

(written for a student who was wondering)

What is the red thread in my research?

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Published research

This is a difficult question, and it is of course something that I sometimes ask myself. The first thing to keep in mind is that I did not write or think up my work in its sequence of publication. I will not put in the full references, but you can find them easily on my website. But I do think there is in fact quite a lot of coherence!!

- A. My first interest was how **local temple cults organize, structure local society**. This dates back to my first visits to Taiwan in 1980 and 1983, and my student days in Japan in 1982-1984, and was inspired by the same body of Japanese literature that was used by Prasenjit Duara in his first book (1988 on Chinese temple religion as a cultural nexus for society). I commented on the manuscript of Valerie Hansen's first book (1990) based on that research (hence my own work got superseded or delayed), but my articles on Fujianese temple cults (1990) and local communities and their religious societies (SCEAR 1995) were early results, in 2016 I published a kind of summary of the field as well. My Guan Yu book (2017, and articles in 1999 and 2011) goes back to this period, although I did loads of additional research, reading and thinking during the early 2010s for it as well. My 2019 article on King Tang fits in this group, although the research was all new in the mid-2010s and not based on my work in Japan. The direct trigger for this article was a conference and my memories of reading parts of late Ming local gazetteers as a student in Japan.
- B. In the same period in Japan I got interested in **"shamans" (wu)** as the prime vehicle of bidirectional communication between the divine world and us (unlike dreams, moon blocks etc.). A "shaman" allows you to ask questions. I did not write that much on the topic (beyond my online bibliography), but it never went out of my head. In 2019 I published an article giving my first limited insights, and it will turn up in my fear of witches book. Hopefully I can incorporate it in my social history of Chinese religious culture book.
- C. In 1980-1981 I followed a Master seminar on Western antisemitism in which my social history professor Dik van Arkel outlined a theory on why some cultures have and others have not become antisemitic. He was extremely inspired and inspiring. Unlike frequent stereotyping of Jews and unlike antisemitic accusations, he did not explain it from the Jews or their culture/religion itself. Instead I distinguished the factors, stereotyping, social distance (causing stereotypes to persist and worsen) and terrorisation (so people who do not want to discriminate, are forced by their surroundings to do so). This inspired me to come up with an explanation for the term **White Lotus Teachings as a label** (accompanied by stereotypes) for religious phenomena that the state/officials/educated elites (including top monks) do not like. I realized that primary sources were extremely prejudiced and constructed a phenomenon that did not actually exist as a social organization in the first place, but only as something imagined, as an elite fear. This became my PhD dissertation (1992 book), to which I have returned in a book on the Non-Action Teachings in 2014 (sort of the Ming Qing continuation of the historical White Lotus movement as devotional Amitabha beliefs, also articles in 2009 and 2012 which were superseded by the 2014 book), as well as articles in 2001, 2003, 2013, 2015 (2x), 2018, 2019 (2x), 2020, 2021 and ongoing. This body of

work combines a study of lay Buddhism with an attempt to understand pejorative labelling, which I like to think of as an attempt to demythologize so-called “heresy” in the Chinese context. My article on the Japanese *burakumin* (1990) was inspired by the same social history professor. My book on the fear of witches takes up ideas from my PhD period (pejorative labelling) as well as an interest in “shamans” (2019). My social history professor was also interested in the topic, for similar reasons, though he did not publish on it. Behind it all is perhaps also the religious tradition from which I come (even though no longer a believer myself), namely Calvinist traditions (Huguenots) which were persecuted to death in southern France in the 16th and 17th century. My father’s side is ordinary traders from the east of the Netherlands which moved to Arnhem and then Amsterdam in the 18th century, already as Protestants. I come from the trader branch. On my mother’s side there is a lineage that moved from Germany and several descent lines of Huguenots which fled from France in the late 16th century. One of those lines was quite rich, but lost its possessions in France as a result. The overall family became urban managers, such as legal specialists and sometimes politicians. So here is family history weighing in on my research.

- D. From my interest in the labelling of sociologically different religious phenomena (lay Buddhism, messianic and millenarian beliefs, rumours, sexual practices a.o.) with a single pejorative label and attaching stereotypes to it, I developed **an interest in labels more generally and in the history of our field** (which created these labels). This then coincided with the need to provide histories of Sinological studies in Europe for various occasions. See 2014 (Dutch Sinology), 2016 (term Confucianism), 2019 (the term Buddhism, sadly in Dutch), and an article on Duyvendak that is still in press. My article on the Gelaohui in 1993 also takes up the issue of labelling, it is sadly largely ignored because it is too much against existing research. Abolishing a phenomenon is not academically welcome.
- E. Likewise the (limited) expertise on messianic and millenarian traditions that I acquired for my PhD (1992) made me look at the Chinese Triads from the perspective of messianic and millenarian groups, when I came across sources on them after an invitation to an AAS conference in New Orleans in 1991 (which was largely prompted by someone else not being able to participate and me filling in at a late moment, so much for the role of coincidence in doing research). In the early 1990s I was single and somewhat mobile thanks to postdoc research funds (as well as enough salary to pay for babysits, and most helpful parents), so I was able to go to Taiwan, HK and China to visit ritual performances and other religious practices in the field itself. This became my Triads book (1998, with one follow up article in 2002). The inspiration for my article from 2000 on the importance of incense burning derives from this fieldwork. For me the contributions in this book are a **detailed study of vernacular ritual (part 1), of the demonological messianic paradigm (part 2) and the question whether people (need to) understand the ritual they practice or participate in more distantly (part 3)**. As for the last question, the answer is that this is the wrong question. I have continued along the same line of interpretation in my 2014 book, where I also raise doubts about the need for believers to have a doctrinal understanding of their beliefs.
- F. From my discovery of the demonological messianic paradigm in connection with the Triads, I developed a separate interest in the way of **which “violence” co-shapes a culture**, in my case Chinese culture. This was a topic that until 9/11/2000 received very little attention, we even got turned down for a grant in Sweden as inciting to violence (sic!). I published articles on the topic over the years (1996/7, revised version 2002; 2000, 2011, 2013, 2023) and one booklet (2019). Ideas also pop up in other articles of course and I maintain an online bibliography on the topic.
- G. A total **coincidence is my interest in Yao studies** (only one article in 1998 and the online bibliography). I knew about it, but until a Dutch tourist guide passed by my office in 1993

when I was a postdoc in Leiden I have never seen their texts. I had one PhD on this topic, Chen Meiwen (now at Furen daxue), and was able to help Eli Alberts on his work as well, but did not follow up because I wanted to do the fieldwork that belongs to these texts and my family situation did not allow it. Luckily others have done so in the meantime, as can be found on my Yao website.

- H. My 2006 book on rumours developed directly from my PhD (1992, which has several chapters on rumours that were labelled as White Lotus Teachings). This as well as my discovery of the demonological messianic paradigm (which is primarily an oral phenomenon, with texts only relevant as a secondary phenomenon, see my 1998 book) made me read up on the history of orality and textuality. I started maintaining an online bibliography on these topics (broadly defined), and published some largely ignored **articles on orality and textuality** (2012, 2015 [2x], 2021, 2022). My present project on the social and cultural history of sound and silence takes up these ideas again.
- I. An important source of articles with most scholars **is spin-off, in other words bit of material that you come across (or even draft chapters) that do not fit in the original project**. One could describe my article on the Gelaohui (1993) in that way as well (although in those years I had also just started on the Triads), but certainly my article on the Yongzheng emperor as a lay Buddhist (Chan in fact, not Tibetan) using sources that had been overlooked; this article as well as two articles on the Buddhist sangha in the Qing (2016 and 2020) stem from a book that I wrote in the late 1990s but never published. That also happens.
- J. Sometimes you get **invited to write survey articles, but** these are usually related to my other topics and triggered by editors who have found that you work on a given topic (2011, 2016, 2018, 2022, 2023 [2x]). I leave out contributions to encyclopaedias and book reviews, which work according to a similar formula. I would not advise this kind of thing for early career scholars, who need to publish research articles, but for me these are occasions to order my thoughts without full-blown reading of primary sources. What my survey will not tell you is the articles that I was asked to do and did not write, usually because it did not fit in very well in the amount of time I had available (especially when the children were small). Sometimes I have also taken an article back because I disagreed (too much) with the editors. This includes a completed bibliographical article on secret societies (never published), perhaps a big survey article on the study of inscriptions (still negotiating with the editors, so there still is hope), and a big article for a survey history that the editor apparently did not like (he did not tell me, but he did invite others to do the same work). This last article was also much too long, more like a book, and I have published parts of it over the years (see item I above).
- K. Similarly, I got invited to **write reports**, basically because I had done the website on the Falun Gong which was read at the time by anybody who needed more background and before proper book-length studies had appeared. In research terms this was a waste of time (since they were not published and produced almost no spin-off either). But they got me some money at a good moment in time. They can be found as downloads on my website, section on publications (one report for the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees and one for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Buza)).
- L. I often **experimented with new ideas in my teaching**, since the early 2010s also and especially in summer (or winter) courses for MA and PhD students interested in Buddhism. As you can see from my list of lectures and teaching, I often take non-Buddhist or not quite-mainstream Buddhist topics that later turn up in books or articles. In that respect age-mandated retirement this year is something of a let-down and I will miss my teaching.

Evidently, I am leaving out my future research here, since I do hope to continue as long as I can and my health allows.

How I got started

A common question from those outside the field of Chinese studies, especially friends and relatives, is why I studied Chinese. It is really a coincidence, since I originally wanted to do Egyptology. I always stress that I am in good company, for Erik Zürcher too started out in that field, but shifted to Sinology within a week or two. I did so even earlier. When the decision was upon me to choose my final subjects for the Gymnasium α (Alpha humanities track) at the age of 15, the alternative topic of Chinese studies came up, since "that culture still existed, at least." The best friend of my father was a historian (and himself the son of Holland's first Egyptologist!) and a fellow student of his was a BA ("kandidaats" in Sinology as well as the Sinological Institute librarian (later its history teacher until my first year). A visit to that institute was organized. My mother's father knew a full Sinologist, a former merchant navy captain who had studied Sinology during the Second World War, but had worked on the "Paketsvaart" merchant navy in the Far East before the War. A further meeting was organized and I made my choice, now more than half a century ago (spring of 1974). I picked six languages and history, we were not allowed to do more in my school. More importantly, I could drop mathematics. Much too sloppy for that.

In the meantime I started buying books and collecting paper cuttings from the old newspapers and journal (Time and Newsweek especially) that my younger brother was collecting massively to sell as old paper. He was always the business man. As a result I became familiar with China's sad, and then still recent history, of the 1960s and early 1970s. Corpses floating down Pearl River. So I never studied China out of Maoist admiration (how could I, coming from a conservative liberal bourgeois household), but out of a fascination with history and strange scripts. I could not be disappointed, at least not in ideological terms.

In September 1976 the big day arrived and I started on a gruelling program of learning Chinese, Japanese (from the spring semester onwards) and Classical Chinese (from the second year onwards). The first semester was difficult, partly because the teaching was disorganized (the crown on my troubles being a teacher who refused to explain the aspect 了, because it was too difficult. It reminds me of stories of Chinese teachers in English secondary schools who do not care about tones, since their students cannot do it anyhow. In addition I was getting used to living away from home and membership of a time-consuming students' organization. Luckily, a new language teacher arrived in the spring semester (James Liang) and I was saved. On the whole, the university was a great time since I finally felt normal intellectually. I was still a bookish nerd (and that sometimes came to hound me), but at least I was like many others.

I was lucky to get selected for the one year scholarship to China in 1979 and left for a whole year in late August. It was quite a challenge, no email or Skype and no phone calls, just letters that took at least a week or more to travel one way, meaning my parents received the first news a month after I had left. They were from the old days, so they were somewhat worried, but not toooo stressed (although my mother still talks about it as of 2024). It was an eventful year, and maybe I will be able to write things up using my diary (until February 1980), photographs and (deceitful) memories. Academically it was important, since it demotivated me to do modern China, as the stories about the recent past were simply too dramatic. Moreover, at home it was still very sensitive among left wings intellectuals to talk critically about the Maoist past (do not forget that Mao had died more or less at the same time as I started studying Chinese, as well as the earthquake of Tangshan of course). When I started teaching Chinese history in 1987, it was equally sensitive to talk about the Dutch colonial past though, which I usually combined with talking about the Maoist period, in order to make a point

about the victims of regime change, colonization, imperialism, and the historians' fear to talk about such issues.

My China year was strange for many reasons. We gathered at the Democracy wall at Xidan, which we thought was exciting, making light of the secret police taking pictures. I for one had little sensitivity to what was going on. When there was a strike of people who did not want to go to Shenyang, I did not even know about it and went. Incidentally, everybody else just came later, so the strike just kept people in Beijing for longer. I had a good time in Shenyang, except for illnesses (especially when limiting myself to the meals the Chinese got, which weakened my resistance for their lesser quality than the food we got as foreigners) and loneliness at times. I was forced to speak Chinese, at first mostly because I was the only foreign student. Later one male Japanese, and two women (Overseas Chinese and Italian, former Mao sympathizer) came, but I had contact only with the Japanese student. Since he only spoke Japanese and Chinese, and at the time my spoken Japanese was limited to the odd word or so, we spoke Chinese as well. Indeed, except for the French who came still later (with whom I spoke French) we spoke Chinese among each other. I only discovered the name of one of the Australians many years later, or rather 梅約翰 found out that 田海 really was Barend ter Haar and wrote to me in the late 1990s (sic!) that he was John Makeham. Apart from improving my modern and classical Chinese, I travelled in the winter holidays (some 36 cities had been opened up to foreigners that year and I saw nine of them) and saved enough money to go to Taiwan in the summer.

Visiting Taiwan was crucial to understanding the crucial place of religious culture in traditional society. I just had to put open my ears and there would be something religious resounding in the distance! Such a difference with the mainland, already in 1980 when martial law was still there. I was also able to buy a number of pirated Sinological tools and handbooks which I have kept and used until things became digital in the 2000s and 2010s. I was still too afraid to burn incense (on this topic see ter Haar 2000, "Teachings with Incense") that took another ten years, in the early 1990s when I finally came my Protestant inhibitions. But I did see scores of temples of most religious backgrounds, including the still illegal Yiguandao.

Thanks to a Mombusho (Ministry of Education) scholarship I could go to Japan for two whole years in 1982-1984. Again no internet and no phones, so lonely at times. It was difficult to meet Japanese, even more so than Chinese a few years before (but they had the excuse of three decades of anti-foreign campaigns behind them. When I finally did meet local people I got up in more complicated human relationships that I had ever anticipated. I did vastly improve my Japanese and got to know a lot about Japanese religious culture, especially the lay Buddhist movement of the Soka Gakkai (never a member, but my then family-in-law was). At Kyushu University I was made welcome as a member of the 東洋史研究室 and generally had a great time there. One of my hobbies in Kyushu (during my year in Fukuoka) was visiting Shinto shrines by racing bike. This came in handy after I had specialized in the social history of religious culture in China, since it allowed me to distinguish between what was Japanese and what was Chinese, also in the Japanese language literature. I also made another visit to Taiwan. Whereas Taiwan had looked very orderly after I came from the mainland through Hong Kong in the summer of 1980, now it looked terribly chaotic coming from Japan. Perspective makes all the difference in what one sees and experiences! During half a year of visiting libraries in Tokyo, I got to see scores of really old books, the oldest one a Yuan edition of Hong Mai's *Yijianzhi* (I eventually wrote an article on this source, though not this edition, in 1993).

With hindsight my choice of a PhD topic in new religious movements and their misconstruction by Chinese elites as the White Lotus Teachings may seem extremely logical. In reality, I originally went to Japan to do the social history of Chinese science and technology. I was interested in what used to

be called the Needham question, but I solved it to my own satisfaction and got drawn into Ming social history thanks to my then supervisor Kawakatsu Mamoru. Eventually, I could use what I learned from and through him in combination with my interest in religious history to write my PhD dissertation.

In 1991 I received a postdoc that provided a lot of extra money to travel to the Far East. During these visits to the field I was able to witness lots of ritual practice, annual festivals, and ritual theatre/theatrical ritual. Although I have always remained a historian, being able to re-imagine what is written in a few words in the sources with the experience of these various visits to Taiwan, Hong Kong and southern China has been a tremendous enrichment of my analytical capabilities. Such as they are. I was also able to finance a longer trip back to Japan, collecting materials for future projects (including the Gelaohui article from 1993 and my Triads book, as well as stuff that still has to result in a book or article—who knows). ON the side, I collected experiences of various sorts staying in two Buddhist temples with priests who lived of performing rituals (funerary as well as protection).

More recently, I was again able to spend longer periods of time in the Far East and I hope to continue to do so for some time. Each time, I learn from the local people and the local colleagues in ways that I did not anticipate. Life is too short, but I hope I can still repay them with good research.