"Comparative Epistemologies for Thinking China,"
The Research & Educational Center for China Studies and
Cross-Taiwan Strait Relations, Department of Political Science,
National Taiwan University

INTERVIEW ‘Oral Histories of Chinese Studies’

Interviewee: Professor dr. Ulrich Libbrecht

Interviewer: dr. Mieke Matthyssen

Translation: dr. Mieke Matthyssen

Dates: 24th November 2012, 8th and 19th of January 2013

Place: Zulzeke, Belgium

Prof. dr. Libbrecht was born in 1928 in Avelgem. He is an authority in the field of Eastern and
Comparative philosophy. He studied Sinology in Gent, graduated cum laude in 1972 at the
University of Leiden and that same year became professor in Sinology, Chinese philosophy
and Buddhology at the University of Leuven. He also founded the School for Comparative
Philosophy in Antwerp (Belgium) and the school Philosophy East-West in Utrecht
(Netherlands). His magnum opus consists of four books in Dutch - called Introduction to
Comparative Philosophy. There is an abbreviated version in English, entitled Within the Four
Seas: Introduction to Comparative Philosophy. In these volumes, he develops a comparative
model based on the paradigm-free axes of energy and information, which accommodates
the current world-views of Daoism, Buddhism and Rationalism – representing the Chinese,
Indian and Western heritage. This model shows how science and religion interrelate within
such a global framework, which in the course of his life has become the main field of interest
of prof Libbrecht.

What follows is the transcription of the interviews taken (in Dutch) in his home in Zulzeke at
three different occasions (24th November 2012, 8th and 19th of January 2013). We entered
many discussions not always related to Chinese Studies or China in general, which are left
out in as far as they did not contribute to the concept of Chinese Studies and China experts’
narratives.
Mieke: A first question is what your first encounter with China was? Or even earlier maybe, what is your first memory of the country?

Prof Libbrecht: Well, to begin with, after my graduate studies, I started working as a mathematics teacher but was drafted into the army, something every able man was required to do for a period of eighteen months back in those days. While in the army, I was promoted to the rank of lieutenant and sent to Germany. That was a good thing of course, because as a lieutenant, I had my own room and spent a lot of my free time studying advanced mathematics, the studies I wanted to continue to become a master of mathematics. Whilst studying, I came across a book of philosophy, written by the Flemish philosopher Edgar De Bruyne.¹

I started reading this book and became so intrigued by it, that I promptly cast my mathematics books aside. While reading a book about Greek philosophy I started questioning what it was really all about, whether the underlying reasoning was correct. Later on I realized what I really missed in this kind of philosophy, and that was an emotional aspect. The emotional life seem to have no place in this philosophy, it was a purely rational philosophy. So I asked myself whether it would be the same in other countries and different cultures. I thought, let’s see how the Indians view this. So I started reading Indian philosophy but was troubled by the fact that I didn’t know the language and couldn’t really make anything out of the foreign terms. So I decided to buy some books and learn a little Sanskrit to better understand the old language.

In this period, when I was around thirty-one, I started developing rheumatoid arthritis, and was treated with cortisone, which required me to lie on my back for three months! I couldn’t do anything, couldn’t walk. The only thing I was allowed to do was …study. So what better way to spend my time, which I had plenty of, to start learning Sanskrit. Eventually, after that period of time, I fully recovered and thought it would be interesting to learn some Chinese too, so I bought some Chinese books. I was interested, but imagine, having no one to show

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¹ Edgar De Bruyne (1898-1959) was a doctor in philosophy, who taught at Ghent University as from 1935. One of his most famous works is De geschiedenis van de aesthetica (The History of Esthetics) (in different volumes), which in its French edition is said to have strongly influenced Umberto Eco.
you how to write Chinese, I was constantly copying the symbols until I discovered a seminar teaching Chinese at Ghent University, and so I went to follow these courses by professor Ellegiers. He barely had students though, and kind of advised me to try some others courses too. And that’s what I did. Of course I didn’t tell my wife, that I tried everything. (laughs)

Mieke: Because you were still teaching mathematics in secondary school at that time?

Libbrecht: Yes, all the time I studied I continued teaching mathematics. There was only this one year that I had a special scholarship for finishing my PhD. Anyway, there wasn’t a lot to follow otherwise, so I decided to stick to my plan, and study Sinology, all the while working full time as a mathematics teacher. So I had to do my exams during summertime, and spent the whole summer studying. As a man in his thirties way past his student days, studying was meant to really learn something, not just for my amusement or pleasure or to live a student live. It paid off. I finished that first year with the highest distinction, and told myself I couldn’t go back now. I kept that going for four years, five actually.

Professor Scharpé (1913 – 1986), with whom I learnt Sanskrit, had advised me to follow a special year that would benefit my master thesis, which, of course, would also benefit my final results. And this is what happened; it was through my thesis that I got highest distinction. I wrote my master thesis about an ancient Chinese philosopher called Gongsun Long. As a person with a taste for mathematics and logic, I carefully analyzed his works. We also had to type on a typewriter, flawlessly. Even my doctoral dissertation, I still wrote on a typewriter. The amount of work we had to write on a typewriter back in those days, today’s youth cannot imagine how it was! If only I had lived as a student with today’s technology! It was quite painstaking at that time. But I’m getting off the point. I never published that thesis by the way. So if I remember well, in 1966, after five years of studying, I graduated with highest distinction (summa cum laude), and wanted to pick up doctoral research.

Then the question rose about what? At that time I was reading the works of Joseph Needham, who by the way I knew quite well and met quite often on multiple congresses. I

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2 Daniël Ellegiers (1921 - ) had obtained a master degree in Ancient Times and Art History (1948) at the University of Ghent, and a doctoral degree in Japanese and Chinese Language and Literature (1952) and a doctoral degree in Arts and Literature (1957) at the University of Utrecht. Since 1959 he was appointed at the University of Ghent for teaching Classical Chinese and modern Chinese and Japanese.

3 Gongsun Long (ca. 325–250 BC) was a famous philosopher of the School of Names, Mingjia. His collected essays are part of the book Gongsun Longzi.
also visited him on his ninetieth birthday in Cambridge. While reading his work on mathematics in China, I came across a footnote about this particular mathematician, Qin Jiushao⁴, whose works were not yet been thoroughly studied, let alone been translated. This was a job I was immediately eager to do. The only problem was that, in Ghent, I could not find any source texts that could really send me off in the right direction. By chance, I met with professor Pokora, a man from Czechoslovakia whom I took to diner in Ghent and who was in possession of these papers. So I asked him if I could get some copies, which he happily sent me. Actually I still have them here at home in my ‘photocopy-archive’. Anyway, after a month of reading I came to the conclusion that I still didn’t understand anything about the matter. (laughs) This terminology could not be found in the dictionaries. So I reconstructed the terminology based on my knowledge of mathematics, which I struggled greatly doing, and gradually composed an overview of the terminology in the treatise. So I spent a lot of time doing what scholars and philosophers call “swinging the hermeneutic scepter” (laughs), always trying out, following the trial and error method. After a while, I had a list of at least 200 mathematical terms, and slowly but steadily, I started to get a better understanding of the subject.

Mieke: You compared it with other commonly used mathematical terms?

Prof Libbrecht: Exactly, I started comparing it with 13th century mathematics, which wasn’t really advanced. But either way, I came to know about many interesting inquiries in Chinese mathematics. Some of these works were even more advanced than those well-known mathematicians like Gauss⁵. But I doubt that this is very interesting to you (laughs). Either way, it is an interesting fact. Afterwards, I made a comparison with my own work and that of Indian and Arabic mathematics and figured out a connection there. It occurred to me there where a lot of mistakes and that I had to correct them using source material that I didn’t fully understand. Either way I finished it. It took me a while to do it though, about five years. It was then printed on stencils (shows me two huge books).

Mieke: During the writing up, where you all the time here, or where you studying in the United States?

⁴ Qin Jiushao (ca. 1202–1261), was an outstanding Chinese mathematician. One of his best known mathematical treatises is the Shushu Jiuzhang (Mathematical Treatise in Nine Sections), written in 1247 CE.

⁵ Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855) was a German mathematician and physical scientist. He is maybe best known for his famous Gaussian curvatures.
Prof Libbrecht: Well, actually I owe a lot to Nathan Sivin, but I don’t have any contact anymore now. I first went to Cambridge, England, one of the world’s finest universities, which also happens to have one of the most elaborate libraries. After that I went to the extensive library of Harvard Yenching University where I found everything I needed. The only problem was, back then we didn’t have any contacts in China, we didn’t know anyone over there. I think I mentioned to you that I received a special scholarship that allowed me to work on this project for a full year, but only if the promoter promised that the doctoral student would finish his studies that year.

Well, finally I graduated as Doctor *Cum Laude* - or In Litteris, it was still in Latin. But we had to address the supervisor as “highly educated promoter” which was really difficult when answering questions with complicated formulas. The best question I got was from my promoter. During my public defense, he commented that I could have written a little more in detail about one particular concept, to which I replied: “Highly educated promoter, I’ve elaborated on this matter in full detail on page 601 or something.” To which he replied: “I’m not even going to bother to read it that far.” Whereupon the whole room bursted out in laughter.

**Mieke: Who was your promoter then?**

Prof Libbrecht: Professor Hulsewé⁶. He was pretty known at the time, and of course there was professor Zürcher⁷, you must know him. He is about my age. Zürcher later said to me, that they could not do other but grant me the title of Doctor Cum Laude, because none of the sinologists knew mathematics and the mathematicians didn’t know Chinese. (laughs)

**Mieke: And who was in your reading commission?**

Prof Libbrecht: Oh I forgot really. Among others, there was also Nathan Sivin, but he had written his report and had sent it from the US. He was not personally there during my defense. He has been here quite often, and he helped me a lot and supported me in my research.

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⁶ A.F.P. Hulsewé (1910-1993) was a Dutch sinologist and professor of Chinese. In 1956, he succeeded Duyvendak as professor of Chinese language and literature. He retired in 1975, and was succeeded by W.L. Idema.

⁷ Erik Zürcher (1928-2008) was a Dutch sinologist. From 1962-1993, he was a professor of history of East Asia at Leiden University (Netherlands), and from 1975 till 1990, he was also director of the Sinological Institute.
But to keep track of my story, later I discovered that there was not much more interesting in the field of Chinese mathematics. There were two ladies from Paris, both sinologists, and I was their promoter in Paris. In their doctoral thesis, the two of them, along with a third person, whom I wasn’t teaching, had more or less exhausted what was available on this subject of Chinese mathematics. Back home, I learnt about the works of Joseph Needham, and I started working more in general on mathematics. In Beijing, once a congress was held on Qin Jiushao, which I of course attended. It was there that I saw the most magnificent copy of my doctorate: it almost fell apart because they all had to read this one copy I had sent. I also had to give a lecture for those who wanted to try to study a similar subject. Unfortunately, I had to do this in English, and we had to work with interpreters, because our modern Chinese was not good enough. But I can talk for hours on that subject and I only just graduated in this story. (laughs)

So I went back to my old school in Oudenaarde to teach. I was probably the only professor of Sinology who was teaching children the Pythagorean theorem. (laughs) And it was in a technical school, which I had deliberately chosen so. I always thought of getting my master degree in mathematics, but then, as I already told you, while studying in the army, I ended up with philosophy. I am also greatly indebted to Apostel with whom I studied logics and philosophy, but that would really lead us too far away from Chinese Studies.

I did follow two years of Japanese in my master studies, but I completely forgot now. I could maybe work with a dictionary and produce something reasonable, but still, it would be very hard to recall that. Ellegiers also taught this course. At that time he was running the whole department of Far-Eastern Oriental Languages and Cultures alone. That was also for me the problem later in Leuven, that they let you start up the department but without any financial support.

But let’s go back to where I started. A year after my doctoral defense, I received a call from the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL) asking me if I could come over to teach there. They told me they had decided to broaden the scope of the department, because the Oriental Department consisted almost solely of Bible Studies and languages. They wanted to attract

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8 Leo Apostel (1925-1995) was an Flemish philosopher and professor in logics and philosophy of science mostly at Ghent university (1955-1979). He was an ardent advocate of interdisciplinary research and the bridging of the gap between the exact sciences and the humanities.
more students, because they were afraid the department might have to be abolished. This of course would never happen, being a Catholic university, but indeed to attract more students some ‘modern’ elements had to be incorporated in the program. And as I got my doctoral degree in Leiden, which was quite famous (still is), they asked me if I would be interested in teaching a year of Sinology for beginners, that is, an introduction course. Of course I was happy to do so, and by doing so, I was of course somehow launched at that university, and after that, they successfully set up a program of Sinology. It already existed, but in French only. When the university was obliged to start teaching all courses both in Dutch and French, the smaller courses such as sinology lacked behind. And now it was time to adjust this. So I went on to teach the subject and had some very nice students, among which Nicole Halsberghe from Ghent, whom I supervised during her doctorate. She is a renowned artist who while being in Japan had fallen in love with Asian arts and who had started to learn Japanese and Chinese. Her teacher for Chinese was Robert Shih, from the French department. She herself was a teacher at Sint Lucas Art School in Ghent. There was also Magda Van den Akker, who also graduated under my supervision, but ended up in journalism.

Anyway, dark times where ahead for the school. In 1968, tensions between the Dutch-speaking (Flemish) and French-speaking (Walloon) communities led to the splitting of the bilingual Catholic University of Leuven into two "sister" universities, with the Dutch-language university becoming a full-fledged independent institution in Leuven in 1970, and the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL) built a new campus site in the French-speaking part of Belgium. The library however, had to be divided, and since there was no Flemish sino-japanese department before that, the Walloon took all the books with them, and from then on we had to manage our own business. We had just one room in our department to start with, with some leftovers of the furniture such as some book frames. You know, following a visit of the Japanese crown prince to Leuven in 1921\(^9\), the university was offered a generous gift of Japanese books and beautiful furniture. They had special furniture made for these books that looked a bit Japanese, so I inherited these book frames, but not the nice furniture such as small tables and chairs. These were all taken. But there was no study called Japanology at that time at UCL, but still they took them all the books with them and then put

\(^9\) This was part of a generous gift consisting of books and art works given by the Japanese Crown prince to the University of Leuven in the period of 1924-1926.
them in the cellar. This was of course to the great sorrow of Japanology professor Willy Vande Walle, who also came from Ghent, but that was after my time. He actually is a much more competent philologist than me. I had much more interest in philosophy and history of science. I even taught on the history of science in China, in the line of Joseph Needham. And I also taught astronomy to sinology students in Leuven. (laughs heartily)

Mieke: I can imagine there is a strong link with Ferdinand Verbiest and astronomy.

Prof Libbrecht: Yes, indeed, but that is another story, we’ll come back to this later. Well, in these difficult beginning days of the Flemish department of Chinese Studies, in the 1970s, I had contact with Taiwan for the first time, with mister Fu Weixin, from the at that time Cultural Centre in Brussels - as they were not allowed to call themselves an Embassy, it was called ‘Cultural Centre’. I had very good contact with him. In this period, I organized a rather small congress about the “History of Chinese science”, and it is still being held now. Last time it was in Korea, and it has been in Sydney, Hong Kong, Beijing, San Diego and many other places, far away so we could also see a little of the world. I started doing that in Leuven and even invited a delegation of five people from Communist China whom unfortunately didn’t speak English, all but one. We also had to pay for everything: their plane tickets, hotel, translators……everything! They were quite pleased though, they weren’t really used to anything like this. I told my assistant, Nicole Halsbergh that they can’t even pay their own diner, simply because they didn’t have any money. So we agreed to give them about a 1000 Belgian Francs a day (approx. €25), and all they did was eat bread, every day, all day, to have some money left to take back home, which was of course very understandable. So this was my very first contact with citizens of Communist China.

Now back to the beginning days of the Chinese department in Leuven. I had to install a library, which took a serious amount of exertion and insistence until I could buy a part of the old library that once belonged to the ‘Fathers of Scheut’. They had established the China-Europe Centre. Of course, this was all about missionary in China, not about science. But they wanted to assume a scientific air. And they had money from selling a few of their monasteries. So these Fathers of Scheut had all the books and the money - still now there is a ‘Scheut Memorial Library’ - and I had nothing, no books, no money. But ultimately it was

10 Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688) was a Belgian Jesuit-astronomer serving at the Qing court.
11 Belgian Roman Catholic missionary congregation established in 1862 by the priest Théophile Verbist.
me who had to teach the real Sinology. This really gave me a hard time. One should not forget that we had to teach a lot of courses that we ourselves had to study hard for. Well, unfortunately, the first course that was abolished when I left was ‘History of Science in China’.

And then, early 1980s, Sinology became hot, China was like a fashion trend. Students were piling up. At one point we had even more students than in Germanic languages, more than 100 students, we couldn’t take it anymore. So finally I got an assistant which took a big stack of tasks and obligations of my shoulders. As I was always very thorough and accurate, it was really hard sometimes, because there was no time to prepare thoroughly. I remember one Sunday I had to read twelve theses by the end of the day. They were all on completely different topics, some also about Japan! And of course professor Vande Walle also had to read my theses about China. But I didn’t know anything about Japan! I learned a lot about Japan from reading these theses but I didn’t know how to grade them properly because well, I did not have time to read everything in depth. You can call that pioneer’s work, but it was not how we liked it. We really strived to keep up a high scientific profile.

So I taught in Leuven for a couple of years. And then again something happened that initiated a big change in my life. One day, the dean of the ‘Higher Institute of Philosophy’ in Leuven - which was one of many allures, a separate institute really – phoned me to ask if I could teach the course of comparative philosophy. The teacher at the time - a professor in Indology - wasn’t interested in teaching it anymore. I told him I already had a lot on my mind, and asked him to give me some time to ponder it over. Of course, the next day, he phoned me again, and I said if you can change the program and put this course in the second term instead of in the first term, I will do it. As it was in English, it required more preparation than in Dutch, especially in those days, because we were not so familiar with reading English, apart from Shakespeare and some general English classes. So I eventually accepted to do it, and it turned my life upside down. Apparently the Indology teacher only taught about Indian philosophy. But I thought that it really should be comparative.

Let me tell you something first. The main chair of comparative philosophy was in Hawaii, and in 1989 I had been there for three weeks attending a congress. Now when the founder, Charles Moore, died in 1967, they didn’t refer to real comparative philosophy anymore. The
course was then called non-Western philosophy (they named it like this in Ghent too), but there was no real comparative aspect to it anymore. I could not accept this because what is the use of learning about India if you don’t compare with your own tradition. I didn’t like this because you don’t just make comparisons between things that are similar in different cultures, but rather between aspects that are not the same. After all, I don’t find the similarities interesting; it is the differences that intrigue me. As I always say, it is not a big discovery to learn that in China they also discovered that 2 + 2 equals 4. (laughs) For instance, the missionaries looked for a God that they of course never found in China, but they just made something up. It is the differences that we have to compare, but in a structured way by using a model. With my background in mathematics, I started to read many books on model theory, and developed my own theory. In this theory, a comparative model based on the two axes of energy and information accommodates the current world-views of Daoism, Buddhism and Rationalism, representing the Chinese, Indian and Western heritage. It also shows how science and religion interrelate in a global framework. This model is still being used, and I dare to say – and this I know from personal testimonies - that it meant a lot to different people with different jobs and religious backgrounds, from religion teachers to economists.

Developing this theory really further shaped my life. If you have a look at my library, you will find more books on philosophy than on Sinology. I somehow left the Sinology behind, because I really was not interested in the - in my view rather superficial - modern aspects of contemporary Chinese politics and economics that gradually became more dominant. Although I have to say that we provided a lot of interpreters for economists working on China. Because in my time, modern Chinese became a very important subject. My own students, and also my successor Carine Defoort, all speak fluently modern Chinese. This was not the case for us as students. This again was a transition period, it seems that all my life was one whole transition period. (laughs) But of course we knew a lot of classical Chinese, which is less thoroughly known by students now.

Mieke: In the end you will always choose a direction to focus on.

Prof Libbrecht: But that was the problem in Ghent at the time. We only had reading classes, no conversation classes. And spoken language is so different from texts. I actually learnt
English while travelling, daily life English of course. We don’t live in Shakespeare, we live in the real world. I had read a lot of Shakespeare, but this did not help me to ask the way in English. (laughs)

Well, to go back to the comparative philosophy, I have to admit that I preferred to study philosophy and attend related seminars. But these seminars on comparative philosophy in Leuven were in English. It didn’t exist in Dutch. You can probably guess why that was the case. There were a lot of students from different countries and cultures and all the Indians, Chinese and South-Americans never heard something about their own culture while studying in Leuven. It was as if there was only one philosophy, that is, the Western philosophy. And when they started to figure that out, they were questioning if there was something in there that could teach them something about their own culture. And that was comparative philosophy. Only, there wasn’t a comparative philosopher. So this is how the course in Leuven started.

I remember the dean of Ghent calling me some years ago, asking if I didn’t know someone who could teach that subject. And I replied “I think I know what you mean”. He of course wanted to ask me for the job. (laughs) So of course I took the job, although I was already 79, and I enjoyed it a lot because it was for students of philosophy, which is quite different from teaching students of cultural studies and linguistics. I have a lot of knowledge in modern physics and astronomy which was one of my strengths. I actually just finished reading the biography of Einstein, and almost finished the biography of Stephen Hawking, which I still very much enjoy. Many philosophers reproach me that I lean too much towards the exact sciences, but I can only reply that this is the only thing we can be sure of. I don’t like the type of French littero-philosophy, that is really partly literature instead of philosophy. They all are just opinions, doxa, but I am interested in the episteme and that is why I prefer to take the exact sciences as a starting point. Of course I have a deep respect for religious matters, but not for ‘religion’ itself as we generally know it now. But I like the background of religion. Therefore I have always been attracted to Buddhism.

Mieke: What do you mean with the background?

Prof Libbrecht: What religion actually is. I have my own theory about it. I found confirmation of this only in Buddhism, but not the popular Buddhism people live now. When I was in
Taiwan, I did go to a Buddhist monastery, where I have been talking a whole day with the abbot, not to see their life in action but rather to search for a meaning in Buddhism.

**Mieke: What is religion to you, and why did you find that in Buddhism?**

Prof Libbrecht: Buddhism is philosophy. Schopenhauer said there have only been three great philosophers, and note the sequence: Buddha, Plato and Kant. He saw that Buddhism is a philosophy, but we are used to considering it a religion. Christianity is not a philosophy; it is a religion that creates all kinds of myths: resurrections and miracles, etc. But according to me, philosophical Buddhism is so pure, especially if you know a thing or two about modern physics.

**Mieke: And in what way are they related?**

Prof Libbrecht: That’s rather hard to explain. (laughs)

**Mieke: It doesn’t have to be simple, you can explain it the hard way. I will try to keep up.**

Prof Libbrecht: The underlying way of thinking behind Buddhist religion and physics basically is the same. Do you know the Buddhist concept of ‘nothingness’? People think nothing is “absolutely nothing”, but that is not the case with Buddhism. Nothing is pure energy. You can read all about that in my book *Boedda en ik (Buddha and me)*, which discusses the way I view Buddhism. But I am not interested in the religion, with offerings and so on. I always say “If you meet the Buddha, kill him”. I took this saying from Zen Buddhists. The idea is that one should never start to worship the Buddha (professor Libbrecht shows me a 300 year old Buddha statue behind him given to him as a goodbye present from the School of Comparative Philosophy in Antwerp, which will be discussed later).

But let’s continue with our subject, the common ground of Buddhism and physics. I was looking for the deep structure of religion. I didn’t derive it from the rationality. Kant wrote a lot about religion, which he called *Vernunftgläube*. For me this seems to mean a religion you can only accept as a rational human being. But maybe you don’t know a lot about Kant? Kant wanted to define a religion that could also be derived from the ratio, reasoning and logic. And he used to say that Christianity comes closest to this ideal. I forgive him for stating so, because I read all of his writings about religion and can follow his logic. Then I started wondering, as everywhere in the world religion exists, what the deep structure of religion
was. Because all we can see is the superficial structure of the religion in its specific cultural context. I was really looking for the deep structure, and I learnt that you have to derive that from human emotionality, the human possibility of being moved. But I consider emotionality (poignancy) at the same level as rationality. Especially being touched by the cosmos is important for me. Of course not when doing scientific research, but in my personal life, it is equally important. I am an absolute follower of “Deus sive natura (God or Nature)”, each day I reflect on the cosmos. It is so overwhelming; it will always be a mystery. Some people call it God, and that is fine with me, but it is not very logical, it is just symbolic, I don’t give it a name. And science will never solve this mystery because it will remain a mystery. I find it really a pity, scientists always believe they will find the answer, a little pretentious if I may add. I call it physicist prophecy. They should stay in their field of work. Don’t get me wrong, they’ve done a lot of good things.

Mieke: Recently the physical discovery of the HIGGS particle (Higgs boson) also heightened the discussion about whether we can and will be able to explain the cosmos.

Prof Libbrecht: Richard Dawkins\(^1\) has a nice book about the redundancy of God. And I agree with him but he only explains the superficial part. You have to look at what religion is, and Buddhists are actually the only ones that came close to understanding it. That also explains why in Buddhism there are no prayers – unless in popular folk Buddhism – but meditation is important. The most advanced Buddhists, mostly to be found in Zen Buddhism, are all philosophers. So for me, Buddhism doesn’t refer to “the Buddhists”. You will never find me in a Buddhist temple to pray or offer, but I am very tolerant. I even opened the ramadan period in Antwerp once, and gave lectures for the Trappisten in Westmalle\(^2\). (laughs) I really wanted to help them finding the deep structure of their religion. But I am always very careful in what I say, never get into a heated discussion, or make bold statements. I just want to point out that there is a deep structure in every religion, because this will make people of different religious background and convictions to come closer to each other and be more tolerant. And I am convinced this attitude of tolerance is something you can develop through studying comparative philosophy. I once sat next to a man in a panel, he was a Muslim, I was talking to him about the subject and then he told me, “We have the

\(^1\) Richard Dawkins is an English ethnologist, evolutionary biologist and author, known for his ardent of the evolutionary biological theory against creationism.

\(^2\) A branch of the Trappist monasteries, famous for their self-brewed beers.
truth” and I replied: “Indeed that is true, but it is a pity we also have it”. (laughs heartily) Of course I later explained him that in my opinion every religion is ‘true’ in a superficial way. I don’t even want to use the word ‘truth’ anymore in a religious context.

Anyway, to come back to the story of my life and the connection with China, since I gave the course ‘comparative philosophy’ only every second year as an additional course, I thought of starting something on my own not affiliated to the university. As you know, the university is quite a slow and rigid bureaucratic system, and I didn’t assume to be able to set up such courses at the university. Then one day I gave a lecture at an established yoga center. Afterwards I was talking with someone of the group and I told him I would like to start my own school but that I was first looking for a very good secretary, because that is crucial when you start a school like that. He told me he would love to be this person. So we started the School of Comparative Philosophy in Antwerp about twenty-two years ago now. Although we had no money, the four people all gave 5000 Belgian Francs (approx. 125 Euro) to start the school with, which we later got back. But we never really got much funding; our students didn’t seem to mind to pay for the courses. Besides, a lot of Dutch people came to our courses. But I sometimes pitied them because they had to come from very far, some of them coming from Groningen. So we started a school in Utrecht too. Both of these schools are still a major success. Even now I still have very good contact with the school in Antwerp but promised myself that before becoming 80, I should really have left, because one does not have the strength anymore to manage such a school, to attend all the meetings and so on. Luckily we have a very good cooperation with the University of Antwerp too. I always hoped it would grow through the Pieter Gillis Foundation. I’ll tell you a little more about that.

Before UFSIA and UIA collaborated to form the UA (University of Antwerp), UFSIA belonged to the Jesuits. So they taught religion there, but UIA wanted to teach philosophy instead, and they appointed me to teach the Eastern part of this course. And of course we had some disagreement with the Jesuits, but finally we won, and that is how the course of ‘Philosophy of Life’ at the University of Antwerp was born, including Christianity as well as Eastern philosophy. So we (nowadays my assistant teaches Eastern philosophy) started teaching Eastern philosophy for this course and it still exists. First there is an introduction course for about 700 students, and about 100 students choose later for Eastern philosophy. So it developed quite well, albeit only at the end of my life (collaboration formed in 2002). Even
today people contact me for my course and for my model, and I still support every one of them, because in the academic world it is difficult to get support. Although I have to say that in the beginning, in our school, most lecturers were from Leuven University, and gradually this changed to professors from Antwerp, Ghent and the Netherlands. Someone who supported me a lot in the beginning was professor Apostel, he was a man with a “reputation”, I didn’t have one.

**Mieke: Was Apostel also interested in Eastern philosophy?**

Prof Libbrecht: He didn’t know anything about that. But the course wasn’t only on Eastern philosophy, it was also about Western philosophy. I needed him though because he had a name and because of that, we broke through. We have a magnificent school now.

**Mieke: So who is running the school now?**

Prof Libbrecht: My former assistant Patricia Konings is now the director, and also teaches my former course. Els Janssens is also deeply involved. They both do their job really well.

**Mieke: And could you explain a little why you feel most affiliated to Buddhism out of all Eastern philosophies?**

Prof Libbrecht: Well I studied the Upanishads and the Vedanta too but I didn’t find it as pure as Buddhism. They still have an *atman* concept, an ego or identity. This is what I found really brilliant in Buddhism, the concept of *an-atman*. And this is also very well reflected in my comparative model, that in mystical experiences there is no *atman*. But Buddhism is still very often misunderstood in Western civilization.

**Mieke: So you were also studying the Vedanta?**

Prof Libbrecht: I studied all of them. One I also found very interesting was the Samkhya philosophy. I have a lot of books about this. And people always ask me when I do all this reading, then I tell them “When you watch TV!” (laughs) TV watching consumes so much of one’s valuable time, but so many people don’t realize that.

**Mieke: What also interests me, is your work about Ferdinand Verbiest?**
Prof Libbrecht: Well, I started this project, a lovely project that I thought would suit me very well because of my mathematical background. But unfortunately I got no funding from the Fathers (of Scheut). I had no money but I collected every document related to Ferdinand Verbiest on the planet. I went to Lisbon, Macau, Beijing and Manila, searching for those documents, and archived all of them. Then it had to be studied of course, and at first I got some help from an assistant, but after some years there was no budget available anymore to appoint him. What I achieved was that still now, the project is being continued by professor Noël Golvers, who is a classicus. He can translate the Latin works, and maybe the Portuguese works. In fact, in Portugal I found over fifty letters written by Verbiest that were unknown, hidden in an archive. The correspondence of Verbiest had been published before the war, but without these letters. I had discovered about these letters, and thus went to Portugal and took an interpreter with me. I really liked the Ferdinand Verbiest project. I cannot say that the correspondence was as interesting as the documents in Portugal, it was really much about the translation itself. But Verbiest had also written a manuscript about all the astronomical instruments he had built. I’ve seen those instruments when I was in Beijing. A long treaty has been written about these instruments and it has been translated by Nicole Halsberghe in her doctoral thesis. It was a very nice project and this was the best achievement, but we couldn’t finish it. We had to leave it to other people. Now the project still exists but on slow pace and they don’t have a sinologist anymore, which is highly regrettable.

Mieke: So all that’s left is the library.

Prof Libbrecht: Yes, most of these books are the books I collected. In the end, I really regretted that I was left without money to do more research.

Mieke: And no translations anymore.

Prof Libbrecht: Well, definitely not from Chinese documents. Verbiest also wrote some texts in Latin, and we published that, together with Golvers. But I wish there was more. The only comfort I had was going back to my philosophy. Over the years I also wrote about twenty-one books. This of course was mainly during my retirement.

Mieke: Well, to come back to China, what do remember about it most vividly?
The first time I was there, people still wore this blue Mao-suit. And the professors only talked about Marxism, really disappointing, however understandable it may be. That of course was very different in Taiwan.

Mieke: When was your first time in China?

Prof Libbrecht: That must have been shortly after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, because everyone still wore the same suits and everyone still talked about Mao and nothing else. However, in most towns, like in Shanghai, and the more South you went, normal dressing re-appeared. But that was not the case in Beijing!

Mieke: Northern China is still slightly more conservative than Southern China. There is this Chinese saying that says “The further from the Emperor (central authority), the more freedom one enjoys”.¹⁴

Prof Libbrecht: Well, I found it really disappointing. Contemporary China still now is really ruled by economy and so on, no-one is really interested in the deeper layer of China. And as soon as Papoea New Guinea becomes the centre of the world, they will all move there.

Mieke: I guess in China it is quite hard to get to the bottom of things.

Prof Libbrecht: Still, modern China has become too important to ignore, also at the university. We graduated in Ghent with only two students. In first bachelor we were four, and two later left. And at that time, I started with Sanskrit, because there was no Chinese in the beginning.

Mieke: One other question was about the Chinese art exhibitions you organized.

Prof Libbrecht: Well, that was with my former doctoral student, Nicole Halsberghe, who is an artist herself. As I said before, she did her doctoral thesis on the long treaty on the astronomical instruments Ferdinand Verbiest had written. This of course was very ‘exact’ sciences, and you also needed knowledge of the state of affairs of sciences in Europe in the 17th century. Fortunately, we got help from a professor in Groningen (Holland), an exact scientist, who in his free time kept himself busy with this period, the Golden Age in the Netherlands. He investigated what was known in the field of technology in this period, so we

¹⁴ 天高皇帝远.
often went to talk with him for detailed information on all these machines and tools. It really was a huge task to translate this.

Anyway, she was closely involved in organizing the two exhibitions: one on three Chinese painters, and one on this extremely long painting of the coast of Taiwan. Really fantastic! This painting was exhibited by spreading it over different walls of the exhibition room. We also had Chinese music performances, which were quite successful. I also got a lot of books from the Taiwanese for our Sinology library. As I already told you, I got along very well with mister Fu from the Taiwanese representation, the cultural attaché. I was often invited by him and he even came home here. I think I was in Taiwan about four times, and really liked it. We once stayed in this huge hotel with red pillars in Taipei, with some five or six restaurants inside. At that time, that was the hotel where diplomats were received at that time. Then I had expressed the wish to see the indigenous inhabitants of Taiwan, and so they took us there by plane! The second time I was in the mountains in Taiwan, there had been a typhoon and everything had collapsed. And of course there is Palace Museum. What a marvel that is!

**Mieke:** And where was this huge coastal painting from?

Prof Libbrecht: Oh well they had delivered this. It was a painting under the direction of Chang Dai-Chien. Let’s go and have a look at it in my study.

(In his study, we are surrounded by huge piles of books. One book that attracts attention is of course the huge work of professor Libbrecht on the study of comparative philosophy. Prof Libbrecht starts to talk about this.)

In this edition, there are more than 7000 footnotes, it really was a gigantic work. Every singly statement is grounded. As a mathematician, I want to prove everything that I say, and if I cannot prove it, I refer to authorities in the field. That is why there are so many footnotes, four thick parts, of which there is also an English version. Actually, I am a mathematician as a scientist, but deep down I am more like a poet.

**Mieke:** Many scientists are in a way, I guess, marveling about the nature of life.

Libbrecht: For me, it was a conscious choice. I was not allowed to go to the university when I was eighteen, but I was allowed to study for (secondary school) a teachers diploma. So I
deliberately chose mathematics, because I felt I became a bit unstable, inclining too much towards sentimentalism, to dreamy-like. But I am most happy whenever I can read Rainer Maria Rilke (laughs). In the evenings, when I am tired, I read poetry.

But to come back to the two art exhibitions – that was why we came to my library for after all. We organized them with the help of the Taiwanese cultural department in Brussels. One exhibition was with the works of three artists, among which the works by Pu Xinyu (1896-1963), who is a cousin of the last Emperor, Puyi, and two others famous artists Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-chien) and Huang Chun-pi. The second exhibition was with this huge coastal painting (shows a picture of the painting). Both exhibitions were very successful.

Mieke: When you talk about the changes in Beijing over the years, well, I guess my generation can’t imagine these changes anymore. You can, because you were there before it became a huge cosmopolitan, you knew it when there were only small alleys instead of the large boulevards now, and the Beijing Hotel was still the only accommodation where tourists were allowed to stay.

Prof Libbrecht: That probably was the place where we slept during our stay.

Mieke: It probably was. Where you there for a congress?

Prof Libbrecht: No, it was a delegation from Leuven whom was invited by the Chinese. That was in the period the Chinese started to get in contact with the rest of the world.

Mieke: Invited by Tsinghua University I assume?

Prof Libbrecht: Yes indeed. I remember the house of Du Fu in Chengdu, which is beautiful by the way. The curator there told me I was the only Westerner since long who knew who Du Fu was. The tourists that visit this place often don’t really know who he is. I knew him because I had read some of his poetry.

Mieke: I guess you read a lot more classic poetry when you were studying Sinology than is now the case.

Prof Libbrecht: Yes, mainly because we focused on ancient China.

Mieke: Do you remember which year you were in Beijing and Chengdu?
Prof Libbrecht: I can’t remember the exact date, but it was one of the congresses of ‘The history of Chinese Sciences’ we had started to organize, and this was the fourth time after Leuven, Hong Kong, Sydney, so it must have been in the mid 1980s. But I also was in Beijing earlier for this Congress on Chinese mathematics, and they were really proud I wanted to come and lecture because they knew my book. Then they asked me if there was something I personally wanted to see. So I asked them if they could show me the birthplace of Confucius, which is in the city of Qufu in Shangdong province. A whole undertaking, I might add. As there was no email, they had been sent a telegram, but apparently the message had not come through, and so they didn’t know we were coming. I remember I had been sleeping on the way to Qingdao and when my wife, the guide and me arrived at the old train station in Qingdao, I thought we had arrived in Germany (Qingdao is a former German colony). So they did not know we would arrive, and we were waiting for somebody to come. Darkness started to fall, and we just had this guide by our side. Eventually, some people took us to a room where we could rest a little more comfortably and after that they brought us to the local university. All in all I was glad I went there. We also went to mountain Taishan. I took the elevator of course, either that or the notorious several 1000 steps\textsuperscript{15}. I also saw people carrying this typical carriage with two wooden bars carrying stones all the way up to the top when it already started to get dark. I really pitied them, but the guide told me I should not say why they should not do that because this is how they make a living. Everything was still very basic at that time. I also went to Emeishan but could not get to the top walking because I had severe gout, so I only did part of it. It was really wonderful! I also brought along a very good guide who knew English well, because in our time our knowledge of modern Chinese was very limited. I remember we once went to a bookshop, and there was a new Chinese-English Dictionary. I asked the guide “Do you have this?” and he replied he could not afford it, so I gave it to him and explained that with this money in Belgium you could not buy anything substantial. I also sent him a book on Europe and music by Mozart which he liked so much, but this all never arrived. It was stolen I suppose. That was a regular practice in those days; everything got lost one way or another. I really questioned the morals of modern Chinese people then, and especially with regard to corruption. Even now, it seems to me time to re-introduce Confucianism.

\textsuperscript{15} Officially 7200 steps including the inner temple steps up to the top, which is the East Peak.
Mieke: Well, that is exactly what they are doing now in contemporary China. Moreover, studies show that Chinese people today are most concerned and angry about the prevailing corruption. They don’t mind to work hard, but if you see what happens with their money and their land, and how other people by bribing others get extremely rich, you get angry of course. Social inequality is a huge problem.

Prof Libbrecht: Yes, indeed the local officials are the worse.

Mieke: Actually, the last five years there were many protests, even against the lack of freedom of speech. People do not take it anymore. If you have nothing left to lose, why stay silent?

Prof Libbrecht: Anyway, to continue the story, we went to China in 1979 I guess (about three years after Mao died). Everything was in ruins as a result of the Cultural Revolution. They also showed us a Buddhist monastery where all the statues were demolished. We had asked to have a look at what had happened during this period, and there we were! They did however, preserve the Tibetan Lama monastery in Beijing, the Yonghegong. This had been defended quite strongly.

Mieke: Now, almost everything looks new; either restored or rebuilt.

Prof Libbrecht: Yes, at that time, in 1979, when they started to get in contact with the rest of the world during the beginning years of Deng Xiaoping, we really felt the frustration of the professors about what had happened during the Cultural Revolution. Now these are the older people, but at that time, they were the young intelligentsia. They also took us to a state-owned enterprise in Shanghai, and proudly told us ‘look at what we achieved’, but of course this was not what we came for. (laughs) But they were proud about those kinds of things. In fact, they really had not much to show us.

We also went to the Great Wall. We were there for this congress and I entrusted my wife to a member of the embassy, the cultural attaché, who already passed away. I asked him if he could take care of her. He wanted to take her to the Great Wall, but halfway the taxi driver didn’t want to drive them there anymore, so they just had to go back. China was very corrupt back then. And I remember spending hours convincing people to let me have a look at some of the works Verbiest wrote. I finally got my hands on them, but I never got to see
the great 17th century works they had in the library with European scientific works there, because it was taken away and put in a private library. But I did get to study some astronomical reports made by Verbiest whom he made for the imperial court. I even had some copies made from it. I didn’t see much else though, nobody wanted to show me, and if I asked them about some works, they told me it vanished. That was the easiest way; everyone always rejected responsibility. It was really hard to get things done at that time. You can imagine that I fell in love with Taiwan after a while, with how smoothly everything went there.

**Mieke:** It is different now but some of those phenomena are quite persistent. The people are different but there still is a lot of ‘indifference’ or lack of engagement.

Prof Libbrecht: Well, when I went to South Africa to see the library of African literature, the curator there didn’t speak a word African and was completely without any knowledge when it came to the books they had. They promote them but they don’t know anything about the subject at hand. Really incompetent people.

Well, I remember once, they brought us to a house, to a Chinese family, with the whole Leuven delegation, and there, we were allowed to ask questions. Of course it was a set up. The family told us they had never been as happy as now under the new regime when obviously they were not. It was a nice house too. But when we were in Sichuan, our guide asked me if I had another wish, and I told him I would like to take a look in one of those small farmhouses. The people were very friendly and offered us tea, but they were very poor. Very simple people, we were probably going to be the subject of conversation throughout the entire year because they had never seen a Westerner. I was very glad I visited them. But you know what they did have? A small television with one channel. (laughs)

**Mieke:** Sichuan still is a relatively poor province.

Prof Libbrecht: The time I spent there in Sichuan on the countryside was the time that I most felt like I was in China. I was also deeply impressed, with everything really, especially with that irrigation project at the Min-river in Dujiangyan, which is over 2000 years old.\textsuperscript{16} They tapped water over there, really quite extraordinary. I also bought a reproduction of a statue

\textsuperscript{16} Dujiangyan is an irrigation infrastructure in Sichuan province built in 256 BC. It is still in use today to irrigate large parts of land in the region.
of the engineer of the project, Li Bing (c. 230 BC), that was excavated at the spot. It is in this region that the earthquake took place too, in 2008 and I don’t know if it is still intact.

**Mieke: What’s very beautiful about Sichuan province is that in the East you have all those rice fields, and in the West, the start of the Himalaya. Also the presence of Tibetans in that area make it special.**

Prof Libbrecht: Yes, I have seen them. I regret never having gone to Tibet, but at that time it was completely forbidden for foreigners. I have also been in Canton in those years, but that is really South-China. For me, that was already the Côte d’Azur of China, it was really remarkable, all the women wearing colored and short trousers and skirts.

**Mieke: And very close to Shenzhen, together with Shanghai the first ‘modernized’, liberalized city after the Mao-period.**

Prof Libbrecht: From Shenzhen, the delegation went to Hong Kong, from which most people flew back home, and I alone continued to Taiwan. I went there for a short period, about a week, just because I really wanted to have a look there. I made sure I could stay with the Fathers of Scheut over there, that was easy for me, I had no idea how to arrange my stay otherwise. They were already in Taipei then. It is actually then that … well, that is another story. I was in Brussels for a Chinese art exposition, and I saw a Belgian nun standing there wearing a crucifix necklace. She turned out to be a good friend of a Buddhist nun exhibiting there at the exhibition. This Buddhist nun-painter was actually the fashi (leader of the monastery) of a monastery located in Taipei. When I visited Taipei later on, I was granted the opportunity to visit that monastery and the whole day I received a very warm welcome and was allowed to ask anything I wanted. I was very happy they did those things for me, because they don’t usually allow strangers in monasteries and especially not in a nunnery.

I’ve actually always been a big fan of Chinese painting, especially from landscape paintings. It resonates with somewhere deep inside me.

(We eat some sweets and drink coffee and professor Libbrecht starts about something else.)

I’ll tell you about an old dream of mine. When I was in Ghent I studied philosophy with Apostel. I loved studying with him because he was a man of science, and not just of literature, just like me. Apostel wanted to establish a postgraduate study called ‘Synthesis-
science’. He wanted to educate philosophers to have a bigger perspective on for instance biology and physics and also a thing or two about quantum physics, all those things. He designed a program for these courses and of course, as is always the case, his colleagues made mock of him, they laughed with him. This was at the time always the case when you were innovative and especially whenever someone engaged in synthetical thinking; it had to be analytical, or strongly methodologically related. And so the program failed, it never broke through. Then in 1985 he received the Solvay-price, and was awarded a high amount of money. With that money, he went to Brussels and started something he called ‘(comprehensive) Worldviews’. I wanted to go there but I lacked the time so I sent someone from our school in Antwerp, Edel Maex. Some rather brief publications resulted from these classes, and for me, it has disintegrated. Apostel is probably one of the most unpractical minds I have ever met. What often happens to people like him is that, soon, their money runs dry. In all his naivety, he probably employed someone, paid him a good salary and many expenses and so on. Such a limited amount of money is soon finished of course, even if it is a big amount. I always regretted that. And since I recently receive quite some requests and letters of interest from scientists in the exact sciences.... Well I just received a book from an Oceanologist from Maastricht, who sent me his book, and is now also coming to our school in Antwerp. He is very interested in synthetical thinking. I am now reading a book of a professor from the engineering and architecture department, so an exact scientist. Well, not a whole lot of people would read his book because it is really pure science. But he also relies on different disciplines. Some time ago, a specialist in veins joined our School in Antwerp, and he told me he was fed up with having to looking at only veins day in day out. He said felt the need for ‘more’ than just his exact science. So I started thinking about the possibility of starting a new kind of group that focused on real scientists who follow the scientific methods, but with an interest in philosophy. Because what we want, is that philosophers take more science into account. That is the only secure base you have. And the reason why for instance sinologists are so often secluded from scientific thinking is because the exact scientists don’t know anything about it. I asked Apostel for advice on whether or not I would include the highest thinking, thinking related to Oriental philosophy in this project, and he answered that this was far too early. Often philosophers don’t know anything about worldviews originating in the exact sciences. I’m a person that always follows science and I believe that you have to have a certain base of astronomy, quantum physics, etc. that seems to me the
only right basis to start philosophical thinking. Therefore I thought of starting up such a course and integrate philosophy and science, and I could take the initiative like my teacher did before. So in such a reading group or think-thank, mathematics would have to find its basics in philosophy.

Mieke: A lot of famous scientists are in fact philosopher, aren’t they?

Prof Libbrecht: They can be philosophers in their own branch. There was a time that philosophers thought they could mess with the methodology of scientists and their areas of knowledge, but that is not possible. There was a course about that in Ghent, called ‘basic principles of philosophy’. It was an extremely complicated course in which I believe I was the only one who took the exams. It was about the basic principles of mathematics. But the mathematicians should not learn this from philosophers; they knew it themselves. In addition, the philosophers could not even follow the exact scientific reasoning. But that was the aim of the course. Look for example at what biologists achieved. In fact, I would go even further and say that I never met anyone who could explain to me in a philosophical way what a differential quotient is. Same question, what is an electron really? You think it is a cloud? There is only an electron cloud which is statistic. One should not say “There is an electron everywhere”, no no, it should be “An electron can be everywhere”. It is an incredibly difficult way of reasoning, and that’s what I want philosophers to seriously take into account.

Mieke: It is actually about the nature of life, whether you look at it in a chemical, mathematical, physical, or other way.

Prof Libbrecht: Yes exactly. I really don’t like those French so-called philosophers.

Mieke: Lots of bla bla bla?

Prof Libbrecht: What did they call themselves? The “postmodernists”! I recently tried again to read some of their works, my goodness!

(During a coffee/tea break, we talk about religion and philosophy and professor Libbrecht’s book called Is God dood? Zoektocht naar de kern van de spiritualiteit? (Is God dead? Quest for the core of spirituality). As he explains, in that book he declares God dead, but it is the God in the Bible that he refers to, which is from Nietzsche’s “Gott ist tot”. Professor
Libbrecht also says that he is a spiritual atheist but that he could never radically discard God or common people’s belief in God, like for instance of his mother. He is just in favor of a gradual but active reduction of every God identity.

Prof Libbrecht: I went to an art exposition about China in Brussels, 4 or 5 years ago. I can’t remember the name though. They showed a cartoon film there. It was about a very simple story, but absolutely wonderful.\(^{17}\) It was so incredibly poetic and it showed us that China is still very much about the past.

Mieke: That was one of the questions I also had for you, because I don’t know in how far you follow what happens in contemporary China. I take great interest in contemporary China but always try to find connections to the past. An outsider might not see all that, he only sees the outside, the glitter, shiny restorations and so on. But he might not see what’s on the “inside” of Chinese society.

Prof Libbrecht: It is been a while since I’ve been there but I strongly had the impression last time when we were visiting a renovated temple in Hangzhou, that it was done just for tourism. That’s the feeling I had. Later when I visited Indonesia, more specifically Borobudur, my guide told me: “Before we visit the site I’ll tell you a thing or two.” He started explaining a lot about Buddhism and when he was ready, he asked me if I understood. I told him I would give him an A+ grade (10/10), and that this was the course I teach myself at the university. (laughs) So he really understood the history of it. But I suppose you should tell me what is left of all this. I haven’t been there for more than twenty years now.

Anyway, you probably start to realize what philosophy means to me. You see that book over there (he points at the book *Crystal and Dragon: The Cosmic Dance of Symmetry and Chaos in Nature, Art and Consciousness* by David Wade). This is also one of the books that put me on the track of Chinese thinking. It is about the natural dynamics. Greek philosophy is static, like a crystal, and Chinese dynamics is the dragon, strong but changing. Crystal is symbolic for searching for the unchanging, while the dragon represents dynamics. Gradually I learnt all about natural dynamics in China; the idea of a dynamic world, I all learnt from my encounters with Chinese cosmology and philosophy.

\(^{17}\) Professor Libbrecht refers to the cartoon film ‘Feeling of mountains and water’ (1988) by Te Wei (1915-2010) who was a Chinese animator and producer of animated films in painterly style. He is probably best known for the short animated film *The Conceited General.*
I’ve done something that almost no one does these days. In search for emotionality, I went all the way back to the 18th century, to the German philosophy such as Schopenhauer. But that sort of romanticism vanished together with Nazi Germany. Nazi Germany in a way destroyed German philosophy. The only thing I would not mind to agree with is that the Germans (Hitler) wanted to make Nietzsche “compulsory literature”. I really regret the fact that they don’t give students his works to read anymore. When I was young, it was still compulsory.

(Then we enter a discussion about the postmodernist philosophers such as Rorty and Habermas, about Hitler, Hegel, all in search for the origin of emotionality…) Prof Libbrecht: I wanted to know what emotionality really is. Later I found out that mysticism is a transcendent emotionality. Emotionality is always focused on the person himself. You need it to survive. Survival depends on your emotions. Then I started to wonder if mysticism was an emotion that wasn’t focused on the person himself. It always points outward. Then I started to understand Buddhism, which in its highest form is ‘emptiness’. For me the deepest aspect of religion is emotionality, but not in a sense of sentimentality, because that is a part of selfishness. I call that ego-intentionality or alter-intentionality. Ego-intentionality refers to emotionality that is directed towards the self, while alter-intentionality means being moved by others, nature… I didn’t invent that though, that’s a part of romanticism. Is it worth something? For me it is. For others? I don’t care. I feel at peace when I can put those things into my model.

However you look at it, in Buddhist religion, there hasn’t been a single religious war. Of course there were other wars, but not involving religion, like Christians or Protestants. That’s the social aspect of Buddhism. If we meditate, we become mild, and if we step out, we can’t operate in conflict models anymore, I can’t do that anymore. I also thank Popper for that18. I learned from him that in a conversation, you always have to assume the other might be right. That’s also why I read almost everything by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Persian philosopher. Sufism was originally Persian, but what I don’t understand is why Nasr never (negatively) commented on the Koran, why he isn’t critical towards those texts, and still considers it as a holy book. I can find holy things in the Bible, but the Bible itself isn’t holy. However, it had,

18 Karl Raimund Popper (1902 –1994) was an Austro-British philosopher and professor at the London School of Economics. He is especially known as a philosopher of science.
and still has, a huge impact on society. There are a lot of stories in it but you can’t make a
philosophy out of it. And there are so many cruelties in the Bible too. I read it all, and with
every cruelty I read, I put a cross next to it. My Bible is like a graveyard, so to speak, full of
crosses. I just don’t understand why the Christians adopted this book as their manifest. Of
course it is because they didn’t have anything else. But I’m sure all of this isn’t a part of your
research on Chinese studies. (laughs) Anyway, I found it important that all philosophers,
apart from their specific specialization, such as those dealing with Eastern philosophies,
adopt an open-minded attitude and come to some kind of gesamtansicht, both in their
worldview and in their view on mankind, and that they keep far away from so-called holy
books.

Mieke: Well most Eastern philosophies are quite good at that.

Prof Libbrecht: That is also how I became attracted to Sinology. Concretely, I started like
everyone I guess, with Arthur Wailey’s German translation of the Daodejing (48:40). I didn’t
know it was a translation from English, I bought it in Germany back then. I was in the army at
the time and I was so impressed by that. Even though I didn’t understand some parts, it was
still magical to me. I thought to myself, if ever read a book at my deathbed, that would be it.
I read other translations too, when I was a teacher, but they were so different from one
another. I wondered how that was possible, and I thought if I would understood Chinese I
could understand these differences, but that was already later. The great thing was that I
understood a lot of it, intuitively, so that I even thought ‘This is a world I want to live in’. This
text contains so many beautiful passages and stories. But I also thought that I would only
fully understand its meaning if I became a Daoist myself, if I cultivated a Daoist sentiment
inside. And this made me a lover of nature. I grew up on the countryside, and for us nature
was evident, it was our habitat without real conscious appreciation. But through studying
Daoism, I became more conscious of it. I even became an ardent member of the Wielewaal,
a Belgian organization in favor of nature. It brought me closer to a reality that I had never
known before, that is, back to a natural life. And that is how it started for me, through the
Daodejing.
Mieke: Another thing I was curious about, is whether you still have any contacts or people you know that brought you in contact with China? Chinese contacts or people from the University of Leuven?

Prof Libbrecht: No, not really. I blame it on my age. I would also say that a lot of them aren’t alive anymore. Schipper\(^{19}\) is still alive I believe. Dirk De Jong (Classical Chinese) is dead too. My promoter Hulsewé too, after a while there’s no-one left. I don’t have Chinese contacts either, that ended about ten years ago. It disappears, mainly because I left the university. No, for me that period is over, and now I can focus more on comparative thinking. These days, Chinese studies take a very small part in my life.

Mieke: Who is your favorite contact in China or Taiwan from the past?

Prof Libbrecht: From the period of communist China I would say that I didn’t have any particular contact, mainly because you couldn’t keep in touch with them for a long period, and they didn’t speak English either. Besides, they haven’t read a lot due to the intellectual restrictions during the Communist era. Everything was very complicated and time-consuming at that time, during the 80s. In Taiwan however, I had some very good contacts. I have great memories of Taiwan. A lot of students from the University of Leuven went to Taiwan because they generously award scholarships. At that time, there were almost no scholarships for mainland China. When we were invited to a congress in China, we usually had to pay everything ourselves. In Taiwan everything went smoothly, it felt like home to me. In mainland China, I felt like the business world dominated everything, and I could not and did not want to participate in that. There was a professor of my age however who had good contacts in mainland China, a professor who gave Chinese law and economics, Sylvain Plasschaert (see also other interview). And a Dutch lady who already had a degree in law, Jacoba Hanenburg. She had graduated under my supervision.

Mieke: Now if you would look back at your academic career and all the things you learnt, what would you advise people who start Chinese studies now.

\(^{19}\) Kristofer Schipper (1934 –...) is a Dutch sinologist. He is an emeritus professor of Oriental Studies at Leiden University, where he was appointed in 1993. Schipper is also appointed at the Sorbonne, Religious Studies, in Paris. He also teaches at Fuzhou University and Zhangzhou College. He is an authority in the field of Daoism.
Libbrecht: Well, it depends on what they want to do with it. My fellow student Erika de Poorter continued with Japanese and went to Leiden later on. But it really depends on what you like to do. I always hated the way they compared us with the interpreter school. That is something completely different from studying to gain a deep knowledge about a culture. Also in Leuven at the time, they wanted me to give more modern Chinese courses, but it is always the people who are at the periphery who shout loudest. That is because they want to use it for some specific purpose, such as commercial reasons. If they would ever combine it again, Chinese studies and interpreter Chinese, that would really be a disaster.

Mieke: In the same line: what book or reference work would you recommend students or people in general who want to learn about China? What should a student Sinology read before he graduates, such as a general reference work to grasp the core of China?

Prof Libbrecht: That’s a very difficult question! You mean a book that I was inspired or impressed by? I would certainly make them read on the history of China, such as the series *Science and Civilization* by Joseph Needham. In fact in our times, we read a lot of German and French books such as *Geschichte der Chinesischen reichen* by Alfred Forke, Henri Maspero (1882-1945) and Etienne Lamotte (1903-1983), Marcel Granet, Alain Peyrefitte. A good but thorough introduction to China remains to be *The Cambridge History of China*, which is very detailed. Perhaps some work of Johann Gotfriedd Eichhorn. That’s the best one for religion, also because my last years of teaching, I had to give a course on Chinese religion, which I was not too fond of! And then there was of course Feng Youlan. But still, these are old books, books that were read in my times. There probably are books as good as those now, or even better, especially on contemporary China. In a second phase there were the books by American sinologist such as Chan Wing-tsit, Jonathan Spence and Roger Ames. Actually I have known Ames for quite some time. We met at several occasions in Taiwan, Hawaii and Hamburg. He once visited Leuven and I introduced Carine Defoort to him, who later went to study Comparative Philosophy at the University of Hawaii. And of course there are the works of (Wilt) Idema, who is famous for his work on Chinese literature, and Kristofer Schipper’s work on Daoism. Actually, the books on modern China, I started to read because I had to teach Chinese history, and that meant going as far as the reform period of Deng Xiaoping.
If you would ask me the same question about Buddhism, then I would not hesitate; that would be *Buddhist Logic* written by Stcherbatsky\textsuperscript{20}. Of course, this appealed to my ‘logic’ inclination. Reading that was my first step in really understanding Buddhism. I had read a lot already, but really understanding it, is what this book helped me with. I had started a comparative study between Daoism and North-American Indians and discovered that to some degree, native American Indians have things in common with Daoism, both relying strongly on nature. When I went to the US, I met an Indian who was a professor of Indian Affairs at the State University of Michigan. I asked him what was a reliable reference work for native American Indian philosophy, because there was a lot of romantic literature concerning Indians too. So he sent me a list with works, his own work on top. First professor, than Indian. (laughs heartily) Later, I also started reading about African philosophy, and just this last New Year, I received some books about it. I don’t know a lot about that subject though. I had a heated discussion with a German professor who was teaching at the University of Rotterdam, and who was always angry with me because I never took into consideration African philosophy in my courses. But that was because firstly I had to limit myself, and also because I didn’t know any decent work on African philosophy. I said there isn’t any African writing that I can relate to. [.....] I love Buddhism and Daoism because it is the most extreme philosophy, as well as the Greek philosophy, and that is how I started to take these three for developing a comparative model.

So to conclude, China occupies only a third of the story of my life. It was a story in which I have been looking for similar concepts about nature in the West, for instance in Romanticism. There are a couple of Americans whom inspired me too, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)\textsuperscript{21} and Ralph Waldo Emerson\textsuperscript{22}. Through them, I started to investigate what nature meant in the West, which place it occupied in Western thinking, in comparison with in Daoism, and I was a little disappointed by that. Apart from German Romanticism, these two American figures and some native North-American philosophy, I did not find much relation to nature. And that is why I still feel more affiliated with Chinese philosophy.

\textsuperscript{20} Fyodor Theodore Stcherbatsky (1866 1942) was a Russian Indologist who has been extremely influential in laying the foundations in the Western world for the scholarly study of Buddhist philosophy.

\textsuperscript{21} Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was a leading figure in the Transcendentalist movement of the mid-19th century. He is best known for his novel *Walden*, a reflection upon two years and two months of retreat into nature.

\textsuperscript{22} Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the leader of the Transcendentalist movement in the US.
Mieke: Well, thank you very much for this interview! It was very interesting, and I enjoyed it very much. I hope you also enjoyed it.