

## **An Open Book in an Open Landscape**

### **Dutch Writers in Beijing**

From 31 August to 4 September 2011 the Chinese capital, Beijing, took on a somewhat orange hue. During that period the Netherlands was playing host to the eighteenth edition of the Beijing Book Fair, one of the largest and most rapidly expanding book fairs in the world. After such major powers as Germany, France, Russia and India, the Netherlands was the first 'smaller' country to be given the opportunity of presenting its writers and literature to the Chinese. The host country's stand covered an area of over 1,500m<sup>2</sup>, and in its form and imagery it symbolised the theme 'Open Landscape - Open Book'. In this way, the intention was to draw people's attention to specific elements of the Dutch way of thinking: openness, transparency and a desire for practicability.

Just over twenty authors travelled to Beijing and sixteen publishers were present on the host country's stand. During the varied writers' programme, the Dutch authors were able to forge contacts with their Chinese colleagues, both at the fair and in the city. In beautifully presented exhibitions one could become acquainted with Vincent van Gogh's correspondence, with books with the finest of layouts, with illustrations for children's books and literary strip cartoons.

Immediately after the fair ended the Dutch Foundation for Literature, which was ultimately responsible for the host country's presentation, spoke of its having been a success. It pointed out that this eighteenth edition of the Beijing Book Fair had attracted more visitors than ever before (half a million). The attraction of the host country's stand was reportedly so great that the other stands had on average to make do with fewer visitors than previously. The press too showed a real interest - and that was absolutely not restricted to the Dutch media. The folder compiled by the Dutch Foundation for Literature with articles from the Chinese press is most impressive.

As a native of Flanders, the writer of this article has to regret that no writers from the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium were present in Beijing. The host stand had just only one small table on which lay books by Flemish writers - no more than that. During the host country's lengthy preparations for the fair, Flanders ought really to have been invited by the head of the Dutch Foundation for Literature to make an appropriate contribution to the stand. Apparently, in the end this was not possible. As a result, however, the Chinese were left with the mistaken impression that Dutch-language literature extends no further south than the border between the Netherlands and Belgium. In the past, such joint presentations had indeed been possible. For example, the Netherlands and Flanders were able to put on a joint exhibit at the *Frankfurter Buchmesse* in 1993. This experience had positive spin-off, since at other international book fairs the Netherlands and Flanders also combined to be 'the host country', as at Barcelona (1995), Göteborg (1997) and Paris (2003) - and each time the Dutch-language literature as a whole made a good impression.

A grouchy type might well ask himself if a book fair in Beijing, so far from home, could be of any possible use to Dutch literature. But that would be to ignore the vast market that can (admittedly theoretically) be tapped. Billions of potential readers at the other end of the Silk Road are maybe just waiting for the chance to get to know Dutch writers.

Criticism was much more vociferous regarding the political and general social context within which the Beijing book fair was organised. China is not exactly a country where intellectual broad-mindedness and the free expression of opinion are self-evident concepts. Furthermore, the Chinese authorities seemed to adopt an even tougher attitude than before in the months leading up to the fair. Fear that the Arab Spring might have an inspiring effect on the Chinese intelligentsia could well have been a part of this. Many people also wondered if the Dutch literary world,

which is often so concerned about freedom and democracy, would really find it easy to present itself in its Sunday best in the Chinese capital. The Dutch Foundation for Literature parried this criticism by pointing out that during the long preparations for hosting the fair a great many contacts had been established between Dutch and Chinese writers and publishers. This had given rise to an intellectual climate based on the mutual exchange of ideas. The fact that Chinese writers were able to share thoughts with their Dutch colleagues during the period of the fair was also extremely important and could well lead to lasting contacts. Actually, it is possible to draw a parallel with the Olympic Games held in Beijing in 2008, and the World Exposition organised in Shanghai in 2010. Very much the same discussion took place on both occasions. As to whether the Land of the Dragon has shown greater openness since these events – the answer to that depends on who you ask.

But let us return to the literature. Now that the spotlights and microphones have long since been switched off, it will be interesting to see if the Chinese publishers retain their interest in Dutch books. If they do, which genres will they prefer, and will they invest appropriately in promoting their translations from the Dutch? Will the contacts established before and during the fair result in long-lasting cooperation? In any case, if Dutch literature wishes to keep a foot in the door in China, some form of permanent follow-up is essential. In short, the work is only just beginning.

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## **Why Hella S. Haasse's Work Does Not Need Introduction Abroad**

The sad news of the death of H  l  ne Serafia Haasse in September 2011 is – once more – an occasion to underline Haasse's literary significance, not only as a nationally and internationally recognised literary writer, but also as an author who has always embedded her work in a global context. This article aims to give a short overview of the reception of Haasse's work outside the Netherlands.

Most records of Hella S. Haasse's work emphasize her historical work, but Haasse wrote *across* genres: besides creatively "assembling" historical novels, she wrote experimental (auto) biographies, plays, essays, literary criticism, travel writing, contemporary novels and short stories. This is not an exhaustive list. Her work is diverse, it discusses a wide range of topics and is often hard to capture in traditional genre categories.

Haasse was a productive author who wrote throughout her life with a remarkable consistency: her oeuvre consists of around 30 titles that were published in the Netherlands with timely intervals of two to three years in between – from her literary debut, the short novel *Oeroeg* (1948, translated into English as *Forever a Stranger*), until her last novel *Sleuteloog* in 2002 (*The Eye of the Key*). The latter mirrors and expands on *Oeroeg's* theme in its description of an interracial friendship in the Dutch East Indies affected by colonial hierarchy. Born in 1918 in what is now Jakarta (then Batavia, capital of the former Dutch East Indies), Indonesia became a thread throughout Haasse's work. However, the author herself never referred to Indonesia as a "theme", for her the country simply meant "fertile soil for my imagination".

Ten years of Haasse's life were spent in France. Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands once described her as a writer with three countries of origin: the Netherlands, Indonesia and France. These three origins are thematically represented in Haasse's