

Anonymous Chinese painter, Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest (Collection of Stichting van Braam Houckgeest).
Reproduced from Leonard Blussé, *Visible Cities: Canton, Nagasaki, and Batavia and the Coming of the Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).



Andreas Everardus Van Braam Houckgeest, or the Optimistic Adventures of a Dutchman in China

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The genre of traditional biography, written for the sake of celebrating the lives of admirable persons who may serve as role models for later generations, has by now almost faded away, and with it we may say farewell to the most hypocritical genre that history writing has bequeathed upon us. If we ignore the ongoing predilection of the boulevard press for the 'scandalous lives' of media figures and movie stars, it may be agreed that biographies are now primarily written (and read) because of the light they throw on interesting events in times past that we would not be able to understand without following the *faits et gestes* of individuals who played a role in them. One colourful individual who has received much flak from moralists, contemporaries and biographers of contemporaries of his, but who deserves the attention of anyone interested in the history of the China trade, is the rotund Dutchman Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest (1739-1801). Van Braam spent his life seeking to build a fortune as an entrepreneur and as a critical observer of 'things Chinese' while serving off and on as a Dutch East India Company servant at Canton in the latter part of the 18th century. Although after a life

of many ups and downs he passed away, at the age of sixty-two, a destitute man, leaving behind hardly any material means for his young wife and baby boy, it cannot be denied that he lived an interesting life in very interesting times.

Proud of his writings and the objects he collected during his adventurous career abroad, Van Braam would undoubtedly be happy to know that these memorabilia are treasured today in various locations. In the Dutch National Archives at The Hague we may find his personal writings as well as those of his brother, Vice-Admiral Jacob Pieter Van Braam;¹ at President George Washington's estate, Mount Vernon, throngs of tourists admire the china service which he presented to Martha Washington; and recently the *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam acquired from his American descendants some Chinese furniture from the now-demolished mansion that he built for himself by the banks of the Delaware River after his return to America in 1796. Finally, historians still regularly refer to the fine narrative of the tribute mission he undertook to the court of the Qianlong emperor in 1794-95 at the behest of the Dutch East India Company, first published in French in Philadelphia and later republished in Europe in cannibalized versions in English, French and Dutch.² Van Braam would probably be also pleasantly surprised to learn that Edward Barnsley, a great-great grandson through his eldest daughter, has written a family history of him and his offspring in America and Holland.³

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Two pieces of the china service presented by Van Braam Houckgeest to Martha Washington.

This extraordinarily detailed study, which Barnsley wrote with great enthusiasm after he retired from public life in the 1980s and 90s, has unfortunately been published in a very limited edition only for his own family and a few local libraries and is therefore, except for one copy in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum library, unavailable outside the United States. (The present author is still pulling his own hair out of frustration that he did not know about

Mr. Barnsley's existence while he was doing research at Princeton in 1990. Van Braam Houckgeest's great-great-grandson, a much esteemed local historian, was living only several miles away across the Delaware River). The present notes on Van Braam are a collage of information from the archival documents in Holland, his own writings and the various materials that his great-great-grandson was able to tease out of the local archives in the United States.

Like his older brother, Jacob Pieter van Braam (1737-1803), who was to become an admiral later in life, Andreas joined the navy as a cadet; but he then left the service at the age of nineteen and joined the VOC, the Dutch East India Company. The directors of the Company, known as the Gentlemen Seventeen, in view of improving the quality of tea imports, had just started a new, direct shipping connection between Amsterdam and Canton. Until then all the VOC's trade with China had been managed from Batavia, the Company's headquarters in Asia. Although in 1727, a similar move to create a direct shipping link had been made to thwart competition from the Flemish Ostende Company, the trade soon returned to Batavia after this rival had been done away with.

But in 1755, Amsterdam reached the conclusion that too much pilfering was going on in the East and decided to take the Chinese tea trade into its own hands. The Company found that the new trading

link soon paid off, and, to the chagrin of the colonial administration in Batavia, the 'Chinasche Commissie' in Amsterdam would not slacken its grip on the trade with Canton until the demise of the Company itself in 1797. Hired by the China Commission, Andreas Everardus Van Braam travelled regularly back and forth between Canton and Amsterdam to report on the activities in China; and on his second trip home, in 1763, he stopped at the Cape of Good Hope to marry Catharina Cornelia Gertruida, Baroness Van Reede van Oudtshoorn, third daughter of the governor of the Cape colony.

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As we are still awaiting further publication of the diaries that were kept at the Dutch Canton factory starting in the early 1760s, it is hard to learn more about Van Braam's daily activities.⁴ In the only journal published so far, we witness him as an assistant testing the quality of tea and doing all sorts of errands. But in a recent monograph on the Dutch tea trade in Canton, Liu Yong gives a vivid account of the man's inventive character and improvisational genius.⁵ In the summer of 1772, the VOC ship *Rijnsburg* foundered in a typhoon on the Chinese coast. Apart from the loss of lives and goods on board that ship, the Canton factory staff faced additional problems because it was feared that there was

Catharina Cornelia Geertruida van Braam Houckgeest, glass.
Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

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not enough cargo space left to ship the tea off to Europe. Van Braam, who was by then serving as Supercargo, went to see the governor of Macao and asked him if he would sell a ship he owned. When the governor agreed to sell, Van Braam inspected the vessel and, after some further negotiation, bought it for 38,000 Spanish rials. As soon as the transfer had taken place, Van Braam prepared to sail the ship, which he had renamed the *Herstelder* (the Repairer), to the Whampoa roadstead. But there he underestimated the reaction of the local Chinese mandarin or *hoppo*, who haughtily informed him that he would not let in a foreign ship which had no cargo to tax and which had originally been owned by a Macao resident. The tug-of-war that followed between Van Braam, the Macao Senate, the Macao governor, the *hoppo* in Macao and the Chinese authorities in Canton forms a textbook example of bureaucratic wrangling on the China coast. But in the end, through a skilful combination of patient negotiation, veiled threats and unexpected action, Van Braam got his way, and the ship was allowed into Sesame cave.

One year later, after spending a total of fifteen years at Canton, Van Braam decided that he had amassed enough fortune to return home and live a rentier's life with his wife and children at a country estate near the old Hansa town of Zutphen (Province of Gelderland). Setting himself up as a country squire of sorts, he added the name of a possession of his father-in-law, Houckgeest, to his name. And, restless person that he was, he soon found himself embroiled in factional local politics. He joined the faction of reformers that later became known as the "Patriots" and aimed to topple the local governing elites. Inspired by the revolutionary events on the other side of the Atlantic, and probably bored to death on his country estate, Van Braam emigrated in 1783 with his wife and five children to the United States, where he settled in Charleston, South Carolina, as a merchant and rice farmer, and acquired the American nationality. Shortly after the family's arrival, four of his children fell ill and died in a diphtheria epidemic. Only his eldest daughter, who married the independence war hero Richard Brooke Roberts, survived. When Van Braam's agricultural business, which was inspired by the Chinese practice of riziculture, also folded, he and his wife chose to return home. As a result of this personal tragedy, which greatly affected his wife, the marriage also seems to have broken up. Probably thanks to the help of his brother Jacob Pieter, who enjoyed a meteoric

career, rising from navy Captain to Counsellor of the Indies and finally to Vice Admiral of the Navy, Andreas was able to enter VOC service again as Supercargo in Canton, where he arrived in 1790.

On the way to China he spent some time in Malacca, where he wrote an interesting report on tin production and the tin trade and how it could be reformed to the benefit of the Company.⁶ Convinced that the Company was no longer able to enforce the tin monopsony which was being bypassed on all sides by English and American country traders, Van Braam advocated a more liberal trade policy. Upon his arrival in the Pearl River region, Van Braam found that a lot had changed since his departure twenty years earlier. The English competition was now stronger than ever in the tea trade, but to his delight he discovered many American ships anchored at Whampoa. He figured that he could make himself a lot of (illicit) money helping out his American fellow citizens by procuring tea through the well-established channels of the Dutch East India Company. Thanks to Barnsley's research, we know that in addition to his VOC duties, Van Braam bought or loaded at least seven American ships for private trade during the years 1792-1795.⁷ The famous American navigator and travel writer Amasa Delano also refers to a business deal with Van Braam, although he seems to have lost a great sum of money in that venture.⁸

Like all other Company officers, during the trading season Van Braam lived in the comfortable Dutch factory, situated next to the English factory outside the walls of Canton; but in spring and summer he would move to nearby Macao. There he must have learned to play the guitar, and acquired a tender spot for Portuguese songs. His American grandson remembered later how his grandfather would occasionally withdraw from public and softly sing Portuguese songs while accompanying himself on strings. The Portuguese language obviously also attracted Van Braam's interest, for he wrote a grammar for those who wanted to learn the language. Both the manuscripts of his article on the Malacca tin trade and of the Portuguese grammar are proudly depicted in the portrait he commissioned from a local Chinese painter.

As head of the Canton factory, in 1793 Van Braam witnessed the coming and going of the Macartney embassy to the court of the Qianlong Emperor, and was quite relieved that the British were not able to get hold

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of an island of their own in the Canton delta as they had envisaged. Yet the failure of the English mission did not discourage him from drafting an adventurous plan of his own. He knew that VOC ambassadors had visited the Qing court on several occasions in the 17th century and had produced beautifully illustrated works which had been published and turned into best-sellers by the then famous publishing house of Van Meurs in Amsterdam.⁹ He decided the time was ripe to make such an interesting trip through China himself, and therefore he wrote a letter to the Governor-General and Council of the Indies in Batavia informing them that the Viceroy of Canton had invited all western trading nations to send an envoy to the Qianlong Emperor to congratulate him on the sixtieth anniversary of his reign. His gamble worked out, but not altogether as he had hoped. The Dutch colonial administration at Batavia accepted his proposal, but instead of appointing Van Braam Houckgeest himself they delegated Isaac Titsingh as first ambassador and Van Braam as second envoy. Titsingh (1745-1812), the *éminence grise* of the Council of the Indies, was a man with considerable experience in India and before that in Japan, where he had paid several tribute visits to the shogunate in Edo.¹⁰

The embassy to the Qing court has not only been elaborately described by Van Braam Houckgeest himself, but also by Titsingh, who kept his own diary, as well as by a young Frenchman, C. L. J. de Guignes, who joined the embassy on the invitation of Titsingh, a good friend of his father, the famous orientalist Joseph de Guignes (1721-1800).¹¹ In 1938, the Dutch sinologist J. J. L. Duyvendak wrote an extensive article about the trip to the court, based on sparse Chinese documentation, Van Braam's book and Titsingh's manuscript which he had at hand.¹²

The beginning of the voyage to the Chinese capital was not at all what the two aging envoys had envisaged. After Titsingh disembarked in the autumn of 1794, a letter was sent to the Viceroy of Guangzhou province, informing him of the arrival of the Dutch envoy and asking permission to travel to Peking to congratulate the emperor on the 60th anniversary of his reign. When the old monarch was informed of the arrival of the Dutch ambassadors he immediately let it be known that they should leave Canton immediately, because if they hurried they could arrive at the northern capital just in time to participate in the officially

planned great celebrations in January, which would also be attended by envoys from Mongolia and Korea. Given the late arrival of Titsingh and the early arrival of winter that year, the Dutch had hoped to make the trip in spring, but they clearly had underestimated the enthusiasm of the Qianlong emperor himself. They now faced an exhausting trip of several thousand miles. As Titsingh wrote in his travel account: 'This news I found very disagreeable, because of the inconveniences of cold and discomfort to which one is exposed in such a severe and raw season, and which urgently required the necessary provision, and because of the fatigues of the journey which then for the greater part, the rivers being frozen, would have to be continued overland.'¹³ What followed was indeed a harrowing, highly uncomfortable rush overland because the rivers and canals were frozen. By the time the Dutch envoys reached Peking several coolies had died of exhaustion, Van Braam had lost most of his impressive girth, and Titsingh was literally at his wits' end.

On January 20, 1795, Chinese New Year's Day, the VOC ambassadors were received, together with the ambassadors from Korea, at Baohe Palace, where they were presented with wine upon having performed the customary kowtows. After the celebrations were over, the Dutch visitors were invited to accompany the Emperor to the imperial gardens, where they went skating, much to the amusement of their host, who toasted their health several times. A few days later the envoys received a paternalistic letter from the emperor to the "Dutch king" in which *stadtholder* Willem V was admonished 'to rule his people with a pensive mood and a forthright heart and to remember the generosity of the emperor, who emphatically tells him to devote himself diligently to his government!'¹⁴ Little could either the Chinese emperor or the two envoys imagine that almost at the same moment that the letter was handed over, the stadtholder already had cleared off to England after French troops under the command of general Pichecu had invaded Holland across the frozen rivers. On their way back south in early spring, the Dutch visitors enjoyed a very pleasant trip and were wined and dined wherever they went.

Back in Canton, Titsingh and Van Braam each went their own way. Titsingh decided not to return to Batavia but sailed to England with a large collection of manuscripts and Japonalia he had amassed during his long stay in the East. There he would await the

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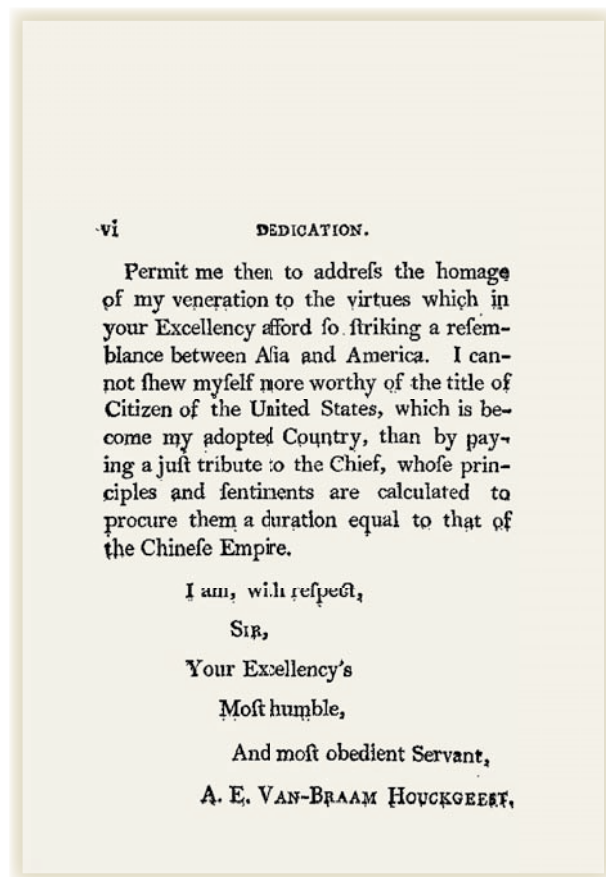
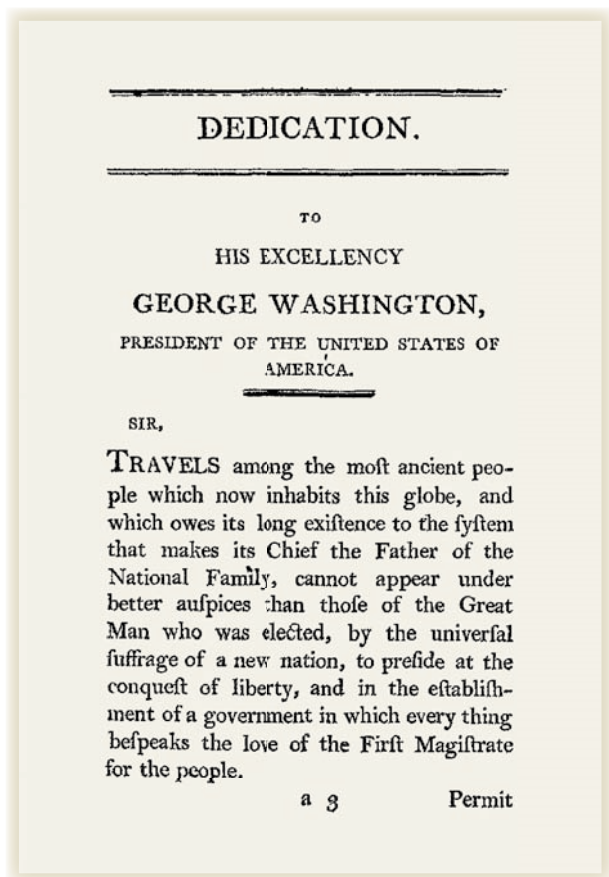
outcome of the war that had broken out with England now that a change of regime had occurred in Holland. Van Braam harboured other plans. He ordered a china service for the wife of the American president, Martha Washington, and a complete suite of furniture and paintings for a new mansion that he planned to build for himself upon his arrival in the United States. He loaded all his *chinoiseries* aboard an American vessel and set course for Philadelphia. On the way, he called at the Cape Colony, where he took on board a 19-year-old orphaned cousin of his estranged wife, with the promise that he would take care of her education, and thus assured himself of a surrogate daughter who soon turned out to be more than that.

Once he had arrived in the United States and had presented Martha Washington with her porcelain china service, the indefatigable old man embarked on two

large projects which would eventually break his neck. But before we turn our attention to this, let us make a short remark on the decorations and motto inscribed on the porcelain platters in the china service. Amidst garlands showing the names of the various states of the new republic is written *Decus et Tutamen* – the legend on the English pound piece – followed by *Ab Illo*. At the Mount Vernon estate, this is translated as ‘Glory and Arms from that,’ which is really meaningless. The correct reading should be ‘Glory and Honour *away from him*,’ referring to the secession of the American states from the English king—a mischievous pun Van Braam makes at the expense of his former English neighbours in Canton.¹⁵

What did Van Braam’s new projects entail? First of all he wanted to publish his travel account, and in order to reach the largest possible reading public he decided to publish in French. It so happened that Philadelphia was crowded at the time by learned French *evacués* like Talleyrand and Moreau de Saint-Méry who had fled the Jacobin butchers and were biding their time

Dedication to George Washington of Van Braam Houckgeest’s *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company, to the Court of the Emperor of China in the Years 1794 and 1795*.



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Andreas Everardus Van Braam Houckgeest
by Chitqua, terracotta.
Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



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A N
AUTHENTIC ACCOUNT
OF THE
E M B A S S Y
OF THE
DUTCH EAST-INDIA COMPANY,
TO THE
COURT OF THE EMPEROR OF CHINA,
In the Years 1794 and 1795;
(SUBSEQUENT TO THAT OF THE EARL OF MACARTNEY.)
CONTAINING A DESCRIPTION OF
SEVERAL PARTS OF THE CHINESE EMPIRE,
UNKNOWN TO
E U R O P E A N S;
TAKEN FROM THE JOURNAL OF
ANDRÉ EVERARD VAN BRAAM,
CHIEF OF THE DIRECTION OF THAT COMPANY, AND
SECOND IN THE EMBASSY.
TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL OF
M. L. E. MOREAU DE SAINT-MERY.

With a correct Chart of the Route.

VOL. I.

L O N D O N:
PRINTED FOR R. PHILLIPS, NO. 71, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-
YARD, AND SOLD BY J. DEBRET, PICCADILLY; LEE
AND HURST, PATERNOSTER-ROW; AND BY
ALL OTHER BOOKSELLERS.

1798.

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abroad until the revolution had eaten its children. Both Talleyrand and Moreau soon became personal friends of the vivacious Van Braam, and with Moreau's assistance – he must have been royally remunerated for this – Van Braam published a beautifully illustrated account of the *Voyage de l'ambassade de la Compagnie des Indes orientales hollandaises, vers l'empereur de la Chine, dans les années 1794 & 1795, 'en deux tomes'*, dedicated to George Washington himself.

Always in a hurry to make money and to gain fame, the author had already sent the first volume to Europe before the second appeared. By some whim of fate, almost the entire print run of this book fell into the hands of a French privateer and the book was forthwith published in France without the author's authorisation—in two “tomes,” of course, as if it were the whole original opus. This pirated edition in two volumes published in France in 1798 was subsequently translated into English (1798), German (1798-9), and Dutch (1804-6), and it is now generally but quite mistakenly thought to be the original book. Yet all these editions include only the text of the first volume of Van Braam's work; they do not carry the entertaining story of the envoys' trip from Peking to Canton further than April 4, 1795, while they did not arrive in Canton until September. Also, the various appendices that Van Braam added, such as a brief version of a Chinese drama, are lacking. Reading the pirated edition one gets the impression

that the Dutch embassy was a colossal failure in which the envoys had to suffer much physical discomfort and discourteous treatment from the Chinese. The second volume of the original American edition was published in 1798, but by then nobody was interested because the first volume had disappeared. Thus Van Braam ended up losing a great deal of money on this venture, and only a few specimens of the original two-volume Philadelphia edition have been preserved.

An even deeper pit into which the remains of Van Braam's capital disappeared was the mansion he built at Bristol, close to the banks of the Delaware River. The construction of *China's Retreat* was like a gigantic potlatch ceremony. Van Braam had to sell the house almost immediately after it was finished to square his debts—but not before he celebrated there his marriage to his youthful Cape bride. He thereby became a bigamist, because his first wife was still alive in Holland and he had never obtained a divorce from her. Almost penniless, he took his small family (his wife gave birth to a son shortly afterwards) to Europe where, after some peregrinations through the German states, he finally settled in Amsterdam. When the exhausted Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest met his maker in 1801 he truly could look back on a worldly existence in which he had tried to live up to his personal motto: *'In magnis Voluisse sat est'* [In matters of great importance striving is enough]. **RC**

NOTES

- 1 Archief Pieter Jacob van Braam, Nationaal Archief no.1.10.11.02.
- 2 André Everard van Braam Houckgeest, *Voyage de l'ambassade de la Compagnie des Indes orientales hollandaises, vers l'empereur de la Chine, dans les années 1794 & 1795*. Philadelphia 1797-1798, 2 vols.
- 3 Edward Roberts Barnsley, *The First VBH, a biography about the remarkable life of an eighteenth century Dutch citizen and naturalized American named Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest*. Beach Haven, N.J., 1989, 2 vols.
- 4 *The Canton-Macao Dagregisters 1762*. Translation and Annotation by Paul A. Van Dyke and Cynthia Viallé, Macao: Instituto Cultural, 2006.
- 5 Liu Yong, *The Dutch East India Company's Tea Trade with China, 1757-1781*. TANAP Monographs on the History of Asian-European Interaction, vol. 6, Leiden/Boston: Brill Publishers, 2007, pp. 101-111.
- 6 J. de Hullu, 'A.E. Van Braam Houckgeest's memorie over Malakka en den tinhandel aldaar (1790)', in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*, vol. 76 (1920), pp. 284-309.
- 7 Barnsley, *The first VBH*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 128-131.
- 8 Amasa Delano, *Delano's voyages of commerce and discovery: Amasa Delano in China, the Pacific Islands, Australia, and South America, 1789-1807*, Stockbridge, Mass.: Berkshire House Publishers, 1994.
- 9 Johan Nieuwhof, *Het gezantschap der Neêrlandsche O.I. Compagnie aan den grooten Tartarischen Cham*. Amsterdam: Van Meurs, 1665; Olfert Dapper, *Gedenkwaardig bedrijf der Nederlandsche O.I., C. op de kuste en in het Keizerrijk van Taising of Sina*. Amsterdam: Van Meurs, 1670.
- 10 On Titsingh, see Frank Lequin, *Isaac Titsingh in China (1794-1796)*. Alphen aan den Rijn: Canaletto/Repro-Holland, 2005.
- 11 Chrétien-Louis-Joseph de Guignes, *Voyages à Peking, Manille et l'île de France, faits dans l'intervalle des années 1784 à 1801*. Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1808, 3 vols.
- 12 J. J. L. Duyvendak, 'The last Dutch embassy to the Chinese court', *T'oung Pao*, (1938) Vol. 34-4, pp. 1-137.
- 13 *Ibidem*, p. 20; Frank Lequin, *Isaac Titsingh in China (1794-1796)*, cit., p. 81.
- 14 Hendrik Müller, *Azie gespiegeld, Malakka en China*. Leiden: Sijthoff, 1918, p. 130.
- 15 Eleanor H. Gustafson, 'Hidden Meaning, Dutch American Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest (1739-1801)', *Magazine Antiques*, October 2004. http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1026/is_4_166/ai_n6276484