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# Branding the Open-minded Nation

Dutch Authors at the 2011 Beijing Book Fair

*Laurens Ham*

## Abstract

In 2011, the Netherlands was invited to be the guest of honour at the Beijing Book Fair. This fair attracted controversy that revealed the tensions that exist between nation branding, public diplomacy, and literary autonomy: while its sponsor, the Ministry of Culture, regarded the fair as a perfect marketing opportunity, Amnesty International used the occasion to protest repression in China. Dutch authors invited to participate in the fair forged an alternative position by emphasizing their status as autonomous artists. However, an analysis of the debate in the Dutch media shows that both the Ministry, Amnesty International, the Dutch Foundation for Literature, and many authors interpreted the contact between Chinese and Dutch authors as a clash between an open(-minded) culture and a closed one.

**Keywords:** literary policy, cultural diplomacy, nation branding, book fairs, literary autonomy, activism

## Introduction

On 9 September 2010, Dutch blogger Chrétien Breukers asked national poet laureate Ramsey Nasr to ‘take a strong stand against the intended participation of the Dutch Foundation for Literature [DFL] in the 2011 Beijing Book Fair’. The DFL – the main subsidizing body in the Dutch literary field – had an important role in the book fair programme as guest of honour for 2011. Breukers found this highly problematic:

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For many years now, China has been the country issuing *and* implementing the most death sentences. China has also been pursuing a settlement policy for years (just like Israel), in particular in Tibet. China is not a democracy. Human rights are not guaranteed in China – quite the opposite. [...]

As poet laureate, you should launch a new Poet Laureate Poem, which will have the added advantage that for once it need not discuss that triplet of Palestine, silly Christians, and Arrogance.<sup>1</sup> (Breukers 2010)

A year later, on 5 September 2011, Nasr did indeed discuss the Dutch participation in the Beijing Book Fair during an appearance on the daily television show *De wereld draait door*. However, he chose to defend the opposite position from the one advocated by Breukers the year before: Nasr did not argue *against* Dutch participation but defended his decision to be *part* of the delegation sent by the DFL. According to Nasr, this was the best way of protesting the human rights situation in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the restrictive climate Chinese authors are forced to work in (Anon. 5 September 2011).

In August and September 2011, a controversy over the Beijing Book Fair caused an uproar in the Dutch literary world. The resulting discussion revealed the tensions that exist between nation branding, public diplomacy, and literary autonomy. For while the sponsoring Ministry of Culture appeared to regard the fair as a perfect opportunity for marketing Dutch books to a huge upcoming market, Amnesty International used the occasion to protest censorship and repression in China. Dutch authors invited to participate in the fair were caught between these two intense fires: they could be part of either a promotional campaign for the branding of Dutch literature or of a solidarity campaign for their persecuted Chinese colleagues. Finding these instrumental, politicized roles highly uncomfortable, many authors began forging an alternative, third position by emphasizing their status as autonomous artists who would not let others pigeonhole them as either advertisers or activists.

The present paper will reconstruct the divergent positions in this debate, paying particular attention to the discursive field in which the discussion

1 'China is al jaren het land dat de meeste doodvonnisen oplegt, én uitvoert. China voert al jaren een nederzettingenpolitiek (net als Israël), vooral in Tibet. China is geen democratie. De mensenrechten zijn in China niet gewaarborgd. Integendeel. / [...] / U, als Dichter des Vaderlands, zoudt [...] weer eens een keer een DiDeVa-gedicht de wereld inzenden; met als extra voordeel dat het deze keer niet zou gaan over de trits Palestina, domme Christenen en Eigenwaan.'

took place: a discourse on openness and ‘closedness’ – which in itself also vacillated between tolerance and receptiveness on the one hand and (wilful) ignorance on the other – which was used to characterize the Dutch-Chinese relationship. Both the DFL and Amnesty deployed this discourse in their branding campaigns, and most of the writers involved conformed to these demarcations. The fact that the discourse of openness was so easily applied by several different players in the field illustrates that there can sometimes be but a fine line between literature, state, and market, particularly in international branding processes.

### How to Deal with Intermingling Fields?

As the Introduction to the present volume shows, the concept of cultural (or literary) branding poses somewhat of a problem to field theorists. Field theory commonly studies the literary field as a relatively autonomous conceptual domain, functioning according to its own rules of the so-called reversed economy: actors strive for symbolic capital, not for economic success. To be sure, Pierre Bourdieu’s seminal works on field theory make clear that a perfect autonomy can never be obtained. The literary field, after all, is embedded in the larger field of power and will always be susceptible to power influences (Bourdieu 1983: 319). However, Bourdieu credits literature as a form of expression that is able to ‘struggle against the field of forces’ to which it belongs – suggesting that the literary field is bound to offer resistance to heterogeneous influences that threaten its autonomy (Brouillette and Doody 2015: 100).

The Introduction also points out that by the 1990s, Bourdieu had become markedly uncomfortable about the growing influence of the news media and the large book publishing companies which, as he saw it, would put severe pressure on literary autonomy (Bourdieu 2008). He would arguably be even more alarmed by the situation a few decades later, now that it had become quite uncontroversial to openly brand literary works and authors using all possible (social) media, advertising campaigns, and festivals.<sup>2</sup> The growing impact of media in the literary field has led several researchers to propose new field and capital concepts. Couldry (2003) and Driessens (2013), for example, argue for the introduction of the concepts of ‘media meta-capital’ and ‘celebrity capital’, respectively, to account for the crucial role that media play in forming an author’s reputation. Driessens (2013: 543)

2 See Collins for the American situation and Bax for the Dutch situation.

states that ‘celebrity has become a valued power resource’ in multiple social fields, ‘such as the political, cultural, or economic field’, which suggests that the boundaries between the formerly separate fields of culture, state, and market have begun to fade.

In her seminal paper text, Gisèle Sapiro (2003: 442) positions the literary field ‘*between* the state and the market’ (emphasis added) – so she appears to assume we can still *separate* these domains from one another. According to Sapiro (457), the autonomy of the literary field is both hindered and facilitated by states and markets: ‘[W]hile the market helped literary activity to free itself from the supervision of the State, the State can also become an instrument for saving the rights and freedom of creation from the merciless sanction of the market and the risks of the cultural producers of being exploited.’ From this perspective, cultural policy is aimed at making authors less dependent on a constant production of easily marketable texts.

However, this reciprocal permeation of fields and forces makes it ever harder to consider interpreting states as protectors of literary autonomy. While presenting any literary field without taking the role of the modern media landscape into account would be a highly artificial enterprise, it appears to be equally unproductive to see the contemporary nation state as a purely public affair, protecting the literary and other cultural fields from commercial influences. Several recent critical cultural policy studies have attempted to show that cultural policies have been internationally *instrumentalizing* in new ways over the past few decades. Whereas many governments still fund arts and culture partly because of their supposed intrinsic value (supporting its autonomous status), instrumentalist policies that emphasize the economic importance or societal value of culture have been on the rise (Gray 2007; Belfiore 2012; Hesmondhalgh 2015). Perhaps the current literary and cultural policy domains should not be operationalized as (semi-)autonomous fields, but rather be situated – to quote Geir Vestheim (2012) – in an ‘overlapping zone between culture, politics and money’.

This situation of overlapping spheres can perhaps be best observed when literary products and authors become part of a nation-branding campaign. Following Nadia Kaneva’s working definition, nation branding is ‘a compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms’ (Kaneva 2011: 118). Melissa Aronczyk’s (2013: 16-17) definition is helpful as well, because it stresses the importance of the overlap or ‘interpenetration’: ‘Nation branding can be provisionally defined as the result of the interpenetration of commercial and public sector interests to communicate national priorities among domestic and international populations.’ According to Aronczyk,

this branding process can be used to pursue a range of different purposes. Firstly, it can be 'a conscious strategy of capital (re)generation, combining public and private sector resources to generate fiscal advantage'. Secondly, it can be a diplomatic tool, by conveying 'an image of legitimacy and authority in diplomatic arenas'. Thirdly, national leaders might want to generate 'positive foreign public opinion that will "boomerang" back home', leading to domestic feelings of patriotism. All in all, nation branding could be seen as a positively connotated form of 'soft power', both for the home country and for the outside world. This is why there is a lively scholarly debate going on about the differences between nation branding and public diplomacy: one could argue that nation-branding activities nowadays have at least some diplomatic functions.<sup>3</sup>

Emphasizing the cultural uniqueness of a nation is one of the prime instruments in a nation-branding process. This can serve important political purposes, as was quite clear when Catalonia, an autonomous region within Spain that has been struggling for years to gain a greater degree of self-government, was invited as a guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2007. The Catalan organization used the fair to position Catalonia as a unique brand within the global marketplace.<sup>4</sup> The Netherlands, in contrast, did not have a similarly contested political status when the country was invited as the guest of honour at the Beijing Book Fair 2011. This raises the question as to what aims the DFL and the Dutch Ministry of Culture had in mind when they decided to participate in the fair in such a prominent capacity.

### Open Landscape – Open Book: 'Holland' as a Brand

To answer this question, it is helpful to first focus on the Dutch cultural policy over the period 2010–2011, when Halbe Zijlstra was Undersecretary for Education, Culture and Science in Prime Minister Mark Rutte's first cabinet (2010–2012), a coalition between the conservative-liberal VVD and the Christian-democratic CDA, with support of the right-wing populist PVV. Even before the cabinet had been formally installed on 14 October 2010, it had become clear that the new government planned to implement major cuts in the total budget for national subsidies for the cultural sector, reducing the funds by approximately 25 per cent, from €900 million to €700

3 Szondi. Some critical scholars regard nation branding as a type of 'commercial nationalism': see Volcic and Andrejevic.

4 Woolard.

million a year. Soon after Zijlstra had been installed as Undersecretary, he became the embodiment of the ‘cultural erosion’<sup>5</sup> thousands of protesters feared would come to dominate the arts in the Netherlands. Large-scale demonstrations were held in November 2010 and June 2011, but generally to no avail: over the next few years, Zijlstra implemented most of the planned financial measures.

But Zijlstra also went beyond the purely fiscal, edging into the rhetorical and ideological to legitimize the government’s actions. In his memorandum *More Than Quality: A New Perspective on Cultural Policy* (*Meer dan kwaliteit: Een nieuwe visie op cultuurbeleid*), presented in early June 2011, the Undersecretary outlined a cultural policy that was to be much more instrumentalist than before. This document explicitly not only stated that the budget cuts were necessary to meet the broader policy objective of cutting public expenditure, but that they had a symbolic function too:

The government acts too much as a financier, and in the current allocation of grants, not enough attention is paid to audiences and to entrepreneurship. The cabinet wants cultural institutions and artists to become more entrepreneurial and to realize a larger part of their income themselves. Cultural institutions need to become less dependent on the government in order to be more flexible and robust. That is why the cabinet is cutting spending on culture.<sup>6</sup> (Zijlstra 2011a: 2)

Although the DFL was confronted with fewer direct budget cuts than other Dutch art funds, the new policies did directly affect the literary landscape as well. Zijlstra (2011a: 28) asked the DFL to focus less on personal project grants for authors and more on digital innovation and on advancing translations. This fitted better with the policy’s general aim of stimulating the international circulation of Dutch cultural goods, with ‘economic interests’ being the main driver (5). Among the new priorities of this international cultural policy were enhancing cultural exchange with emerging markets (such as the BRIC countries – Brazil, Russia, India, and China), and employing

5 See, for instance, Van Klink 2010; Van der Ploeg and Dommering 2011.

6 ‘De overheid treedt te veel op als financier en bij de verlening van subsidies is nu te weinig aandacht voor publiek en ondernemerschap. Het kabinet wil dat culturele instellingen en kunstenaars ondernemender worden en een groter deel van hun inkomsten zelf verwerven. Culturele instellingen moeten minder afhankelijk worden van de overheid en daardoor flexibeler en krachtiger worden. Daarom bezuinigt het kabinet op cultuur.’

cultural diplomacy '[to open] doors in international politics [and contribute] to a positive image of the Netherlands' (6).<sup>7</sup>

The Beijing Book Fair 2011 was one of the first opportunities for these ambitions to bear any fruit. The guest of honour theme the DFL had landed on was 'Open Landscape – Open Book', a theme that was not a completely novel invention: in 1993, when the Netherlands and Flanders had been guests of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair, their joint title had been 'Flandern und die Niederlande: weltoffen' (Flanders and the Netherlands: open to the world) (Van Voorst 2016: 22). 'Open Landscape – Open Book' has a broad array of connotations: it literally points to the openness and flatness of the Dutch landscape – one of the country's touristic unique selling points – while at the same time connecting this to the act of reading a book.<sup>8</sup> Openness could here also be interpreted more broadly, as a general quality of the Netherlands and the people who live there. If the most prevalent stereotypes are to be believed, the Dutch are exceptionally direct and straightforward;<sup>9</sup> Dutch society is supposedly tolerant and open to all kinds of people;<sup>10</sup> and the Dutch economy is considered open as well, being heavily dependent on exports. 'Open Landscape – Open Book' cleverly merges all these assumptions and connotations.

It is interesting to see how seamlessly this framing aligns with the 'official' Dutch national brand that was beginning to take shape in 2010-2011.<sup>11</sup> Since then, a distinguished 'Holland' brand has been developed, characterized by a logo featuring an orange tulip and propagated by tourist agency NBTC Holland Branding, the governmental portal Holland Trade and Invest, and Creative Holland, an initiative of the Dutch creative industries supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.<sup>12</sup> The assumed openness of the Dutch economy, culture, people, and landscape are some of the central

7 On translated literature as cultural diplomacy, see von Flotow 2007.

8 For the Dutch pavilion, Ira Koers and Roelof Mulder (Bureau Iya Koers) created a design defined by 'low-lying landscape walls that signified the low lying dykes which are such an important characteristic of the Dutch landscape' ('Dutch pavilion').

9 To name just two of the recent popular articles about this topic: Daveney 2015 and Mecking 2018.

10 Dzodan discusses *and* deconstructs these stereotypes.

11 On 13 September 2011, the Dutch government published its memorandum *Naar de top. Het bedrijvenbeleid in actie(s)* (*To the Top: Business Policy in Action(s)*), in which investments in 'Holland Branding' were explicitly mentioned, particularly in connection to the 'creative industries' and the 'creative sector' in general (*Naar de top* 36). For Dutch nation branding, see also Hospers 2015.

12 One of the earliest attempts to formulate this Dutch national brand is Duijvestijn, Van Ham, Van Kralingen, Van Bekkum, Melissen, and Olins 2004.



features of this brand.<sup>13</sup> The ‘Holland Brand Story’ presents the idea of open-mindedness as the ‘core of Holland’s brand DNA’:

Holland is characterized by an open mind that welcomes the unknown and approaches challenges in a creative way. Unafraid, Holland grabs opportunities with both hands and often veers left where others would go right. An open mind leads to free thinking: Holland thinks only you can decide what’s right for you. In fact, Holland’s curtains are always open, simply because she has nothing to hide. Holland accepts and welcomes whoever you are and whatever you think. This makes Holland a melting pot of cultures, opinions, and views, all in a setting that is just as extraordinary and colourful. (‘Holland brand story’)

Cultural institutions have not been left untouched by such branding campaigns. The NBTC website presents tourists and potential business partners with several Dutch ‘storylines’, many of which are directly linked to cultural institutions such as museums and heritage sites: ‘Mondrian to Dutch Design’, ‘Vincent van Gogh’, ‘Castles & Country Houses’, ‘The Golden Age’, and so on (‘Storylines’). Literary policy, however, was not directly integrated into this campaign: whereas the visual arts are among the most prominent international branding instruments for the Netherlands, Dutch literature is largely unknown on the world stage. Still, there is a striking similarity between NBTC’s Holland Branding rhetoric and the speech with which Halbe Zijlstra opened the Beijing Book Fair on 31 August 2011:

[The Dutch pavilion] sets itself apart through its open, inviting character that is in keeping with the openness of Dutch society; a society which has for centuries been characterized by transparency, hospitality, tolerance for the views of others, freedom of speech, and a culture of freedom of the press.

In this way, the pavilion functions as an outpost of the Netherlands, as a true free port.<sup>14</sup> (Zijlstra 2011b)

With this last sentence, his speech took a mercantile turn, with was made explicit later on: ‘This government desires to allocate a larger role to the

13 See for instance Duijvestijn et al. 2004: 59; Koehler 2017: 5, 15.

14 A variant of this speech was delivered on the opening night before: Zijlstra 2011c. In a radio interview on 30 August 2011, Zijlstra again emphasized the economic importance of the fair: Anon. 30 August 2011.

economic importance of cultural policy. That is one reason why we are so happy about our ties with China, an emerging economic power with a strong cultural tradition'. However, it was not exclusively economics that Zijlstra hinted at. By mentioning 'freedom of speech and a culture of freedom of the press', he also alluded to a more political interpretation of the slogan 'Open Landscape – Open Book'. This is a subtle but clear reference to the substantial press and literature censorship in China (Ng 2015; Sun 2015).

By alluding to this interpretation, the DFL and the Ministry responded to the wishes of parties who were concerned about Dutch writers and organizations participating in a fair in a country where the freedoms of press and literature are far from respected. The Dutch division of Amnesty International arguably most visibly took this stand, but they were not the only one: the Christian opposition party ChristenUnie (CU) questioned the Minister for Foreign Affairs on Chinese censorship measures in parliament on 2 September 2011 (VoordeWind 2011).

Amnesty made 'Support the persecuted writers in China' into one of its core campaigns of 2011. The NGO collected almost 105,000 signatures under a petition for the Chinese authorities, pleading for the release of writers Liu Xiaobo, Nurmemet Yasin, and Yang Tongyang; it called on the Dutch government to openly protest the lack of freedom of speech in China; it informed the Dutch audience about the human rights situation in China, for example at the music festivals Lowlands and Pinkpop; and it tried to inspire Dutch writers to show solidarity with their Chinese colleagues (Anon. 2011: 13-14).

It was this last part of the campaign that caused such a stir in the Dutch literary world in August and September 2011. Authors suddenly found themselves in the midst of a discussion that brought an array of difficult questions to the fore: was this fair merely meant for doing business, or did it primarily have a diplomatic, political aim? What was needed: nation branding or humanitarian action? And perhaps most importantly: would Dutch writers even have the opportunity to maintain an independent position?

## The Debate in August and September 2011

It took quite a while for these questions to really percolate into public consciousness. Amnesty International tried several times to start a large national debate about the ills of Chinese censorship, but they initially had little success. In May 2011, the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper reported that explicit sex scenes in the Chinese translation of *Love Life*, a novel by Dutch

bestselling author Kluun,<sup>15</sup> had been censored. Sinologist Daan Bronkhorst had discovered this during a research project on Chinese censorship that had been initiated by Amnesty (Kist 2011).<sup>16</sup> However, the findings did not cause the broad public discussion Amnesty was evidently hoping for, and the Dutch delegation of authors did not change their plans. Amnesty also reprimanded the arts organization Den Haag Onder de Hemel for not exhibiting the artwork *The Empty Chair* by Maarten Baas during a visit of the Chinese ambassador on 6 June. This work was made as a reference to the Nobel Prize-winning dissident Liu Xiaobo, whose chair had stood empty during the ceremony because he was imprisoned in China (Nazarski 2011). Again, Amnesty's efforts to drum up publicity and awareness had little effect.

After its two unsuccessful attempts to capture the public's attention, Amnesty finally succeeded in starting a censorship debate on 29 August, one day before the fair's opening. The NGO announced that 120 Dutch novelists, poets, translators, and editors had signed a declaration of solidarity with repressed Chinese authors. Among the signatories were the delegated authors Bernlef<sup>17</sup> and Ramsey Nasr. In the same press release, Amnesty asked the members of the delegation to wear a brooch that depicted *The Empty Chair* (Anon. 29 August 2011). The NGO appeared to expect that Dutch authors intended to openly protest the Chinese government both at home and at the fair.

However, on that same day Bernlef declared in a public radio interview that he did not have much faith in the political effectiveness of their trip, exactly because of Amnesty's efforts to raise awareness of the human rights situation in the PRC: 'Partly due to Amnesty International's meddling in the Netherlands, there has been so much publicity that anyone in China who was not alarmed yet, now surely is' (Wielert 2011).<sup>18</sup> In the following days, there was a lot more criticism of Amnesty's 'meddling': not only Bernlef, but all authors taking part in the delegation declared they would not wear the brooch, which they considered 'childish' and 'nonsense' (Moleman 31 August 2011; Garschagen 31 August 2011). At the same time, many authors and opinion makers back in the Netherlands regarded this refusal as cowardly and non-solidary behaviour (Holman 2011; Ephimenco 2011). The brooch

15 Pseudonym of Dutch author Raymond van de Klundert.

16 Most newspaper sources cited in this paper have been consulted using the digital newspaper database LexisNexis. Since this database does not systematically mention page numbers, all newspaper sources in this paper lack page numbers.

17 Pseudonym of Dutch author Hendrik Jan Marsman.

18 'Mede door de bemoeienissen van Amnesty International in Nederland is er zoveel ruchtbaarheid aan gegeven dat als ze in China nog niet wakker waren dat nu wel zijn.'

became a symbol for a larger question: should the authors of the Dutch delegation show their solidarity with repressed Chinese authors or not?<sup>19</sup>

In the weeks after 29 August, dozens of newspaper, television, radio, and weblog items were published in which the Dutch participation was discussed as a literary-political issue. In many of these items, authors took a leading role. The concept of openness, with its connotations of freedom and autonomy, proved to be the central 'discursive node' in the debate. Interestingly, all parties in the discussion, no matter their viewpoint, adhered to the general framing of the Dutch participation in the fair: the suggestion that the Netherlands are characterized by an open-mindedness not common to the PRC. It is thus interesting to note that the framing itself was hardly questioned; one could wonder whether artists should be expected to simply accept and participate in such a nation-branding story.

Because Amnesty had not presented the declaration of solidarity until 29 August, the positioning of Bernlef and Nasr looked inconsistent: both had first signed the declaration and had then defended the Dutch participation in the fair or even openly criticized Amnesty. In fact, they had merely changed their minds over the course of several months: on 31 August, Bernlef declared that he had signed the declaration two and a half months earlier (Garschagen 31 August 2011). Soon after arriving in China, not only Bernlef and Nasr but also the DFL's general manager Henk Pröpper had changed their minds about the objectives of the trip. Pröpper's self-assured declaration in May ('We will invite critical writers and we will meet dissidents, even if it is in the back of a teahouse') (De Fauwe 2011) had changed into a much more relativist positioning on 1 September: 'We rightly consider censorship and freedom of speech very important in the Netherlands, but these are at risk of becoming hollow concepts if we keep using them to contrast our own culture with the Chinese' (Tanis 1 September 2011).<sup>20</sup> This turn to a more cautious approach was perhaps not unwise: on 2 May, journalist and China expert Petra Quaedvlieg had already suggested that it would be crucial to mention the Chinese repression only indirectly. 'Taking an aggressive stance will have an adverse effect. But by not saying anything at all, imprisoned

19 In an evaluation, Amnesty presented this as the most important lesson learned: the NGO had tried to start an open and massive authors protest against Chinese censorship, but this made the delegation feel highly uncomfortable ('Amnesty International Nederland Jaarverslag 2011' 15).

20 'We nodigen daar kritische schrijvers uit en we zullen dissidenten gaan spreken, al is het achterin een theehuis'; 'Censuur en vrijheid van meningsuiting vinden we in Nederland terecht heel belangrijk, maar het dreigen lege begrippen te worden als dat steeds het uithangbord is om je eigen cultuur tegenover de Chinese te zetten.'

Chinese authors will feel abandoned by their Western colleagues' (Quaedvlieg 2011).<sup>21</sup> The question was what could still be achieved now that all active participants (writers, administrators, and policymakers alike) appeared to consider an open conversation about human rights to be impossible.

During the fair, several authors sought to answer this question. Kader Abdolah, an Iranian-born writer who has lived in the Netherlands since 1988, was the most outspoken in exploring the limits of what was possible. He declared that he first intended to give a lecture with the title 'Holland for Beginners', but he decided to switch to a more personal story about individual freedom. After his arrival in the Netherlands, he said, 'I suddenly felt free, as an astronaut. [...] When I wrote in freedom, I became myself. It is important for everyone, everywhere, to be themselves' (Tanis 3 September 2011).<sup>22</sup> In a conversation with a Tibetan author, he also tried to raise the question of freedom (Moleman 5 September 2011). Other authors followed suit, albeit less explicitly. Adriaan van Dis, for example, spoke of an earlier visit to China in the 1980s, which then appeared to be a country 'created by "prison guards"'. But he decided to love China anyway. He saw couples kissing in the street – in other words, he decided to praise the human, non-repressive aspects of the country (Moleman 31 August 2011).<sup>23</sup> Margriet de Moor surprisingly described the openness of the Netherlands as a danger: because the country is so open to the sea, it would be vulnerable to natural threats, de Moor suggested (Moleman 31 August 2011). It is unclear what this geographical feature had to do with either the literary or the political message of the Dutch delegation to the PRC, or how it could be reconciled with the officially-sanctioned *positive* message about Dutch open(-minded)ness.

In many of the contributions by writers who attended the fair, a contrast is implied between the closed and repressive nature of the Chinese state and the frankness of the Chinese people. In a series of reactions, the DFL published after the fair, the openness of Chinese conversation partners was mentioned remarkably often. Literary non-fiction author Geert Mak reports experiencing 'during all meetings [...] a great openness', children's book authors Ingrid and Dieter Schubert praise the 'unprecedented openness' of their conversations, and several publishers mention the Chinese 'frankness'

21 'Door het mes op tafel te gooien bereik je een averechts effect. Maar door niets te zeggen, zullen Chinese schrijvers die vastzitten zich door hun westerse collega's in de steek gelaten voelen.' See also Benali 2011.

22 'Opeens voelde ik me vrij, als een astronaut. [...] Toen ik in vrijheid schreef, werd ik mezelf. Het is voor iedereen, overal, belangrijk zichzelf te zijn.'

23 'geschapen door "gevangenisbewaarders"'

(DFL 2011). At the same time, it was often apparent that any openness on the political and institutional level was wholly illusory. Not only was the book fair literally closed off during a visit of party official Li Chuangchun – a ‘security measure’ that served as an unintentional, ironical commentary on the theme ‘Open Landscape – Open Book’ – but open conversations were also practically impossible. Several of the Chinese authors the DFL had invited were not able to attend because they were under house arrest (Moleman 2 September 2011; Garschagen 2 September 2011).

Of course, this discrepancy did not pass unnoticed by the delegation. During the fair, delegation members often emphasized that they had to operate ‘in the margins’, ‘out of the public eye’ (Moleman 2 September 2011; Enquist, Perez and Pröpfer 2011).<sup>24</sup> This led to a paradoxical discourse in authors’ reflections on their conversations with Chinese authors and publishers: openness was seen as a quality which could only function in private conversations and literary allusions. Van Dis for instance said: ‘In the shadows of the fair, I spoke in all openness with several writers and scholars who were very outspoken’ (DFL 2011, emphasis added). According to Pröpfer (2011), Chinese writers saw the Dutch pavilion as a ‘port of refuge’ in which they nevertheless spoke about their country very carefully, ‘in literary terms’.<sup>25</sup> Ramsey Nasr (8 September 2011) represented China as a ‘closed country’, in which the Dutch delegation entered ‘as a virus of curiosity’.<sup>26</sup> All delegates appeared to feel a tension between openness and the lack thereof, which is closely related to their choice not to wear the Amnesty brooch. On the one hand, openness seemed to be unfeasible; on the other hand, conversation partners were praised constantly for their frankness. This suggests that the chosen frame for this fair, openness as the distinctive feature of Dutch society and culture, was reproduced by the Dutch authors when confronted with the fairly different Chinese cultural and institutional context. Chinese authors were integrated into this frame: they were praised because they proved to be open and frank as well.

It is striking that the delegation reproduced this official branding so easily, and that they implicitly considered it superior to other models of considering intercultural conversations, as is attested to by their constant framing of all encounters in the terms that were established by the DFL and the Ministry. Within the debate held in the Dutch press, the authors had generally criticized the ‘typically Dutch’ tendency to entertain feelings

24 ‘in de marge’, ‘[...]buiten de publiciteit.’

25 ‘vrijplaats’, ‘[...] in literaire bewoordingen’

26 ‘gesloten land’, ‘[...] als een virus van nieuwsgierigheid.’

of moral superiority. According to members of the delegation, Dutch commentators were quick to ‘wag a finger’ (Tanis 1 September 2011; Garschagen 31 August 2011; Koch 2011) at other nations: Dutch people, it was said, all too often assumed the right ‘to teach other people lessons’ (Anon. 5 September 2011).<sup>27</sup> Commentators also recalled the 1970s and the 1980s, when Dutch intellectuals protested against the repressive regimes of Argentina and against South African *apartheid* (De Fauwe 2011; Koch 2011; Truijens 2011).<sup>28</sup> This led to cultural and economic boycotts, which were particularly drastic in the case of South Africa. According to author Herman Koch and to Henk Pröpper, these policies had had many negative consequences, both for the Dutch and the South African cultural climate. Not only should every human being feel free to act, but particularly for autonomous authors joint actions would be inappropriate: ‘We are here as a group of writers, but also as free individuals who should be able to talk freely to everyone, without our conversation partners being frightened or embarrassed by an action group’s brooch’, Koch said (FDL 2011). He did not appear to notice that precisely this freedom to speak was not self-evident for the Chinese writers, which was what the entire debate and controversy were actually about in the first place.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, every single author that had joined the delegation remained silent about the economic motives behind the fair. Rather, the fair was presented as an opportunity to ‘look, smell, feel, and experience’ (Garschagen 31 August 2011) or to ‘start a conversation’ (Tanis 1 September 2011).<sup>29</sup> Bernlef was the only writer to mention an economic driver, in an interview preceding the fair: ‘If repression intensifies, there might be a moment when one says: are we only going there to the greater honour and glory of the Dutch economy, with culture as a lubricant? But as of yet there has been no reason to say: we’re not going to go’ (Anon. 17 May 2011).<sup>30</sup> Some authors and journalists who were not part of the delegation ridiculed this disinclination to broach the matter of economic capital.<sup>31</sup> This discrepancy can be interpreted using Bourdieu’s terminology: whereas the delegation

27 ‘Opgeheven vingertje’, ‘[E]en lesje leren.’

28 Historical analyses of earlier cultural boycotts include: Anon. 2 September 2011; van Velzen 2011.

29 ‘kijken, ruiken, voelen en indrukken opdoen’ (Garschagen, ‘Protesteren is dom’); ‘[...] het gesprek aan te gaan.’

30 ‘Als de repressie zich verheft, kan er een punt komen waarop je zegt: gaan we er alleen maar heen ter meerdere eer en glorie van de Nederlandse economie, met cultuur als glijmiddel? Maar voorlopig is er geen reden om te zeggen: we gaan niet.’

31 See for instance Möring 2011.

maintained the *illusio* that theirs was no more than a 'literary field trip', outsiders time and again shattered this *illusio* by emphasizing that this was a 'culturally-furnished trade mission' (Anon. 31 August 2011).<sup>32</sup>

Two general tendencies can be discerned in the positioning of criticasters who did not go to the fair. The first accepts the economic rationale of the 'trade mission', but reprimands the delegation for not being *honest* about it – and therefore, implicitly, for not being 'open' about it. Chrétien Breukers, for one, often presented this point of view in a series of blog articles published during the fair. The fact that the Netherlands used the human rights discussion as a 'stalking horse' for trade was reprehensible, but he considered this only natural for a Dutch delegation. He cynically cites a slogan used by the Dutch East India Company – the first Dutch multinational, which became a huge global player in the colonial trade of the seventeenth century – and which according to Breukers was still typical for 'the' Dutch: 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained'. From this perspective, the human rights advocacy was only meant to function as an 'investment' to attain what the Dutch were really after: huge profits. Breukers wrote: 'Every attempt to frame this as "cultural exchange" or an "attempt to transport our principles to China" is not only insincere but even quite hypocritical. Let us value our authors for what they are: pioneers in a new market' (Breukers 30 August 2011).<sup>33</sup>

Other commentators, such as Theodor Holman (2011), Sylvain Ephimenco (2011), and Joris van Casteren (2011), also blamed the delegation first and foremost for a lack of sincerity and courage. They use the same cynical tone as Breukers. Arnon Grunberg (2011), pointing at the entrepreneurial direction in Dutch cultural policy since Halbe Zijlstra, wrote ironically: 'The shopkeeper mentality is nowadays the pinnacle that writers and artists can achieve, after all, and I readily adjust myself to this mentality'.<sup>34</sup> Grunberg mocked this 'shopkeeper mentality' but did not reject it. Several other commentators even suggested that a lack of sincerity made the Dutch delegation look like a Chinese one. Stephan Sanders (2011) for instance referred to the univocal moral positioning of the delegation: 'The Dutch group has [...] undergone a simultaneous reality check. Suddenly, these twenty individual writers have been transformed into a single Dutch delegation, which collectively

32 'cultureel aangeklede handelsmissie.'

33 'Iedere poging om dit als "culturele uitwisseling" of een "poging om onze waarden naar China te transporteren" in te kleden, is niet alleen onwaarachtig, maar zelfs lichtelijk hypocriet. Laten wij de schrijvers die in Peking zijn daarom eren als wat zij zijn: pioniers op een nieuwe markt.'

34 'De middenstandsmentaliteit geldt tegenwoordig immers als het hoogst haalbare voor schrijvers en kunstenaars en ik pas mij gaarne aan.'



opposes the swelling critique from the home front. From a distance, one should observe that this group sports a suspiciously larger number of Chinese features'.<sup>35</sup> 'Typically Dutch' qualities such as candour and individuality are here contrasted with 'Chinese' groupthink and artifice.

The second tendency was more fundamental: some commentators argued that human rights should always take precedence over trading motives. Multiple articles mention the opposing positions of 'the clergyman' and 'the merchant', two symbolic figures allegedly typical for Dutch international relations. While the Netherlands acted as a 'clergyman' against repressive regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, the country now, according to these critics, all too pragmatically positioned itself as a 'merchant'. This is the frame adapted by, for instance, the author Marcel Möring (2011).<sup>36</sup> The tone of the argument was (again) heavy with irony and sarcasm: the clergyman and the merchant are figures with negative connotations in the Dutch capitalist-Calvinist past, and both are associated with puritanical and at the same time unscrupulous condescension. Only a few letters to the editor by the general public referred more principally to the importance of human rights, making an unambiguous plea for a form of cultural diplomacy that emphasizes human rights and the freedom of speech. Even these letters were not wholly free of irony: 'Economic interests are more important than the freedom of those who fight for democracy [...]. Pennies precede freedom. A terrific statement on the second page of your newspaper. Congratulations' (Rudolph 2011).<sup>37</sup> But unlike most contributions by literary insiders, these letters did not start from the sarcastic assumption that 'Dutch economic pragmatism' would be all-determining.

## Conclusion

In many regards, this sarcasm made the debate over the 2011 Beijing Book Fair little more than a rhetorical exchange, instead of the fundamental discussion about the new course of Dutch (international) cultural policy it could have been. In the late summer of 2011, there were reasons to have this discussion:

35 'De Nederlandse groep krijgt gelijktijdig een injectie van wereldwijsheid toegediend. Plotseling zijn die twintig individuele schrijvers veranderd in één Nederlandse delegatie, die zich gezamenlijk verzet tegen de aanzwellende kritiek van het thuisfront. Van een afstand zou je kunnen vaststellen dat die groep verdacht veel Chinese trekken heeft gekregen.'

36 See also Garschagen 31 August 2011; Anon. 2 September 2011; Breukers 1 September 2011.

37 'De economische belangen zijn belangrijker dan de vrijheid van vechters voor de democratie [...]. Centjes zijn belangrijker dan vrijheid. Een geweldig statement op uw pagina 2. Gefeliciteerd.'

two large demonstrations had tried to counter the economic rationale of Undersecretary Zijlstra's new cultural policy in 2010 and 2011. The fact that the book fair was framed as a nation-branding campaign ('Holland: the Open-Minded Country') would all the more give cause for fundamental critique.

Criticasters who did not participate in the fair certainly expressed this critique, but they did so only in vitriolic, cynical ways that were not constructive or truly critical. They either assumed that the economic nature of the mission was not the problem, but that the delegation had simply not been 'open enough' about these aims; or they used metaphors (the clergyman and the merchant) that suggested that every Dutch diplomatic mission could only result in a negative extreme: pedantic moralism or blind greed.

The literary delegation appeared to feel unable to question the aims of the Dutch participation in this fair. The lack of openness about the commercial rationale of the fair, particularly by the authors, is easy to explain: many people in the literary field are still averse to discussing economic capital. What *is* surprising, though, is that the authors so easily adapted to the frame of openness introduced by the DFL and then confirmed by Zijlstra. Explicitly and implicitly, openness was interpreted as a praiseworthy feature not to be questioned *or* operationalized – a feature that Chinese authors had to conform to as well. There was no open, critical debate about cultural norms and the limits of nation branding, despite authors' assurances that they wanted to act as autonomous intellectuals.

Even Amnesty International, the most fundamental protector of human rights in this debate, adopted the metaphor of the Netherlands as the quintessential 'open(-minded) country'. In a video campaign the NGO launched before the fair, six Dutch authors read a Chinese poem, emphasizing that they had written their oeuvres in freedom and that they were worried about the fate of their repressed colleagues in China. What is most telling about the campaign is the environment most of the videos are set in: the authors read the works in 'typically Dutch' open polder landscapes.<sup>38</sup> Again, this connection between an 'open landscape' and an 'open publication culture' was invoked; again an essentialist view on the alleged Dutch openness was being brought forward.

This case study clearly shows the political complexities of branding, both on a diplomatic and on a literary level. It shows how national stereotypes can penetrate the discourses in both these fields, demonstrating how porous the borders between (the aims and discourses of) literature, state, and market can be. At the same time, the paradoxical status of literary branding becomes fully visible. Most authors nowadays seem to accept, albeit hesitantly or

38 For example, *Tommy Wieringa zet zich in voor Chinese dichters*, 14 September 2011.

with a heavy dose of sarcasm, that on the international stage, literature requires active branding. However, the taboo on explicit reflections on how this branding should take place and how it should be combined with humanitarian considerations makes the debate rather cynical. In a time when the state and the market are deeply linked when it comes to cultural policies, critical debates about what should take precedence – cultural values, humanitarian values, or money – become more urgent than ever.

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