



sica dutch centre
for international
cultural activities

Netherlands China Arts Foundation /Dutch Culture Centre Shanghai

Expert meeting: Thursday, 14 October, 14.00 – 17.00 hrs

Venue: Felix Meritis, Amsterdam

Attended by: around 80 people

Introductory address by Cees de Graaff: expectations and objectives

After almost four years, the Netherlands China Arts Foundation (NCAF) will cease to exist from the end of 2010. A conference was held in Felix Meritis in Amsterdam on Thursday 14 October 2010 to evaluate the foundation and mark its end. The conference was attended by around eighty artists, representatives from the Dutch cultural organisations, culture policy workers from municipal authorities and central government and a number of Chinese guests.

In his introductory address, SICA Director Cees de Graaff expressed the hope that the conference would succeed in clarifying what has been done in the last four years and what results have been achieved. The main objectives of the meeting were to exchange ideas about the future and consider possible ways of continuing the cultural exchange with China.

There have been significant changes in the relationship between the Netherlands and China

In his introduction, journalist Frénk van der Linden, who took on the role of moderator/interviewer, highlighted the many changes that have taken place in China since he first became acquainted with Chinese culture some thirty years ago. When working as a reporter in China, he was trying to send an article to the Netherlands and needed a telex machine. He eventually found one, in a back room at a Chinese post office. But instead of the familiar Latin alphabet of 26 letters, the machine he found had around 750 Chinese characters. Van der Linden's key message is that so much has changed since those early days. Slowly but surely, examples of Western culture, including Dutch, have begun to make headway in this closed country. The year 1988 saw the publication of Harry Mulisch's *The Assault (De Aanslag)*, the first Dutch novel to be translated into Chinese. Later in the afternoon, Henk Pröpper, Director of the Dutch Foundation for Literature (*Nederlands Letterenfonds*), explained that translations began to appear extremely slowly. By 2003, only ten had been published. But today, a total of 70 Dutch books have been translated into Chinese, and a further 16 translations will be published next year.

A great deal has therefore been achieved in recent years, not only in terms of literature, as a brief tour of the auditorium quickly demonstrated. George van de Wetering did several tours of China with his band Monokino and even played at the Dutch Culture Centre in 2010. The assistance offered to Monokino by the Dutch Culture Centre was to prove especially useful; according to Van de Wetering, an official organisation provides an important boost when promoting bands, because the status of the government and other organisations is highly prized in China. This was something confirmed by many of those present. As an individual artist, it is often difficult to achieve a breakthrough in China. In many cases, support from NCAF/DCC, as the official organisation linked to the Dutch government, enabled doors to be opened that would otherwise have remained closed.

Mayke Jongsma from the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (*Fonds BKVB*) was involved in the establishment of artists-in-residence positions in China and the realisation of the art work called the Treehugger by artist Edwin Zwakman, which Edwin and his assistant Liu Gang would highlight in greater detail later in the meeting. In her experience, organising art-related projects in China is often a very time-consuming process. It is difficult to negotiate the complex labyrinth of organisations and the NCAF also played a useful role in this. Susanna von Canon, who since 1994 has been organising tours of China by Dutch jazz bands with the Chinese musical agency Wu Promotion, pointed out that in her opinion the Chinese were actually very well organised. 'Although improvisation is essential, if you work effectively, it is possible to achieve a great deal in China', said von Canon.

Martijn Sanders: NCAF and DCC introduction

In recent years, the Netherlands has achieved a lot in China, ranging from the translation of novels to Dutch jazz and pop music and from the visual arts to film. This variety of art disciplines was evident from the brief film about the Dutch Culture Centre in Shanghai that was then shown. It featured a minute-and-a-half packed with music, dance, theatre and film. 'Something to feel genuinely nostalgic about', said Martijn Sanders, Director of the Netherlands China Arts Foundation (NCAF) and the Dutch Culture Centre.

Sanders spoke about how the NCAF first came into being, inspired by a desire to strengthen cultural relations with China. There was little hesitation in opting for a private foundation with government support, rather than a government organisation: a private organisation has more independence and freedom, although the support of government can certainly open doors as others had already indicated. Nevertheless, it took two years for things to be effectively up and running, recalled Sanders, 'because China is not alone in being bureaucratic and having a difficult government'. But by the summer of 2007, the foundation could be launched.

Since that time, the NCAF has supported, initiated and organised around 50 projects in a three-and-a-half year period, including a music festival, dance festivals in various cities in China, a photography exhibition and Dutch graphic design. Some projects were small, while others were big; sometimes the initiative came from the NCAF itself and sometimes from elsewhere. They involved more or less all types of art. All of this was achieved with an annual budget of €600,000 in the first two years and €500,000 in the last two. It culminated in the Dutch Culture Centre at the world exhibition in Shanghai. According to Sanders, the idea for the Dutch Culture Centre (DCC) came about as a result of a visit to the Holland Heineken House during the Olympic Games in China. It provided an excellent solution to the issue of how to represent Dutch art and culture during Expo 2010 in Shanghai: a Dutch cultural centre, with its own location and its own programme. Sanders: 'We were interested in the general public in Shanghai themselves and not only in those who came to attend the Expo. We wanted to become part of the cultural life of Shanghai itself.'

After some searching, an old factory was located which was transformed into the Dutch Culture Centre. This made the Netherlands the only exhibitor with a location outside the official Expo site, but which was actually an official part of the Expo and permitted to use the logo. This separate status also meant that cooperation with local Chinese partners was essential. A total of 80 events took place in the DCC in 170 days. As indicated earlier, the target group was the cultural crowd of Shanghai itself. The DCC proved successful in reaching this target group. 'We were very impressed by the keen interest shown by the public. People took photographs of everything, read all the information boards and watched all the films.' Even the Chinese media were enthusiastic, with a total of 640 articles about the DCC featuring in the Chinese press.

But as Sanders knows only too well, this enthusiasm was also coupled with a certain degree of nervousness on the Chinese side. All the texts had to be translated in advance, including the complete scripts of the films and documentaries in order to ensure that nothing offensive was being said. In this too, it was important that there was government support for the different art projects. Because ultimately in China: 'if you are not a member of the government, you are of no importance.'

Sanders also learned lessons about the costs involved: 'Shanghai is a commercial city and we especially underestimated the costs of technology.' As an example, Sanders pointed out that renting a projector in Shanghai proved to be just as expensive as buying one.

In conclusion, Sanders praised the NCAF and the DCC as a good model for future projects. The DCC had proved successful in becoming part of Shanghai's cultural world. Finally, Sanders expressed the need and the desire to ensure that the achievements made do not go to waste. 'We must continue in some way or other and ensure that what we have achieved is kept alive.' An example of this is a digital platform, to be maintained by SICA. This will be discussed in more detail later.

Frènk van der Linden asked Martijn Sanders if there were any things about China that he still had difficulties understanding, after four years of intensive cultural exchange with the country. Sanders: 'It is often difficult to understand and predict the response from the Chinese public. At times they can be incredibly enthusiastic, but sometimes less so. I was often amazed by the response of the Chinese people.'

Monique Ruhe, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

It was then time to hear from Monique Ruhe (Head of the International Culture Policy Unit at the Ministry of OCW), who represented the perspective of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science at this meeting. Ruhe was speaking on behalf of Judith van Kranendonk (Director-General of Culture and Media, Ministry of OCW), who was unable to attend as she was meeting the new State Secretary for Culture. Ruhe explained that the Ministry had made a number of exploratory visits to China in 2005, which had revealed a genuine appetite for cultural exchange from both sides. But the sheer size of China meant that putting this into practice was no easy task and required effective cooperation between the different cultural organisations. This led to the establishment of the NCAF: a separate, private foundation, which would play a pivotal role in cultural exchanges with China. A number of priorities were set in establishing the foundation, including a focus on new hotspots, the encouragement of new artists, working together and learning from each other and not only providing performances, but also master classes and workshops. The NCAF also became totally responsible for the Dutch contribution to Expo 2010 in Shanghai, which as is now known, was to take the form of the DCC, which opened in March 2010.

According to Ruhe, it was always known that the DCC would be successful, but the level of its success was to come as a surprise. The task now facing us is to ensure that the legacy left by the NCAF/DCC is effectively managed. According to Ruhe, relationships with China remain a key priority. For exchanges with Brazil, SICA has established an interactive internet platform. It now intends to do the same for China: indeed, the web address already exists: <http://www.culturalexchange-cn.nl>.

Panel discussion: the Chinese vision

An assessment of four years of cultural exchange with China would be unthinkable without at least a brief evaluation from the Chinese perspective. This was provided during the afternoon in the first panel discussion, in which several artists and organisers were interviewed about their projects. For example, Dutch and visual artist Edwin Zwakman and his Chinese artist assistant Liu Gang spoke about the *Treehugger* project. Thanks to Liu Gang's efforts to bring the attention of local organisations to the project, the pair ultimately succeeded in finding a venue and sufficient funding for the opening. Zwakman once more emphasised the importance played by the support of an official organisation: 'In

China, individuals do not count. Because we had the embassy behind us, we were able to offer the work of art as a kind of gift to the city of Shanghai. And even then, it was not certain that they actually wanted it', joked Zwakman.

Theatre producer Dineke Koerts from Borneoco/CultureXpress and theatre impresario and festival organiser Zhang Xian faced similar problems in organising various dance and theatre events in China. In China, it is not always easy to find good locations, especially for modern dance. 'There are hardly any good dance floors', said Koerts. Whereas Zwakman and many others present emphasised the fact that very little can be achieved in China without the right contacts and support from government, in Koerts' experience, it is actually possible to achieve a lot from the grass roots. 'Although the NCAF funding was extremely important, we also managed to achieve a lot not by turning to the official bodies in the first instance, but with a bottom-up approach rather than top-down.'

In Shanghai, Koerts worked with theatre impresario Zhang Xian, who also organises the Fringe Festival and modern dance and theatre in Shanghai. According to Xian, who ceased working as a dramatist because of government censorship in China, cultural exchange is crucial for his country. 'It is extremely important that we achieve greater openness in China. The younger generation must come into contact with other cultures and with other art.' Xian said that cooperation with the Netherlands gave him the freedom to do what he wanted: 'I was looking to achieve artistic autonomy. It was also great to see a connection develop between two cultures.'

Quinten Peelen, Director and organiser of the Franz Liszt Piano Competition, has been active in China since as early as 2004. The qualifying rounds for the piano competition were held in China this September. 'Around 25% of our entrants come from China', said Peelen. 'This was also one of the main reasons we went there.' In addition to the Franz Liszt competition, Peelen has also worked on a number of exchange projects with Dutch and Chinese artists, including the projects Movement, Utrecht Goes Shanghai and Made In Holland. For the project Utrecht goes Shanghai, which aimed to promote the city of Utrecht, 25 people went to Shanghai to set up special collaborative alliances. 'For example, the Dutch band C-mon & Kipsky performed with musicians who play traditional Chinese music: it was very interesting.'

Peelen sees the various projects in China as valuable and interesting experiences. In response to the question from Van der Linden as to whether it has become easier, after several years of investment, to organise things in China, he responded that there is certainly more going on now, but that the enthusiasm and curiosity for Dutch art has begun to diminish somewhat. He emphasised the importance of knowledge and experience. A great deal of preliminary work is often required in order to get things done quickly in the end. 'Effective preparation, a network and a degree of trust are important. Then it is possible to achieve things quickly in China, but only after a time-consuming preliminary process has been completed. As a result, China is not a country in which things can be achieved quickly on a once-only basis.'

Panel member Floor van Spaendonck, Director of Virtual Platform, the sector institute for e-culture, organised a two-day 'expert meeting' for Dutch and Chinese designers and artists in the Dutch Culture Centre, entitled 'Adaptation'. It proved impossible to obtain a permit from the Shanghai Culture Bureau for the expert meeting, but Virtual Platform persisted. 'We had numerous talks on the subject, but it was still not permitted', says Van Spaendonck.

When asked, all the panel members acknowledged the added value offered by an organisation like the NCAF in organising art-related projects abroad. For some, the NCAF could be instrumental in funding projects, for others it primarily provided the contacts needed to gain access.

Dutch Culture Centre staff

After the panel interview, it was the turn of the three staff members from the Dutch Culture Centre to share their experiences with the auditorium. Monique Knapen, who coordinated the DCC on behalf of

the NCAF, and two members of Chinese staff of the DCC, Xiaowen Ju (adviser on approaching target groups) and Angela Lee, who worked in the Chinese company Auditoire and was responsible for the day-to-day running of the DCC.

Ju explained that the period during which the DCC was in Shanghai proved to be a highly positive experience in which China had the opportunity to become acquainted with Dutch art and culture. Angela Lee added that this kind of temporary cultural centre was a new experience for the Chinese, both the artists and the general public. 'When the DCC closed, a lot of people ask me why and whether we would be returning.' Lee would also have liked to have seen the DCC last for longer, in order to gain greater exposure.

With the closure of the DCC and the NCAF about to reach its end, the question arose as to where someone who wishes to organise something in China should now turn. Knapen pointed out that an online database is being established featuring all the contacts and knowledge acquired through the NCAF and the DCC. The website is to be maintained by SICA and Machtelt Schelling, the Consulate-General in Shanghai. Schelling: 'It is important to maintain our contacts in a cultural hotspot like China.'

Film by the City of Amsterdam

After the interval, the city of Amsterdam's Sabine Gimbere had the task of attempting to keep people's attention for the final hour. She brought along a film about the activities of the city of Amsterdam in the DCC. The film, entitled *Amsterdam in Shanghai*, showed in pictures what so far had only been presented in words: the fact that so much had been done and achieved. The film showed how art, and especially dance, brings young people from China and Amsterdam together. According to Gimbere, the activities in Shanghai were not only an excellent example of cultural exchange between two cities, but also of successful cooperation between local and central government.

Second panel discussion: policymakers

There then followed a second panel discussion, with Henk Heikamp from the Ministry of OCW, Margriet Leemhuis representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Henk Pröpper from the Dutch Fund for Literature and the Culture Council, Stef Oosterloo from the city of Rotterdam, Machtelt Schelling from the Consulate in Shanghai and SICA's Cees de Graaff.

Henk Pröpper said that despite his six years of intensive investment in the Chinese books market, he is still regularly taken aback by his experiences. 'In China, people love the classics, and especially the classic writers whose works refer to decadence. Couperus is the biggest seller there; his novel *Inevitable (Langs lijnen van geleidelijkheid)* sold 6000 copies in a single month.'

Stef Oosterloo from the city of Rotterdam explained that the port city has long had a business relationship with China and even sent its own diplomatic delegation to Shanghai. One thing that he noticed is that the Chinese have a tendency to take things on for the longer term. 'People often stay in the same job for tens of years. These are precisely the kind of people you need to develop long-term relationships.'

Machtelt Schelling added that these kinds of contacts, once established, can make all sorts of things possible but that a relatively minor error can significantly damage the relationship even after years of cooperation. She cites a DCC partner as an example, whose name was accidentally omitted in the final roll call. 'She was so angry that she turned off the electricity' said Schelling.

In response to a question from Van der Linden as to what can be learned from the last four years and what aspects should be maintained, several key things were raised that had been mentioned repeatedly throughout the day. For example, reference was made to the importance of long-term, robust contacts as well as the need to collaborate with local organisers and artists and the fact that cultural exchanges should not be seen as one-way traffic. Margriet Leemhuis agreed that this way of

working was indeed the key principle, but it was occasionally worthwhile to provide an impression of what the Netherlands has to offer in terms of culture.

SICA Director Cees de Graaff added that it is important to examine the specific situation, the objectives and culture. 'The DCC was a resounding success in China, but that does not automatically mean that we should set up a culture centre in another country.'

Henk Pröpper pointed out that there is a relatively large Dutch presence aboard. 'But we need to draw a distinction between structural activities, carried out by the sector institutes, and temporary projects. We need to decide with which countries we wish to have a long-term relationship in terms of arts and culture. The DCC has played a role as a kind of antenna. In certain key cities or countries, you need this kind of antenna in order to create networks.'

Most of those present seemed convinced that China is one of these key countries. As Susanna von Canon said: 'Of itself, China is not desperately waiting to be exposed to Dutch jazz, but we would like it to be heard there. To achieve that, you need a long-term relationship rather than a one night stand.' Machtelt Schelling had also regularly been asked why the DCC no longer existed. 'But the very reason why it was so positive and energetic is that everything had to happen in the space of six months', thought Schelling. 'But China's interest is plain to see; they are certainly open for more.'

Pröpper highlighted the fact that it is not only about promoting Dutch art and culture, but also about learning from other cultures. 'For example, China is much further advanced than the Netherlands in terms of E-culture.'

Henk Heikamp from the Ministry of OCW reminded everyone that the original goal of the NCAF and the DCC was no more or no less than to provide a boost to the cultural relationship between the Netherlands and China. This objective had certainly been achieved, he felt, but that does not mean that the end of the DCC and the NCAF means the end to this relationship. 'There needs to be a place where people, organisers and artists can come together if they need to find something out or are looking for contacts. A website is a step in the right direction.' According to Leemhuis, SICA has an important role to play in managing the legacy of the NCAF and the DCC, and this will definitely include maintenance of the platform.

Cees de Graaff confirmed that SICA does intend to continue by establishing and maintaining a website, but that it also intends to play a role as matchmaker for anyone who wishes to undertake activities relating to art and culture with China. 'The details of how exactly we will do that still need to be developed. It depends on all kinds of extremely practical issues, such as funding. If no funding is available, it will be extremely difficult to continue this process.'

Pröpper ended this second panel discussion by announcing that, in accordance with Chinese custom, he had several gifts for the Chinese guests. The guests from China were given a beautiful collection of Dutch poetry translated into Chinese.

The final word

The final part of the afternoon involved a brief interview with Martijn Sanders, NCAF Director, looking back at what had been achieved. Van der Linden asked him how he felt about this conference, which must feel like the end of an era. Sanders said he was extremely happy with the team who had put together the NCAF, with SICA and with Machtelt Schelling from the consulate, who had acted as a kind of Chinese traffic manager. Particular thanks were owed to Ellen Adriaanssen (NCAF), who had coordinated the activities of the NCAF from the outset.

'A great deal has been achieved in the space of four years', concluded Sanders. 'We must develop this further. The website needs to be maintained and new information added; people are needed to maintain networks and to develop ideas. Funding will also be required to achieve these things.

Although the budget will only need to be a fraction of what it has been in previous years, some funding will still be necessary.'