The European Association of Chinese Studies (EACS) and its history: EACS Scholars in Memoriam - Piet van der Loon

EACS President 1982-1984

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Piet van der Loon, Professor of Chinese at Oxford from 1972 to 1987, was a figure from the remarkable tradition of European sinologists whose catholic erudition and technical precision made the Western study of China into a professional discipline. He stoutly defended that professionalism throughout his career. His standards of accuracy and true judgement in documentation were an example to all who consulted them, and as a field investigator he opened up new possibilities in the subject.

Born on 7 April 1920 in Rotterdam, he remained conscious throughout his life of his family's rural origins in Friesland. The family business was printing. As a student of China he was a product of the University of Leiden but trained privately, partly under J.J.L. Duyvendak, during the difficult years of the German occupation when the formal work of the university was closed down. His identity document gave his profession not as student but as "Sinologist", a description which kept him out of trouble with the authorities and remained a proud banner through life. After the war he moved to Cambridge as a research student under the professor of Chinese, Gustav Haloun, becoming assistant lecturer in 1948 and lecturer in 1949. He remained in Britain for the rest of his life, settling in Oxford after taking up his chair in 1972.

In a research career of strikingly varied focus his first achievements were in the field of bibliography. He systematically combed the libraries of Europe for details of early holdings in Chinese, and built his many discoveries into an unrivalled private index of early Chinese publishing. He created the unique and indispensable Revue Bibliographique de Sinologie, which brought together an international community of scholars into cooperative effort. And in the course of his twenty-four years at Cambridge he made himself responsible for assembling a magnificent research collection of Chinese books in the University Library. The importance of his contribution was recognized with the title Honorary Keeper of the Chinese Books, a post which he continued to hold after the move to Oxford and to which he devoted unabated energy and attention. This unique service over forty years leaves Cambridge University permanently in his debt.

A change of direction came in the mid-1960s, when he made the first of many study-trips to South-East Asia, and later South China, in quest of the ritual foundations of traditional Chinese theatre and the culture of mourning ritual. He relished the physical and technical challenges of this fieldwork, and his discoveries richly repaid the effort he invested in them. For decades he pursued this work alone, keenly aware that modernization was putting an end to traditional Chinese culture among the overseas Chinese communities and that its fate in China (then inaccessible to fieldworkers) seemed even more precarious. It was only in the 1990s, with changing attitudes among a new generation of researchers in China and the West, that his pioneering work made a major impact. This was particularly strong in the Southern Min dialect region of Fujian and Taiwan, whose folk literature he did much to rediscover and revive. Throughout his career he remained active in Europe, founding the European Congresses of Chinese Studies held annually from 1948 under the title "Junior Sinologues". When the movement was finally formalized as the European Association for Chinese Studies, he served a term as its President. In the 1980s he played an energetic part in the European "Taoist Canon" project and its associated workshops. To many students and colleagues his uncompromising professionalism and daunting mastery of phonology and bibliography made him seem formidable and austere, although serious students soon learned to value these increasingly rare standards of scholarly purism. Before the later years brought
wide recognition only those closest to him knew how original this scholar was. To some extent his combination of fastidious discipline with daring stabs of insight inhibited him from exploiting his discoveries on the scale they deserved. But the published research he has left reflects both his accumulation of first-class data and his huge command of the subject. His principal works - "On the transmission of Kuan-tzu" (1952), "The Manila incunabula and early Hokkien studies" (1966-67), "Les origines rituelles du théâtre chinois" (1977), "Chu Wen: a play for the shadow theatre" (1979), Taoist books in the libraries of the Sung period (1984), The classical theatre and art song of South Fukien (1992) - stand as models of their kind, dense in texture, tightly argued, impeccably documented and unquestionably authoritative. All sinologists can learn from him, and his influence will long be felt by all who value integrity and creative innovation in Chinese studies.

In private life Piet was a kind-hearted man of simple tastes, equally attached to home life and to travel. Ill health limited his freedom of movement in the last years, though to the very end he was directing and perfecting new editions of puppet theatre texts in Southern Min dialect from Quanzhou.

Glen Dudbridge

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