⁷ *The Religious System of China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1892).

⁸ Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao, eds., *Sinographies: Writing China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2008).

⁹ Groot, *The Religious System of China*, IX.

What is immediately obvious is that De Groot was very serious about his work as a sinologist, but not for the reasons of sinology as a science of China. Rather, he saw very clearly that he had a chance to contribute to a form of communication that was slowly spanning the globe, and he was in fact instrumental in founding China Studies as an interpretative, rather than an authoritative science.

His constant message, then, is one of worldliness: giving proper context to peoples as they are. In all his endeavors, be they Chinese rationalism, Chinese-Indonesian minorities, the purpose of sinology (as in his inaugural lecture) or the meaning of Christianity for China and vice versa (as in *The Religion of the Chinese*), De Groot stressed a message of an escape from dogmatic world-views that were based on mere abstractions and fatalism, and instead wanted to reorient our timely reflections upon the concrete, and our factual indoctrinations – as, in his own mind, mostly perpetuated by the Church – on the sensible.

The main method, then, is discovering the precise *wording* of this message in De Groot's works, and seeking the constant strain of information and practice that is perpetual, seemingly, throughout the whole sinographical community. As a *sinologist*, De Groot saw deeper meanings in the word China than other scientists. De Groot brought stability and constancy to an, as he saw it, extremely amateuristic field. Even though he failed – in some ways – as a scientist, his work was the prime driving force behind most sinological innovations in The Netherlands since, mostly because of his constant activism against the corruption of the sinographical ideal that he pursued: description of the living tradition.

I. Life of De Groot

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Genius and hard work in a changing age

In this chapter the considerations, life and challenges of De Groot are used as a perspective on his time, and as an introduction to his work.

De Groot lived and died in a radically changing time. In this chapter, it will be attempted to realize a strict connection between what we know about his life, and what is actually, in this sense, knowable about his work. This will form a lens on his time. He was, after all, occupied with many questions that are no longer important, mostly because of the changes brought about within the sinological science. Today it is called China Studies, but in those days, it was something wholly different, mostly because of a stolid theological influence and the strictures placed upon scholarship by the government, who needed interpreters to help connect governmental institutions to the local populace in Indonesia.

De Groot was born in Schiedam in a Catholic family. He went to the university after high school. Initially interested in joining the military, he was forced to relinquish his dreams for joining the army and was slowly pulled in by an academic career. Curiosity may have sparked his incredible desire to travel and see the world. Werblowsky explains that De Groot was in this sense a perfect sympathizer with the colonial government: “he owed his scholarly accomplishments to the opportunities offered by the colonialism of the period.”¹⁰ Specializing in Indonesia, he went there for research; eventually he became a professor in Sinology. Having little interest in big works of synthesis (as is sometimes thought), nor in sweeping statements about China or theological aims, his work reached incredible levels of discernment in understanding the nuance and the needs of the colonial system and the relationship between Western understandings of China and their actual self-conception – all his works are therefore impossible to be read as anything else than a constant dialogue within himself with his own studies and his own thoughts. Although he wrote in a capable and learned style, he avoids

¹⁰ Werblowsky, *The Beaten Track of Science: The Life and Work of J. M. M. De Groot*, 1.

conclusions and seeks refuge in his argumentation to the ‘beaten track of science’ as Werblowsky correctly said.

De Groot's formative years

The Netherlands in the *Fin-de-siècle*, as everywhere, were plagued by feelings of exhaustion and a general mood of fatalism. Today, the period of 1880-1917 is seen as a period of decadence.¹¹ The period began with the *Beweging van Tachtig*, a movement of writers in the eighties (“tachtiger jaren”). Art took on a new meaning: the progress of artistic expressionism and the development of new forms had to be a life’s calling.¹² ‘Naturalism’ came into being, sketching wide-spun images of life.¹³ “Excited feeling and impression,” Albert Verwey called it.¹⁴ *L’Art pour l’art*, which, according to Krul, was nothing more than an orientation of the liberal thought of freedom: the movement arose together with the glory days of Dutch radical liberalism, which also championed individualism.¹⁵ The years 1880-1894 see a transition from individualism to symbolism, then from 1894 to 1900 an idealistic phase.¹⁶

De Groot’s main predecessor, Gustaav Schlegel, reveals to us in a revealing micro-dynamic the reasons behind the great problems of the *Fin-de-siècle* period. Whilst De Groot started out his studies, Gustaav Schlegel was the main teacher. It was a terrible situation for De Groot, who was trying to learn as much as he could, because Schlegel was, in De Groot’s eyes, a bit of an ignoramus who tried to deflect his own lack of affinity with Chinese culture by exploiting the banal and focussing on low subjects such as prostitution, folk sayings and humor – which, according to De Groot, he was still quite incapable of doing properly. Koos Kuiper relates: "De Groot found the atmosphere during Schlegel's lectures disgusting."¹⁷ De Groot started in the first class, in 1876, but in 1883 he was still studying at the university, still only a student, although he would soon go to China for his own fieldwork.

¹¹ W. E. Krul, "Nederland in Het Fin-De-Siècle. De Stijl Van Een Beschaving," *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (1991). A true historian is a narcissist, perhaps, because he translates the words of the past into contemporary language; but at the same time, he is a scientist, because he wants only one thing: to explain what we say through words.

¹² “Zij diende niet slechts een tijdpassering, maar een levensvervulling te zijn [She needed be not just a form of pastime, but a life’s fulfillment].” *Ibid.*, 582.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 583.

¹⁴ “Gevoelsopwelling en indruk,” *ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 584.

¹⁷ Kuiper, *The Early Dutch Sinologists (1854-1900): Training in Holland and China, Function in the Netherlands Indies*, 347.

De Groot and colonialism

The Dutch state maintained its colonial empire throughout the 19th century, but its glory had faded and welfare was falling. Ulbe Bosma relates that the empire had lost its former luster.¹⁸ Bosma writes about the White Man's Burden and the (French) mission civilisatrice, and the *etische politiek*. De Groot must thus simply be placed within the context of the *etische politiek*.

Bosma: “[The] Dutch ethical politic [was a slogan] to imbue the population with the nobility of imperialism.”¹⁹ The *etische politiek* started in 1901 and was a part of the projects of The Netherlands to control the populace. De Groot had returned to The Netherlands long before this period. However, his most important work as professor at Leiden, *The Religious System of China*, can be read as a preparation and dialogical partner with the *etische politiek* of the government.

Therefore, De Groot may have helped shape this political landscape through his writings. De Groot worked every day for fourteen hours.²⁰ His fellow scholars saw him not as a recluse but as an influential, albeit staunch, writer and translator, and in his later years he was mostly a translator. Still, his works are mostly an outgrowth of his own belief in his own limitations as an author: he knew that he was merely at home within the study of religious customs et cetera, and never branched out into other areas professionally. His thought is of a high level of sophistication thanks to his deep knowledge of the Indonesian world and his actual experience with Chinese texts and sources. Universities in those days required men like De Groot to occupy themselves with many different topics. He saw himself in the end cornered by many different kinds of power-politics. He was almost entirely ignorant of his own function in the perpetuation, possibly, of the colonial government.

¹⁸ "De ooit zo lucratieve kruidnagel en nootmuskaatteelt op de Molukken kwijnden weg. Economisch gezien was de kolonie een schim van het vroegere VOC-imperium." Ulbe Bosma, *Indiëgangers. Verhalen Van Nederlanders Die Naar Indië Trokken* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2010), 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰ Kuiper, *The Early Dutch Sinologists (1854-1900): Training in Holland and China, Function in the Netherlands Indies*, 'Biography of De Groot', passim.

De Groot lived during a transitional period in Dutch colonial politics. Indonesian culture and the dominant Indonesian way of life was being integrated into a colonial state that wanted, above all, peace and stability.²¹

Stay in Amoy (1876-78) Indonesia (1878-83) and Southern China (1884-1890)

De Groot stayed for five years in Indonesia.²² After that, De Groot was sent on a “purely scholarly mission” to Southern China.²³ In Indonesia he produced information for the government; in China he produced his studies of the Amoy-(Xiamen-)Chinese and later his *The Religious System of China*.²⁴ He became known for his exhausting labor ethics and sense of dutiful study. Although his method ultimately does center around begging certain questions (What is China? What is a God? What is religion?), he does not really pretend to know what he does not know, and takes an extraordinary breath of different sources into account, even if he has little personal interest in them. Here, for the first time, he is confronted with the reality of colonial oppression. At one point, in an illustrative case, De Groot was seen as a potential marriage partner for an Indonesian noblewoman: Werblowsky makes it look as if he was too racist to marry, quoting De Groot as saying he would never marry “a half-blood”.²⁵ However, it is probably not right to read much real racism in De Groot’s words, because his preconceptions do not seem manifestly racist, especially considering the context in which he lived and his cultural-linguistic background. He might have used the racist discourse of the time to shelter himself from an unwanted marriage with someone entirely unrelated to his own world. Especially considering his dedication to his studies it is unsurprising he turned down the subject of marriage the manner he did.

Moreover, given his aversion to the Church and priests in general, it is notable he even gave it serious thought. Werblowsky claims De Groot was had “a strain of misogyny in his character.”²⁶ But Werblowsky later tells us De Groot left the Catholic church to protect his

²¹ Henk Schulte Nordholt, *The Spell of Power* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1996), 191.

²² Kuiper, *The Early Dutch Sinologists (1854-1900): Training in Holland and China, Function in the Netherlands Indies*, 853.

²³ *Ibid.*, 864.

²⁴ Groot, *The Religious System of China*.

²⁵ Werblowsky, *The Beaten Track of Science: The Life and Work of J. M. M. De Groot*, 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

mother. In this period, whilst he was in Indonesia, his personal life had many changes. He felt great anger at the injustices of the Catholic church, mostly against his mother. De Groot wrote: "the manipulation of my mother by the priests (...) at once severs the last link that still binds me to the Church. My disgust for it is now complete, and I decide not to have anything to do with it from now on."²⁷

He was confronted in Indonesia, finally, with the frustrating lack of efficiency in the colonial administration, and "their total ignorance of English."²⁸ His constant striving for an ideal form of communication is a clear line in everything De Groot did and wrote.

De Groot in Leiden

After coming back from Indonesia, De Groot spent time in Leiden again, eventually becoming a professor of Sinology and the head of the department.

He taught many different subject, most notably also on Islam in Indonesia, which he probably knew little about; but at least he had religious credentials. His successor in teaching Islam (in 1903), Van Vollenhove, was purely a law-scholar.²⁹

De Groot's intelligence was apparent mostly in his continuing work with the colonial government to educate the many students in Leiden responsibly and with confidence. The moral stance he took – against rebellious and "barbarous" behavior by the students – made him incredibly disliked amongst his students. "De Groot's moral sense later revolted against this barbarian survival of what anthropologists would call an initiation rite, meaningful only in a primitive tribal setting but a sheer atavism devoid of all good sense in our society, and in his pamphlets on the subject (...) he did not mince words. He promptly became the most controversial professor in the university."³⁰

It is not the first case of De Groot fulminating against degeneracy: in an earlier instance he denounced "gossip" amongst the Dutch civil service in Cheribon, Java. Werblowsky quotes De Groot's letters: "'Malicious gossip... seems to be an incurable national plague".³¹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 20.

²⁹ Cees Fasseur, *De Indologen. Ambtenaren Voor De Oost 1825-1950* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1993), 364.

³⁰ Werblowsky, *The Beaten Track of Science: The Life and Work of J. M. M. De Groot*, 16.

³¹ Ibid., 20.

De Groot did not so much seek to denounce people, or moralize, but also to discover, through reasonable argument, the right way to go about correct moral behavior. He therefore took a strong interest in the behavior of students outside of the classroom, and it is not farfetched, to, like Werblowsky, tie his argumentation and denouncement of these initiation rites to his anthropological inclinations. De Groot was interested in maintaining a kind of status quo. He was not so much conservative, as traditionalist. The so-called missionary sinologists before him had less moralist inclinations than De Groot; but De Groot has served a cause that remains, unfortunately, extremely misunderstood, and his authoritarian streak and constant probing of governmental, familial and traditionalist-academic influences has caused his 'school' to be considered part of a normal progress within sinology, whereas he had very much his own set of aims and a unique point of view. Unfortunately, this point of view was misunderstood in his time and criminally underestimated nowadays.³²

De Groot in Berlin (1911-1921 – his death)

For De Groot the final period of his life was a period of great disappointments and great difficulty. Dedicated as he was to establishing his idea and standards for academic rigor, De Groot had little sympathy left for the Dutch nation. His biographers, such as Visser and Werblowsky, do have the consensus of opinion that De Groot should have left for Berlin much earlier than he did.³³

World War I finally erupted, and De Groot scandalized himself by signing the pro-German manifesto *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*, a manifesto that proclaimed the innocence of Germany in WWI, in which they were commonly deemed the aggressor.³⁴ The ideas of De Groot were still held in high esteem, but they were deemed unpopular because of their irreconcilability with the dominant ideas within sinology at the time, which was, as far as I can gather, aimed at pigeonholing China in one way or other.³⁵

He then died in 1921 of a stroke, getting in his final days visits from many friends and students and being cared for by his family.³⁶

³² See, for instance, Paramore's scholastic reference to De Groot. Kiri Paramore, *Religion and Orientalism in Asian Studies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 63.

³³ Marinus Willem de Visser, *Levensbericht Van Prof. Dr. J.J.M. De Groot*. (Leiden: Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde, 1921), 10.

³⁴ Werblowsky, *The Beaten Track of Science: The Life and Work of J. M. M. De Groot*, 31.

³⁵ J. R. Callenbach, *"De Chineesche Kwestie" Van Henri Borel* (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach, 1901), 1.

³⁶ Visser, *Levensbericht Van Prof. Dr. J.J.M. De Groot.*, 13-14.

De Groot was a writer, and this is why we know that he existed, but writing implies absence. He was a cloistered, immanent figure within his own world. As a figure within the history of sinology, he could, however, be seen as an emblem, as we will say in the next chapter, for resistance against dogmatism; although as an author he is not necessarily emblematic of resistance, and much more of a steely practice of asserting (his own) authority. But this reputation is undeserved, as I will try to prove. In the next chapter, we will look at his key works and its relation to other great authors before and after him.

II. Leiden Sinology

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In this chapter, De Groot's work will be seen in relation to other sinologists before and after him.

If notwithstanding all its imperfections this work should prove useful to Science as a leaf in the great book of human life, the author will feel himself amply rewarded for the hardships he endured on Chinese soil in collecting data during some of the best years of his life.

J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China* (1892).

De Groot worked to alter sinology. He introduced especially the sociological methods that he is known for. It has none of the modern sociological tools. What it *does* have is awareness of several elements of sociology that his precursors did not use:

1. Strict adherence to empirical data gathered personally.
2. No anecdotal or circumstantial evidence.
3. A different conception of 'China' than his theological forebears, more focussed on diversity.

De Groot did his best to rectify the mistakes of his predecessors as he saw it. Looking at De Groot's character as a sinologist, I will distinguish what he did and how. We must, then, learn to see different things in their different light. The main objective of this chapter is to discover the aims of De Groot as represented in his works, which is an exceptionally crucial challenge, because a large part of De Groot's life and his works centered around finding the right formulation of many critical questions, within the field of sinology but also within academic politics. He was pious about his association with sinology, and sinology was, in many ways, a

kind of church for him, and he spend his whole life fighting for sinology as a discipline. He dutifully completed the activities expected of him, but did so in a way that never challenged the question of sinology, which was absolute to him. In some ways, sinology was his *Li* as the Confucians say, the inner logic which permeated everything. Just like the Confucian *Li*, De Groot's idea of sinology as a communicative doctrine was not definite and could be extended. De Groot has an emblematic status as a man who, for the first time, really gave communal identity and methodological unity to sinology and made it into a discipline makes him still relevant today. However, as shall be seen, in this respect too De Groots accomplishments are rather underwhelming. Instead, I see De Groot more as a correspondent of a deeper kind of scientific ideal, that stresses, above all, falsification and experience.

Important works

The main orientation of this chapter will be *The Religion of the Chinese*, which was a lecture held to a seminary of American theologians. His more famous works are his book on the Amoy Chinese and his magnum opus *The Religious System of China*, which is a remarkable work of synthesis. In all these works, we see the application of sociological methods and the attempt to make sinology into a distinct discipline, a field of knowledge. Still, care must be taken in our attempt to advance into this field. Nothing is left of it, because his followers did not adapt to his changes and reverted immediately back into philological methods. This is mostly because of De Groots rather unscientific tendency to never challenge his own image, his hypotheses, which he seemed to have found in constant communication with his immediate familiarity with the topics he knew about, which explains why most of his works are so highly specialist in nature.

De Groot never became a real dogmatist, although he has that reputation. Instead of working towards a conclusion, he works towards a more adequate form of expression of a universal message that he saw reflected in some parts, but by no means all parts, of Chinese culture. His conception of studying China is, one might say, puritanical. De Groot's affection for sinology had to stem from a real belief. He had great affection for the principles and methods of science, especially rigorous treatment of vast quantifiable factoids, and so his work feels sociological; however, his reputation as a sociological reformer or independent

positivist, is unfounded.³⁷ De Groot's work is, in fact, a unique, robust effort of cultural studies in the modern sense; it is completely justified to call it discourse analysis.

Main theories

De Groot had several important theories about the Chinese speaking world. Most importantly, he believed that Confucianism – and Daoism, Buddhism and Folk Religion – was all fundamentally driven and united by a syncretic conception of the Chinese religious mindset, termed *animism* by De Groot, which resisted monotheism. This is best summed up in a concise formula from *The Religious System of China*: “[T]he human soul is in China the original form of all beings of a higher order.”³⁸ Buddhism was just worked into this animist fabric by Chinese sages as he says as follows in *The Religion of the Chinese*, stressing the incompatibility of monotheism with the Chinese mindset, which we shall see is a continuous thread in his work: “Buddhism eradicated nothing; the religion of the Crescent is only at the beginning of its work; that of the Cross has hardly passed the threshold of China.”³⁹

According to De Groot, the Chinese look and sound idolatrous. The religious and spiritual beliefs and customs of the Chinese are submerged under a great variety of so-called myths and “gods” are found everywhere to be constantly paid homage to, but actually being veiled excuses for a great variety of pagan, or rather popularist rituals. By popularist I mean what De Groot described as barbarous or uncultivated, but in fact just highly cynical and abstracted activities done by elected – self-denying, not so much mistreated or condemned – figures who were convinced of the (symbolic) importance to hurt themselves, or chastise themselves, for the sake of worship. It seem completely likely that De Groot experienced such rituals first-hand. Kiri Paramore, who believed that De Groot's ‘syncretism’ was an analytical category,⁴⁰ was actually much broader than just a tendency to tendentiously interpret Chinese religion, which shows Paramore's belief in De Groot as an obsolete ideologue. The contents of his main works, especially *The Religion of the Chinese*, show De Groot had a program reared in total against religion in general. His vehemence to ‘animism’ is founded on a skeptical

³⁷ Contrary to among others Werblowsky's impetuous opening sentence: “De Groot (...) is rightly considered one of the *founding fathers* [my italics, E.F.] of the social science approach to Sinology,” Werblowsky, *The Beaten Track of Science: The Life and Work of J. M. M. De Groot*, 1.

³⁸ Groot, *The Religious System of China*, 1.

³⁹ J. J. M. De Groot, *The Religion of the Chinese* (New York: McMillan Company, 1910), 2.

⁴⁰ Paramore, *Religion and Orientalism in Asian Studies*, 63.

attitude towards monotheism as well, which he saw, as many did in his time (such as Freud⁴¹) as an unraveled form of the unconscious truths about human relationships to their own past, especially, in the case of Freud, to the father-figure. This might not be strictly in logical, seeing the highly symbolized function of the father-God in Christianity and the psychological function of God in Islam, but it is understandable as an interpretative frame that might fit with the whole of the fin-de-siècle attitude towards religion. De Groot's 'system', as well, stems from the general antipathy towards any religious mindset. Still, in his works he does seem to see a certain modernity in the notions of monotheism, therefore Paramore's position is certainly defensible.

Another important theory of De Groot was his idea of the Chinese empire actively suppressing heterodox opinion such as in the case, once again, of Christianity: "[P]ersecution of Christianity is a fruit of (...) Confucian intolerance."⁴² The main reason for this, was the Chinese Confucianism-inspired focus on the institutional family relations as the basis for both private-domestic *and* governmental policy, which created an unsurmountable friction between Christian and Confucian values. De Groot writes:

It is for Christianity impossible to tolerate ancestral worship, almost as impossible as it is to a Chinaman to renounce it. To renounce it would, indeed, mean renunciation of the great national duty expressed by the word *hiao*; it would mean revolt against paternal and patriarchal authority, which imperiously demands that the offspring shall, by sacrificing, protect progenitors from hunger and misery. And paternal authority is the cement of social life in China, but for which dissolution and disorder would prevail. It is, as such, imposed by law and government upon the nation as the foundation of morality, ethics, and politics; – to sin against it means opposition to social order, to the state and its laws – it is rebellion, severely punishable, even with death. He who renounces ancestral worship is, in fact, leniently dealt with if he is merely treated by his family as an outcast. No wonder that the good Chinese despise and decry Christian converts as the scum of the nation.⁴³

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (London: Hogarth Press, London, 1927).

⁴² Groot, *The Religion of the Chinese*, 199.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

Christianity was, for De Groot, an instrument of administration, in a sense, just like the state, and his theory, therefore, goes a little bit like this: the Chinese state demands absolute obedience from its followers. But Christianity demands absolute obedience to God. De Groot's apparent 'orientalism' (in Saidian sense), by stereotyping 'a Chinaman' like this, is actually sympathy for the imperial and social resistance to Christianity. De Groot writes: "Christianity, in the eye of all these powers, means revolutionism, enmity to the state, to society and social order."⁴⁴ Possibly, although a Westerner might be tempted to see Christianity as 'we' and the Chinese authorities as 'them', De Groot actually *understood* the position of the imperial powers in a certain sense, and is simply restating here what he believes Christianity *is* even in the eyes of also other authorities who might not be open to Christianization. In fact, it seems De Groot was searching for a *higher program* rather than an independent stance – he was by no means a systematic or idealistic thinker, but instead a communicator of a continuous ideology about not only China, but civilization around the world and the way it develops normally. His explanation of Christian developments in China and his description of Chinese religious and social customs can still be valuable, as we shall see, in understanding the precise reasons for China's place in world history. De Groot believed that everything in the Chinese world had a distinct relationship to the West somehow and was not just understandable as 'Oriental'. He never used the construct of 'China' to explain Chinese affairs, such as Hegel's "immovable unity of China" in the Hegelian *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*,⁴⁵ but always connected it to the religious and social expressions of the Chinese world.

The implicit assumptions, however, that remained within De Groot's mind, of the old missionary sensibilities behind sinology and the underlying agenda of theological investigation, which was based on, on the one hand, cruel moral precepts (inspired by the church), and, on the other, the changing times under the progressivist influences of the time. Tradition as embodied by traditionalist activities can seemingly have an autocratic hold on the present state of the art, and this is an important point of consideration, especially in the humanities. People (Blussé et al., Idema et al., and even Paramore) tend to see De Groot as a methodological innovator, but he was merely looking for better means of communication, and

⁴⁴ De Groot, *The Religion of the Chinese*, 86.

⁴⁵ "[China's spiritual subject] does not then, attain to maturity (...) since moral laws are treated as legislative enactments, and law on its part has an ethical aspect. (...) [T]he immovable unity of China (...) is quite peculiarly Oriental", G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 'Part I: The Oriental World.', Marxists.org.

he communicated, mostly, simple rationalism and human sensibilities. The apparent positivism in his message was more the influence of Comte and the positivist revolution in science, than a personal break with tradition. De Groot was a (moderate) positivist by nature and his “positivism” is not necessarily comparable to Comte.

De Groot’s program was fundamentally focused on religion. But his interests lay beyond the simply religious and veer directly into the spiritual. Leonard Blussé bluntly states that De Groot wanted to “describe Chinese religion and sketch its influence on domestic and social life.”⁴⁶ But this is a grossly misleading way of describing De Groot’s program. Blussé believes that De Groot *specialized* in this field because this was the most relevant field for the “Ministry of Colonial Affairs”, as Blussé calls it (actually *Ministerie van Koloniën*, Ministry of Colonies); as we have seen, De Groot was part of an international conversation redefining Western conceptions of religion altogether, and was personally completely invested in this cosmopolitan project. Blussé falls into the trap of treating De Groot as an ethnologist, which many scholars do, but there is little real similarity between classical ethnology, which seeks to understand a people by means of data, and De Groot’s method which is entirely sociological and makes use of a predetermined understanding of religion and works from definite psychological and anthropological theories, which he has himself *not* tested; he thereby breaks the rules of hermeneutics which are central to ethnology. De Groot’s “discourse analysis” is closer to Foucault’s, in the sense that he interprets everything as forced by a struggle for life (Foucault’s stress on ‘power’). A big problem with Blussé is also his arbitrary corroborative strategies for his claims. Blussé compares him to a collector called Emile Guimet, speaking of an ethnological tradition to studying China; but mister Guimet was a mere antiquarian, who was not connected to De Groot professionally and never did any ethnology.⁴⁷ De Groot’s motivations, and even his personal involvement in his work, are not taken into account at all by Blussé. Leonard Blussé is actively psychologizing, stating that De Groot “always delighted in the comparative ethnological approach”.⁴⁸ Because De Groot’s method was one of constant probing and questioning, he did not use a monolithic strategem. In fact, his ‘method’ is not ethnological at all, but rather a careful assessment of what religion is; it is, in this sense, purely sociological and feeds less on ethnology and more on psychology

⁴⁶ J. Leonard Blussé, “Leiden University’s Early Sinologists,” in *Leiden Oriental Connections: 1850-1940*, ed. Willem Otterspeer (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 346.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, passim.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

and positivism. De Groot's descriptions on Chinese activities are often, seemingly, first-hand description, either from himself or from a source, and they are explained from their symbolic and mythical background. For the rest he simply empirically reports on what happens in China. The knowledge is then synthesized in the syncretic religious model mentioned earlier. The only thing that can be gleaned for certain from Blussé article in Otterspeer's collection on the history of Sinology, then, is that De Groot worked for the Ministry of Colonies himself, and for this reason was greatly influenced by the political considerations that imbued his benefactors perspective on the subject he studied. Which is a roundabout way of saying that he *did*, probably, seek funding for his work from the government, and *probably* found an interested patron in the Dutch state for providing the resources he needed to fulfill his – mainly self-guided – substantive commitments to the study of China in Leiden and the Western academic community.

De Groot had his own reality and a fluctuant academic environment. Leiden Sinology meant in this time an overbearing tradition of activity and knowledge production on China. Much of what sinology did, was traditionalist or a conservative. In many ways, De Groot was an autodidact, and it has been said he saw himself this way.⁴⁹ However, his great dedication to the subject proves that there were clear points on which De Groot agreed with sinology's disciplinary stances and motives. In fact, there is a certain lack of creativity in his way of building an argument. He relies much on what has been said already, and does not even try to change the character of what is said. The alleged 'authoritarianism' of his approach is in a sense only the perpetuation of the illusions and false stereotyping that was going on within the tradition. Even though he might not have believed in these himself, he was incapable, because of, as I said, a certain lack of creativity, to rid his own research of these traditional illusions and stereotypes.

Whatever is the right way of seeing De Groot, his work and life have been dominated constantly by a great desire for real learning, a great dedication to the cause of sinology, if it exists, and a profound absence of real dogmatism. His studies in China were, in that sense, his martyrdom, and his return to Leiden the founding of the Leiden "School" of Sinology. He was a man whose belief in tradition drove him professionally.

⁴⁹ H. van der Hoeven, "Groot, Johannes Jacob Maria De," in *Biografisch Woordenboek Van Nederland* (Den Haag: 1979).

Perspectives on Leiden Sinology in the age of De Groot

There is only one real perspective on Leiden Sinology and that is the small, mostly religiously-motivated group of readers in the Netherlands who dialogued mostly amongst themselves about sinological topics.⁵⁰ They do not speak of De Groot as a sociological thinker and no such terminology existed in their discourse. But the fact is that many people see De Groot as part of a singular *sociological* period in this history of sinology.

This poses an extensive challenge. The history of sociology is a dangerous field. According to some, sociology and the social sciences are actually a faulty paradigm that was slowly reinstated to sensibility by a small group of reformers;⁵¹ according to others, it is a purely quantitative science founded on a pure kind of positivism, which one might argue comes down to the same thing.⁵² In any event, the history of sociology has not produced any standard works since the Marxist period in academia, which was in the 1980's. Unfortunately, sinologists often connect De Groot with sociology – even though this might not be completely justified. In his own time, it was not even possible to see him that way.

So why do people associate De Groot with sociology? A lot of artifacts crept into De Groot's work that were the simple result of the methods he used. In hindsight, these may seem sociological.

In *The Religious System of China*, De Groot uses vast quantities of quotes and figures, pictures and old classics to describe the precise origins of particular mindsets and habits within Chinese religious culture, an incredibly overt but still deep enterprise of discovering the true meaning of particular phenomena within cultural life. He does fall into the trap of being overly descriptive. However, he cancels this out somewhat by always researching the inner workings of the world as much as he can. That is to say, he talks about the nature of people's belief in particular proceedings and the metaphysical underpinnings of the symbolism present in the ceremonies, architecture, iconography et cetera.⁵³ He seeks, although describing 'Chinese' habits, to show all practices in their full diversity, and the "synthesis" that is so visible in De Groot stems solely from his interest in high culture, that is to say Confucianism, as it is morphed and warped by the commoners. Therefore, he does not

⁵⁰ People like Callenbach received new publications from the sinological community and were themselves from a background within organized religion. Callenbach, "*De Chineesche Kwestie*" Van Henri Borel, 1.

⁵¹ Arthur L. Stinchcombe, "The Origins of Sociology as a Discipline," *Acta Sociologica*, no. 27 (1984): 51.

⁵² Peter Theodore Manicas, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 1.

⁵³ See for instance his description of the persistence of the soul as related to the significance of the grave in Chinese cultural practices. Groot, *The Religious System of China*, 378.

see China as a “immoveable unity”. Instead, he seeks a clear explanation from the top down for particular phenomena. His presuppositions, although firmly orientalist, are not racist, because they are so grounded in traditional views. He does not rely on Western preconceptions, but only on the traditional mode of referring to China, which he actually believes is only a cultural fact, and not so much a Western point of view – therefore, he is not imperialist ideologically, only epistemologically.

Paradoxically, this works to free him from many complicated positions rampant in sinology and the mind of the common man, as we shall see in the next chapter.

III. Sinology and Colonialism

In this chapter, De Groot's relationship with the colonial government will be explored.

In the previous chapters, De Groot's life and his work, the conclusion results in the understanding that De Groot was interested in colonial Indonesia because mainly the need for government funding, and that the religious angle he took during his whole life, a focus on the rituals and organization and various philosophical-esoteric underpinnings of the religious system in Chinese society, was more of his own inclination. However, if this is the case, a problem arises: religion is not everything, and yet for De Groot – who ran the faculty – it was supposed to explain everything about Chinese life. In normal circumstances, it would be imaginable that the government would push for a more pragmatic angle; instead, they left De Groot to do as he willed, and he wrote little even on the Chinese in Indonesia, focusing instead on the mainland.

Kennis is Macht

In his lecture on the relevance of sinology for colonial politics, De Groot stated that “knowledge is power” (*Kennis is macht*)⁵⁴, which was the official motto of the Dutch colonial government. De Groot gave it his own spin, claiming that the right to have rights, such as a democratic vote, is equally dependent solely on one's knowledge. So De Groot was an active participant in the questionable colonial politics of The Netherlands, seeking thus to control the flow of knowledge but also the generation of knowledge in the indigenous populace. This is morally reproachable. Again, De Groot exploited the traditional, broadly accepted discourse of the time to engage in a game of almost pandering to the spirit of the times. *Kennis is Macht* should not be read here as a philosophical statement, but merely as a form of pandering. Although he does develop some minor theories about controlling the population, he actually seeks to instill a grander message of critical thought that inheres within Chinese writings. He engages in descriptions of China's supposed character and the question of its study. The whole thing reads more as a plea for recognition than a manifesto or letter of intent. It is not surprising, seeing De Groot's interest in religion, to find him ascribing almost racist views, or

⁵⁴ *Over Het Belang Der Kennis Van China Voor Onze Koloniën* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1891), 15.

rather views that are motivated by the strong lens of a small-minded individual, which De Groot was not, but could have been, because he was liable to defend his own cause virulently. The cause of sinology is more important for him than anything else.

Although we do not see overt references to his own work in the lecture, he is constantly stressing the progressive nature of sinology the way he sees it; but this, in a sense, fits with the changing times; although in 1891, when this lecture was held, it was still quite modern to state so; and this may be cause to rethink earlier statements. De Groot was certainly a man with a peculiar sense of tradition and a completely dynamic view of the past; he was not a historian in any sense, and never searched for a story or lessons from the past. He saw the Chinese mind as unchanging, fixed, which is certainly methodologically sound, but scientifically untenable. Also it is clear that he builds on his status as a sinologist and professorates things that only he could know as a sinologist, also quoting Chinese texts which he seemingly translated himself. A constant stress on Daoism is present, although he might have been attracted to Daoism anti-conceptual tendencies. He knows little about China as a living society: that is to say, his insights are based on the belief in logical explanation as the key to knowledge, which is a very primitive sociological idea that originated in the earliest exponents of sociology in Great Britain in the Scottish Enlightenment. It begs the question if De Groot knew his own field. He was perhaps only sociological in this primitive and antiquated sense, for he does not use, at any point, the connectivity of ideologies that Max Weber would popularize in the coming decades. In this sense, De Groot's apparent 'modernity' is caused by his belief, then, in an ancient Whig-history kind of progressive mentality; if so, De Groot is not so much a modern as a man totally secluded from the eye of methodological scrutinizers through an impenetrable network of traditionalists mentalities gathered together for the sake of an authoritarian investiture in the cornerstones of Western so-called science, which means that his work is tinged with the aristocratic sensibilities that underlay all these sources, early sociological methods, philology and the already mentioned covert theological angle and focus on religious (methodological) syncretism.

Defining Grootian Sinology: the state of the art versus the Leiden Sinology philological practice

The contents of his lecture show a large part of what exactly defined the De Grootian phase in sinology. This might be a relevant question because it was held under the subtext of pertaining directly to colonialism. If there is a correlation between Leiden sinology during this

time and the principles of pragmatic colonialism that De Groot elucidates than it would be bewildering to find it not reflected in some form in his inaugural lecture. He uses rarely the word *sinology*, focusing instead on the concept of Indology, that is to say the study of Indonesia.

What is meant by sinology or indology? Both are principally philological sciences, in keeping with its theological roots, focused on explaining the meaning of an Asian culture to a Western audience, especially in a religious sense – which explains De Groot's natural assumption on this level. Sinology in the East is apparently barely relevant to the academic discipline of sinology. If we imagine sinology as comparable to studying Russian in The Philippines, it is strange that this is the case. If Russian was a subject on a Philippine university, they would all read Bakhtin and Jacobson. But in the East, sinology, too, seems like it is expected by the university-establishment – worldwide, so in China too – to have to be regarded as an attempt to communicate *China* to a *Western* audience. So I expect that a sinologist everywhere does not so much read commentaries by Confucian scholars on the classics, but rather Voltaire or Marco Polo. I will not deny that there is some sense to the idea that Chinese culture lacks a true center or real connections between its own constituencies. Confucius was and remains a wandering sage, comparable more to William Shakespeare, in terms of his (social) stature, function and influence, than to Homer or Socrates. It is logical, then, that sinology started in the West and remains a Western science. In this sense, what has always lacking in sinology, up until the time of De Groot and even after, is a body of foundational, Chinese texts. For China is a Western construct, because China is just a loosely connected state that does not search for centralized power, but deems itself already as the only vibrant existing entity in the whole world. It is logical, then, that sinology is the severest form of orientalism and this is in a sense an indelible part of the paradigm.⁵⁵

In a sense, the greatest sinologist in the Netherlands before and during De Groot's time was Henri Borel,⁵⁶ because he was a very popular author and a student of Schlegel. From Borel we glean, then, that the purpose of sinology is, in this sense, a populist agenda, to tell the people what everybody is already thinking about China; because seemingly we learn nothing from research itself, we learn only from treating reality realistically, and it is not

⁵⁵ Here I am directly responding to the idea that China scholars are somehow impervious to orientalism. The idea is that Said was referring to colonialist discourse meant to stifle knowledge-production about the other, and instead spread hackneyed knowledge that was unrealistic. However, China itself is an orientalist construct. David Robles, "China and "Orientalism", " *Oxford Bibliographies* (2017).

⁵⁶ Callenbach, "*De Chineesche Kwestie*" Van Henri Borel.

realistic to dedicate your life to studying China unless you really wanted to understand what it means to be Chinese, in a certain sense, and move there; in this sense, we can see that De Groot's program was very correct, solely in the sense that it was more academic. De Groot, other than Borel, tried to re-chart the course of sinology and make it actually useful to society. The orientation on government officials was the only logical choice. It might be incorrect to say, then, that it had anything to do with funding, as stated earlier: sinology is either populist (as with Borel) or purely practical and innovative, problem-solving and pragmatic. This last stance was vigorously pursued by De Groot. His intention seems to have been to make sinology universalist, freeing it from the bounds of nationalism and eurocentrism. His loyalty was thus to the bigger cause of the State, not the nation. Borel especially and Schlegel to a lesser extent were nationalists, but De Groot was universalist, humanistic and politically aware. He wanted to help the cause of the Dutch state and help bring it scientific, enlightened values. The only problem with this lofty undercurrent of De Groot's work was that the situation from an academic point of view was not tenable, because Leiden University is in many ways a national and not a political institution. Of course, the line between such entities is very slim, but Leiden serves the people, not the government, and De Groot's interests lay more with the government than with the people; possibly to replace his lost religious faith. In the end the main question is therefore whether the later developments reconciled populism with pragmatic colonialism (academic universalist politicism) and created a truly scientific or scholarly sinology.

De Groot and Duyvendak: the logic of transition

De Groot was a singular academic. If this paper has proved anything, however, it is his many weaknesses and his misguided vision. He liked to act as if he had a strongly guided vision; in practice, however, the exact opposite was the case, as is often the case when people act as if they think in a certain way, but fail to actually think it. To realize a certain goal, then, activity needs to be thought, and the thought needs to be appropriate to the action. Pretention is the result of these conditions not being sufficiently met by the person involved in any particular activity. De Groot was not a very pretentious man, but he was wrong in his beliefs about sinology as an apparent goal in itself.

Duyvendak was De Groot's successor in Leiden. He headed *Tong Bao* and became head of the department, conducting the main course of research and the educational and scientific agenda's and programmatic relief of Leiden Sinology. He rejected categorically all

of De Groot's undertakings and was seemingly oblivious to his religious and lingual interests. Instead, Duyvendak focused on 'chamber science', shutting himself inside his office with ancient texts like the *Daodejing* and the *Shangjunshu*.⁵⁷

The transitionary logic, then, is founded on the five pillars of research: Who, Why, What, When and How. De Groot lacked very much in answering the how-question; he was incapable of seeing the great relevance of the when-question; and he was completely in the dark when it comes to the why-question. It is unsurprising, considering his firmly positivist stance, that he focused on the what; when it comes to the who, it is uncertain, from our point of view, where his interests lay; but we can expect with the government officials, more than with his students. Maybe he was wrong to do so. However, it may seem trivial but it is always useful to note that history is written by the literate, and sinology has managed to report even today on its own development. In other words: sinology remains – it has not as of yet succumbed to the tooth of time. De Groot's decisions, although not in his own best interest, nor in those of his students, were in the best interest of sinology – which adds a second dimension to the what-question – what as reality and what as actuality. For when we ask what, we are both asking what it is in reality, and what it is to us. In other words, what is divided between the pragmatic and the theoretical aspects of what research is. For De Groot, these were completely united and his what was both his reality and his cause. This is the true nature of his great dedication to sinology: he had to preserve both his own activities through what he did, but he also had to know what he did – and so he defined himself solely through his research *for sinology*. In this sense, as has been said, his independence is a bit of an illusion, because he was totally dependent on the subject, and he was in many ways incapable of formulating an opinion independent of a sinological one; which is also something we noticed in his lecture on *Kennis is Macht*: all the information is on sinology. His opinions on usefulness were interpreted as sinological – sinology was useful to the state because it helped us inform ourselves about China – which is, of course, what sinology is literally. In other words: knowledge *about China* is what gives me power *to write and talk about China*. – This is the literal meaning of De Groot's *Kennis is Macht*. In this sense, definitely, De Groot worked ceaselessly his whole life for the cause of influencing the absolute relevance of knowledge about China for the Dutch State, and in this sense he may have helped in a very concrete sense to improve the lot and status of Chinese relations in The Netherlands and

⁵⁷ J. J. L. Duyvendak, *The Book of Lord Shang* (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1928).

between the Dutch state and the Chinese state. If nothing else, he helped in every possible way to increase the profile of China and Chinese(-speaking) peoples in The Netherlands.

Personal and Governmental interests: conflation and influence

De Groot's interests lay mainly with religious rituals and the habits of the Chinese. Consequently, he was afraid of waxing philosophically. His interests are mainly to know as much as possible about China, so that he can say and write as much as possible about China. De Groot attempted to establish precise terminology to both understand China better, but also to *other it* in a very real way. For as we have seen, his main interest was to write about China, which means, also, *China as China*. The main question is then whether his influence on the government was very large, and if so, whether he reduced or increased prejudicial bias. For it is always impossible for an individual observer to know how other see them. Objectivity is a structural way of seeing things, that produces intuitions on the basis of the senses: the reasoning underlying objectivity is then the main difference that produces the difference in concluding observations between an objective and subjective or merely empirical judgment. However, we can see that objectivity is generally completely absolved from prejudice: it does not produce lasting intuitions, but instead focuses on the ephemeral and more informational aspects of reality. However, because these are merely possible through *being informed*, the objective mind loses touch with the repetitive nature of different kinds of information, and tends to repeat the same information over and over again in different forms. In science they adhere to the principle of relativity – the way this is possible to be understood, however, is unknown. Relativity is an important concept, because it shows how things are possible in their changing nature; but the Einsteinian formula, which says that energy is matter, presupposes the absoluteness of the relativistic principle, but this is tenable. In the same vein, we can criticize bias *only* to the extent that it is based on our *own understanding of the other's point of view*: if we do not judge the other based on our understanding about them, especially when we are speaking about intuitive knowledge, it must be considered a *lie* and nothing more or less than that. Therefore, in the humanities as well as the sciences, presupposition entails a presupposition of facts that are not there. It is not wrong to form generalized conceptions about others – it is only bad to lie about facts about others based on generalized conceptions about certain kinds of behavior. If an academic like De Groot write a book on China, we expect that he first of all tells us what he believes he

understands, and secondly that he does not corroborate stories based on his intuitions about *China* with *facts* based on his own life-experience. Unfortunately, this is exactly what he did.

De Groot saw himself as a sinologist sinologising sinology. This caused him to be prolific, but it also meant that he dug himself into isolation. In the case of the government, they probably did not understand what he was thinking, and their support for him was based on the heightening profile of China that he himself helped to proliferate. If he was at all successful, he exacerbated the misunderstanding he had about himself, but he might very well have contributed positively to the cause of sinology, at least to the extent that he helped to breathe new life into the discipline. When Duyvendak took over, sinology was a distinguished and sober unity, well-defined as at least a worded model of China, but not being totally true to its own aims and *goals*; however, those goals are ultimately irrelevant to the individual. Therefore, the *individual* Duyvendak was in this sense freed by De Groot's arduous and idiosyncratic ways, which helped to carry the science away from theology-influenced scholasticism and *Beunhazerij*,⁵⁸ and towards disciplined and reasoned scholarly science.

The government was not involved actively in De Groot's research and perhaps not interested. They wanted to increase the profile of the Chinese, perhaps also – as De Groot pinpointed – to limit the proliferation of knowledge amongst the Indonesians, that is to say with a heightened profile, the Chinese could be instated with more assets, in a kind of divide and conquer stratagem. Such activities would, once again, because of serious accusations for moral depravity on the part of the Dutch Government, but also De Groot who did not state this quite in the reasoned, ethical way one would expect off of a real scientist. But it is not necessary to wave the wand of accusation. If anything, De Groot's sinology was not worse than anything else done between people in different positions of power. Indonesia was perhaps once actively exploited, but in these days the main trouble was education and development of the country, and The Netherlands built infrastructure, for example, that is still being used today. It is therefore unlikely that the government pressured De Groot to create oppressive ideology; and even if they might have had that intention, De Groot definitely did not find it in his nature to provide such an ideology, for he was a dutiful intellectual who was preoccupied more with finding rigorous methods of organizing his own humanist or meta-humanist programme, and much less with paying homage to the strictures of authority. If we notice anything then in his lecture, it is the almost complete lack of flattery or even appeals to

⁵⁸ Kuiper, *The Early Dutch Sinologists (1854-1900): Training in Holland and China, Function in the Netherlands Indies*, passim.

common sense, and instead, once again, an – sometimes pontificating – attitude focused on creating an air, ascension and development.

Finally, a lot of the strangeness of De Groot's work also comes from his unexplainable enthusiasm for the sinological constructs of the time. He almost blindly except the preconceptions noticeable in many others like Borel, in other words he betrays the petit-bourgeois witlessness alive within Dutch Society during this time. De Groot's many mistakes and authoritarian bend increase admiration for Duyvendak, because Duyvendak managed to very deftly rid us of the populism at the heart of De Groot's work, whereas inheriting the unified methodological and ideological philosophy that De Groot brought.

IV. Conclusion

De Groot was a constant learner, who perpetuated much from the dominant discourse of his time. His fear for authority made him an authoritarianist himself. He might be considered a founding father of a new kind of sinology; on the other hand, his work remains very much misunderstood.

De Groot wrote in his inaugural lecture: “[Science] should not only try to attempt to research the skies in all their expansiveness, to investigate the Earth till her deepest innards, to discover the laws of Nature till her most hidden hiding corners; also Man should be granted a spacious place in her realm.”⁵⁹ In this age, in which natural science is given right of way in almost any argument, such works ring as very timely and even urgent.

Many people believe De Groot to be a sociological thinker. Certainly his works do not fall strictly within Area Studies. His framework was not geographical. He did not describe his objects of research that way because his paradigm was not geared towards such things. Instead, he relied on a form of discourse analysis, fabricating a long message of the fluctuations within the cultural power-play going on within the Chinese cultural world. When confronted with antiquated science, it seems sometimes vain to use scientific standards to judge it; but of course that is not so. The mistakes of the past can teach us many things, but mostly they reveal to us our own mistakes.

De Groot’s profoundest desire was to provide a context for sinology to thrive, just like a spiritually-minded person might tidy up an altar, light a candle and come in daily for prayer. Sinology, within the De Grootian paradigm at least, is a useful, valuable and active pursuit of rational communication based on certain forms of relating cultural data to other scholars. But De Groot was too rigid and too authoritarian, and, in this sense, too pedantic. De Groot is almost a founder of a new methodology, devised almost from the ground up because of his singular dedication to the sinological *phenomenon*; but this mostly meant that sinology is revealed as the most naturalized and therefore constructed form of orientalism in all the liberal arts. Sinology, unlike some scholars sometimes believe,⁶⁰ is not at all free from orientalism, just because China has never been (de jure) colonized: in fact, the very idea of China is orientalist. The whole field is a Western construct. China is not possible to be

⁵⁹ Groot, *Over Het Belang Der Kennis Van China Voor Onze Koloniën*, 3.

⁶⁰ Robles, "China and "Orientalism".", especially Hägerdal’s article, inaccessible to me but I know his position.

studied. There is a furnace, yes, a fuel, yes, a burning fire and a deep and ancient tradition being carried by a scholarly elite; and yes, there were men, like Mao Zedong, Genghis Khan and the First Emperor, who ruled with an iron fist over a large, ethnically homogeneous group that still exists today. But this is *not* ‘China’. Chinese people are united not in *ethnicity*, but in *goals*. Whether this be blood and barbarity, as De Groot believed, or in harmony and splendor, as Confucius hoped, remains to be seen.

The main problem in studying De Groot is that his works were, in his own time, rather different than those of others. Although he had a very rationalist program, his way of working was more based upon a sense of duty. His focus on religious customs was not surprising. His writing and attitude and life exude a profound sense of self-guided, substantive commitment. This can only be seen as a kind of religion. Surely an overly critical, pedantic, immanent and reductionist ‘sect’ in this sense, but also, for precisely these reasons, having a certain safety and robustness, but not because of methodological soundness, but rather *only* because of its absolute realism. That is to say: De Groot saw sinology purely as a construct and sought to build the *construct of sinology*. He never searched beyond the limits of his science. In this sense, he staked out the limits of sinological paradigm. This gave later scholars, specifically Duyvendak, the intellectual (false) sense of security to build a whole new science that was actually conscious of the constructed nature of China, and sought, instead, the real *causes of the construct of China*. These causes are, as I said, not ethnicity, but a combination of anti-cultural tendencies (collaging and developing cultural memes, *bricolage*) and optimistic idealism as expressed in the Confucian ‘anti-church’.

To conclude, I would call De Groot more than a mere methodological innovator, but less than a founder. My own position has tried to push the latter, whereas sinological scholarship, as expressed by Paramore and Werblowsky, has tried to push the first image of De Groot. The crucial link is De Groot’s relationship to the Catholic Church. His vehemence against the priestly classes reminds us of his own similarity to a priest. Like a priest, he tried to prevent corruption from entering the minds of his flock; and like a priest, he relied on present discourse to sell his message. If anything, then, the *transition* from sinology as a colonialist science and towards chamber scholarship based on key texts, was reflected micro-cosmically in De Groot’s life. De Groot lived as a priest, instead of missionary. He liberated himself from the missionary tradition by becoming more of a symbolic leader, instead of a mere advisor. His focus on translation and interpretation, diagnosed by Werblowsky and others, must be seen as an attempt to find spiritual regalia to underline his patriarchal authority. De Groot is too self-consciously paternalistic to be taken seriously nowadays, but

his work as a discourse analyst is exemplary and deserves recognition. Finally, Orientalism in De Groot, that is to say, De Groot as a racist, is unfounded. Although he talked using clear colonialist and imperialist discourse, he cannot be seen as a racist. I say this only because he, of all people in the field of sinology, stressed diversity above all, even as he worked principally within a discourse of synthesis.

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