

# Anna Maria Van Schurman's Chinese Calligraphy

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## Abstract

Calligraphy is an understudied aspect of the reception of Chinese art in early modern Europe. Chinese visitors to Middelburg (1601) and Amsterdam (1654) first demonstrated it as a cultural practice. Other written samples circulated in the Dutch Republic, an emporium for Chinese goods. This article focuses on a previously unknown participant in this exchange: Anna Maria van Schurman, Europe's first female university student, who had mastered various Asian scripts and was expected to try her hand at Chinese and Japanese. In 1637 Andreas Colvius sent her samples of East Asian writing to copy 'by her own hand'. This exchange makes possible a transcultural study of the calligraphic gift. Via the popular writings of Matteo Ricci, Van Schurman's correspondents may have learned about the role of calligraphy in fostering social relationships in late Ming China. Some of the visual and material qualities of East Asian writing must have made it look like a fitting tribute to a female European scholar of high profile and, in being exchanged as a gift, calligraphy acquired new meanings even while remaining illegible. In seventeenth-century China and Europe, the friendly exchange of calligraphy expressed new forms of sociability.

*Keywords:* Sino-Dutch exchange, calligraphy, gift-giving, friendship, Anna Maria van Schurman

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Thanks to the efforts of the East India Company, which provided the fastest and most reliable route of communication between Europe and the Middle Kingdom, the Dutch Republic was a major emporium of Chinese goods and works of art. Much academic ink has been spilt discussing the tens of millions of ceramic pieces that were imported as well as, at the other end of the cultural spectrum, the foundational role played by the Low Countries in advancing European knowledge of the Chinese language and learning.<sup>1</sup> Calligraphy, and its role in linking arts and letters, has as yet not been part of this discussion. As this article will show, the Netherlands provided the setting for the first demonstrations of Chinese calligraphy in Europe, as not just a visual art but also a performative one. The surviving cases suggest that calligraphy was produced and gifted with the intention to confirm bonds of friendship: this was not unlike the original Chinese tradition, even though few Europeans would have been in the position to understand this Chinese context, let alone read the Chinese script. What makes this story of cross-cultural exchange all the more noteworthy is the role played by a learned woman: Anna Maria van Schurman, the first female university student in Europe. The following pages will therefore analyze the production and circulation of calligraphy in relation to old ideals of friendship – in Europe and China – as well as to new ideals of female literacy in the seventeenth century.

Calligraphy in foreign scripts combined two of the talents for which Van Schurman was known as a prodigy. On the one hand, her proficiency in Asian and Afro-Asiatic languages – including Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Ge'ez (Ethiopic), and Persian – contributed to her reputation as 'natures master-piece amongst women, excelling the very Muses', in the words of the Leiden professor of theology Frederik Spanheim.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, her artistic skills extended from drawing, engraving, and miniature painting to sculpture, embroidery, and papercutting.<sup>3</sup> Friends often begged her for a sample sheet with various scripts in her handwriting, which she sent as gifts accompanying her letters (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>

1 On porcelain, see most recently Van Campen and Eliëns, *Chinese and Japanese Porcelain*. On scholarship, see Duyvendak, 'Early Chinese Studies'; Weststeijn, 'The Middle Kingdom'; Dijkstra, *Printing and Publishing*. This article results from the nwo VIDI project *The Chinese Impact. Images and Ideas of China in the Dutch Golden Age*. I am indebted to Lieke van Deinsen and the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

2 Cited in Makin, *An Essay*, 12. It is possible that Van Schurman wrote in Persian, but nothing of this survives: Van Beek, *The First Female University Student*, 70-74.

3 Van Beek, *The First Female University Student*, 20, 62, and on calligraphy 79, 93, 198.

4 Van der Stighelen, 'Anna Maria van Schurman als kalligrafe'.



Fig. 1 Anna Maria van Schurman, Sheet with Bible verses in Hebrew, Aramaic, Samaritan, Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic (Géez), second quarter of the seventeenth century, Utrecht, Het Utrechts Archief.

As the French scholar Claude Joly, who visited her in Utrecht in 1646, wrote: 'I have never seen anything that would come near the beauty of her handwriting in Rabbinical Hebrew, Syriac, or Arabic.'<sup>5</sup>

Another admirer of Van Schurman's calligraphic ability was the Dordrecht minister Andreas Colvius (fig. 2), with whom she exchanged a number of letters. He was an avid collector of exotica and on 3 November 1637 he sent her samples of different Asian scripts:

Mademoiselle, in order for my letter to please you, I will add some rarities that you might never have seen before: namely Persian and Japanese characters [*sic*] as well as some from the Kingdom of Siam, where is that great city of Ayutthaya. If you would like to keep all of this, I will be happy with copies in your handwriting and you can keep the originals. As for the Chinese, this is fairly commonly known and I have sufficient examples of it. I hear that there is a Chinese man in Amsterdam who knows how to read their writing.<sup>6</sup>

5 Joly, *Voyage fait a Munster*, 151: '[I]e n'ay iamais rien veu qui approcheast de la beauté de son ecriture Rabbinique, Syriaque & Arabique.'

6 Franeker, Martena Museum (hereafter Martena), So094, Colvius to Van Schurman, Dordrecht, 3 November 1637: 'Madamoiselle, A fin que ma lettre vous puisse aggreer, j'y adjousteray quelques rarites que peut estre vous



Fig. 2 Aelbert Cuyp, after Jacob Gerritsz. Cuyp, Portrait of Andreas Colvius (1593-1671), brush drawing in black and grey, grey wash, 11,7 x 9,9 cm, Dordrecht, Regionaal Archief.

This letter merits a close reading for a variety of reasons. On the basis of her virtuosity in arts and letters, Van Schurman was apparently expected to be able to copy alphabetic writing in Persian-Arabic and Thai as well as the logographic characters used in Japan and China, accurately in her own hand (*de vostre main*) (fig. 3). The statement is worthy of note, as at the time no Europeans, apart from Jesuit missionaries on return trips from China, had mastered the Chinese language and script: accurately copying the characters would have been a challenge worthy of a prodigy. Tantalizing, moreover, is his comment that when, in 1637, one wanted to have a Chinese text translated, there was a literate Chinese man (*un chinois ... qui sait lire leur écriture*) available in Amsterdam. Nothing else is known about this individual, unless he was the Chinese boy who, with the very first

n'avez jamais veus. Assc[avoir] caracteres Persiques Japonois, et du Royaume de Siam, ou est cette grande ville d'Odia. S'il vous plaist retenir tout ceci, je me contenteray des copies de vostre main, vous laissant l'authentique. Pour le chinois, il est assez commun, et j'en ai assez. J'entends qu'il y a un chinois a Amsterdam, qui sait lire leur écriture.' A copy of this letter is kept at Utrecht, University Library, Ms. 837, fols. 147v-150r. It was published by Schotel, *Anna Maria van Schurman*, 115.



Fig. 3 Jan Lievens, Portrait of Anna Maria van Schurman, 1649, oil on canvas, 87 x 68,6 cm, London, National Gallery.

Dutch expedition to reach the East Indies, had travelled to the Netherlands in 1597 and illuminated his hosts about his home country.<sup>7</sup>

The exchange between Van Schurman and Colvius makes it possible to write one of the first chapters in the history of the European reception of Chinese calligraphy, an art form that in terms of its antiquity, intellectual status, and performative character has 'no equivalent anywhere else in the world', according to a famous essay by Simon Leys. Calligraphy, he notes, 'addresses the eye and is an art of space; like music, it unfolds in time; like dance, it develops a dynamic sequence of movements'.<sup>8</sup> Although Colvius and Van Schurman may not have been aware of all of the cultural associations that were attached to gifts of calligraphy in late Ming China, some visual and material qualities of the Asian texts must have made them look like a fitting tribute to a female scholar of high profile – the fact

7 Weststeijn, 'Just Like Zhou', 106, referring to Udemans, *'t Geestelyck roer*, 159. On Udemans and Van Schurman, see Van Beek, *The First Female University Student*, 99.

8 Leys, 'One More Art', 302.

that this act of giving replicated a Chinese practice may point out a meaningful cultural parallel regardless of Colvius's and Van Schurman's consciousness of it.

### *Chinese and Japanese Characters in the Netherlands*

While it is questionable whether Colvius's identification of the scripts was correct, and whether he was able to differentiate accurately between written Arabic and Farsi (his term 'Persian characters' is peculiar) or between Japanese and Chinese, his letter illustrates clearly how Asian texts were admired as curiosities in the Low Countries. Undoubtedly, Chinese writing attracted the most attention. Learned Dutchmen such as Clusius, Golius, Heinsius, Scaliger, and many others, collected Chinese books, even though no one except the travelling missionaries and the occasional Chinese visitor could read them.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars – and probably Van Schurman as well – were aware that Chinese characters were used in countries where different languages were spoken, such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, which seemed to demonstrate the possibility of a script that was symbolic rather than alphabetic. This was an object of speculation for the philologist Gerardus Vossius, who depended for his interpretation on the account of the Jesuit mission to China by Matteo Ricci, which had been published in 1615 (fig. 4).

In 1635 Vossius compared the Chinese characters to mathematical or astronomical symbols, but thought it most likely that they were pictograms:<sup>10</sup>

The Chinese and Japanese, although their languages differ just as much as Hebrew and Dutch, still understand one another if they write in this manner. For even if some would have pronounced other words when reading, the concepts would nevertheless have been the same. Indeed, now as people of different languages who see the same thing, understand the same thing, likewise, those who see the sign of a thing would have the same understanding of it.<sup>11</sup>

As Chinese characters express concepts without the medium of language, they are similar to paintings: 'In the same sense, from the painting of a human figure, a horse, a tree or a house, all people obtain the same concept.'<sup>12</sup> Vossius's idea was attractive to his fellow humanists as it seemed to allow for signs that corresponded directly to things and for a script that reflected the order of nature better than any alphabet. Was Chinese perhaps even older than the Egyptian hieroglyphics and thus an expression of the language in which God had spoken to Adam?<sup>13</sup> On a less speculative level, the East Asian 'culture of the brush' that attached such a high social status to writing and the visual arts clearly resonated with the visual culture of the Low Countries. The Dutch traveller Jan Huygen van Linschoten had

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 5.1 in Weststeijn, 'Just Like Zhou', 312-342.

<sup>10</sup> Vossius, *De arte grammatica*, I, 142.

<sup>11</sup> Vossius, *De arte grammatica*, I, 143: 'Sinenses & Japanenses, etsi lingua aequè differant, ac Hebraei, & Belgae; tamen, quae sic scribuntur, intelligere. [...] Utcumque enim in legendo alii alia verba pronunciansent: tamen iidem fuissent conceptus. Nempe uti nunc variarum linguarum homines rem eandem conspicientes eandem rem concipiunt: ita idem [sic] rei signum intuentes, eundem haberent conceptum.'

<sup>12</sup> Vossius, *De arte grammatica*, I, 142: 'Quomodo ex pictura hominis, equi, arboris, domus, homines omnes eundem habent conceptum.'

<sup>13</sup> Weststeijn, 'From Hieroglyphs to Universal Characters'.



Fig. 4 Wolfgang Kilian, title page to Matteo Ricci, De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Iesu, Nicolas Trigault trans. (Lyon: Horace Cardon, 1616).

reported in 1598 on the efforts of Chinese parents to teach their children the 120,000 characters necessary for full literacy, at school during the day and at home by night, to the point of damaging their eyesight.<sup>14</sup> This practice might have appealed to learned luminaries such as Constantijn Huygens, whose interest in East Asia was evident when he went out of his way to have a Chinese inscription on a lacquer screen translated accurately.<sup>15</sup> He was also a trained calligrapher and draftsman who ensured that his own children received the same education. For Van Schurman herself, who sent Huygens, as a ‘favour to an old friend’, some of her calligraphy in foreign scripts, her ambitions in literacy and art likewise reinforced each other.<sup>16</sup> It is in this same friendly context that we probably have to understand Colvius’s encouragement of Van Schurman to copy the East Asian scripts.

On the basis of Colvius’s statement that samples of the Chinese script were ‘fairly common’ (*assez commun*) in the Netherlands, one might try to reconstruct what it was that he sent to Van Schurman. Printed pages with Chinese texts were sometimes included in *alba amicorum*, such as those of Bernardus Paludanus and Ernst Brinck (fig. 5).<sup>17</sup> The latter’s collection and scholarly interests were very similar to those of Colvius.<sup>18</sup> As Van Schurman contributed her own calligraphy in Arabic and Greek to Brinck’s album (on 6 October 1637), it is not impossible that the two Chinese printed texts, Japanese printed text, and Japanese calligraphy that were also pasted in it were somehow related to the batch that Colvius sent her one month later.<sup>19</sup> Another page of printed Chinese script is kept and displayed alongside Colvius’s letter to Van Schurman in the Martena Museum in Franeker (fig. 6). It derives from an encyclopaedia published in Jianyang, an important centre of book production in late Ming China: *Plucked Brocade from the Five Carriages of Books* (*Wuche bajin* 五車拔錦, 1597). The page features six schematic renditions of meteorological phenomena, with second from right a human figure with claws and wings, the Daoist thunder god Leigong 雷公 playing his drums.<sup>20</sup> Together with Colvius’s letter, this was bequeathed by Van Schurman’s heirs to the university of Franeker in 1780.<sup>21</sup> There is no earlier evidence, however, that connects the printed page to the letter, and none of the texts from Japan, Siam, and Persia that Colvius mentioned survive in the museum’s collection. In

14 De Acosta and Van Linschoten, *Historie naturael*, fol. 131v.

15 Van Noord, ‘The “Unhappie Ruines”’, 177–178.

16 Huygens to Van Schurman, The Hague, 5 December 1660, in Worp (ed.), *Briefwisseling*, v, 344 (no. 5667): ‘in gratiam veteris amici’. She complied on 1 November 1666: Worp (ed.), *Briefwisseling*, vi, 200 (no. 6587). Cf. Van der Stighelen, ‘Constantijn Huygens en Anna Maria van Schurman’, 81; Van der Stighelen and De Landtsheer, ‘Een suer-soete Maeghd’, 169–171, 191–192, 196.

17 The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek (hereafter KB), 135 K 4, Album amicorum of Ernst Brinck, II, 1612–1635, fol. 81r and fols. 121a–d, contain fragments from a Chinese dictionary, a quality mark of Chinese silk, an original Japanese calligraphy, and a printed Japanese text erroneously identified as Malay.

18 Jorink, *Het ‘Boeck der Natuere’*, 299.

19 KB, 133 M 87, Album amicorum of Ernst Brinck, III, 1615–1644, inscription by Van Schurman, fol. 91.

20 Martena, So119, Page with six schematic renditions of meteorological phenomena, from Zheng Shikui 鄭世魁 (ed.), *Xinqie quanbu tianxia simin liyong bianguan wuche bajin, sanshisan juan*. Five complete *juan* (24–28) of the same edition are found in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Chinois 5652. According to Helliwell, ‘Chinese leaves’, the Martena and BnF pages are likely to be from the same copy. See also He, *Home and the World*, 96. I thank Lennert Gesterkamp for identifying the Lord of Thunder, and Yun Xie for the bibliographic details.

21 When the University was disbanded by Napoleon in 1811, the leaf passed to the municipality of Franeker, and is now on permanent loan to the Museum Martena.

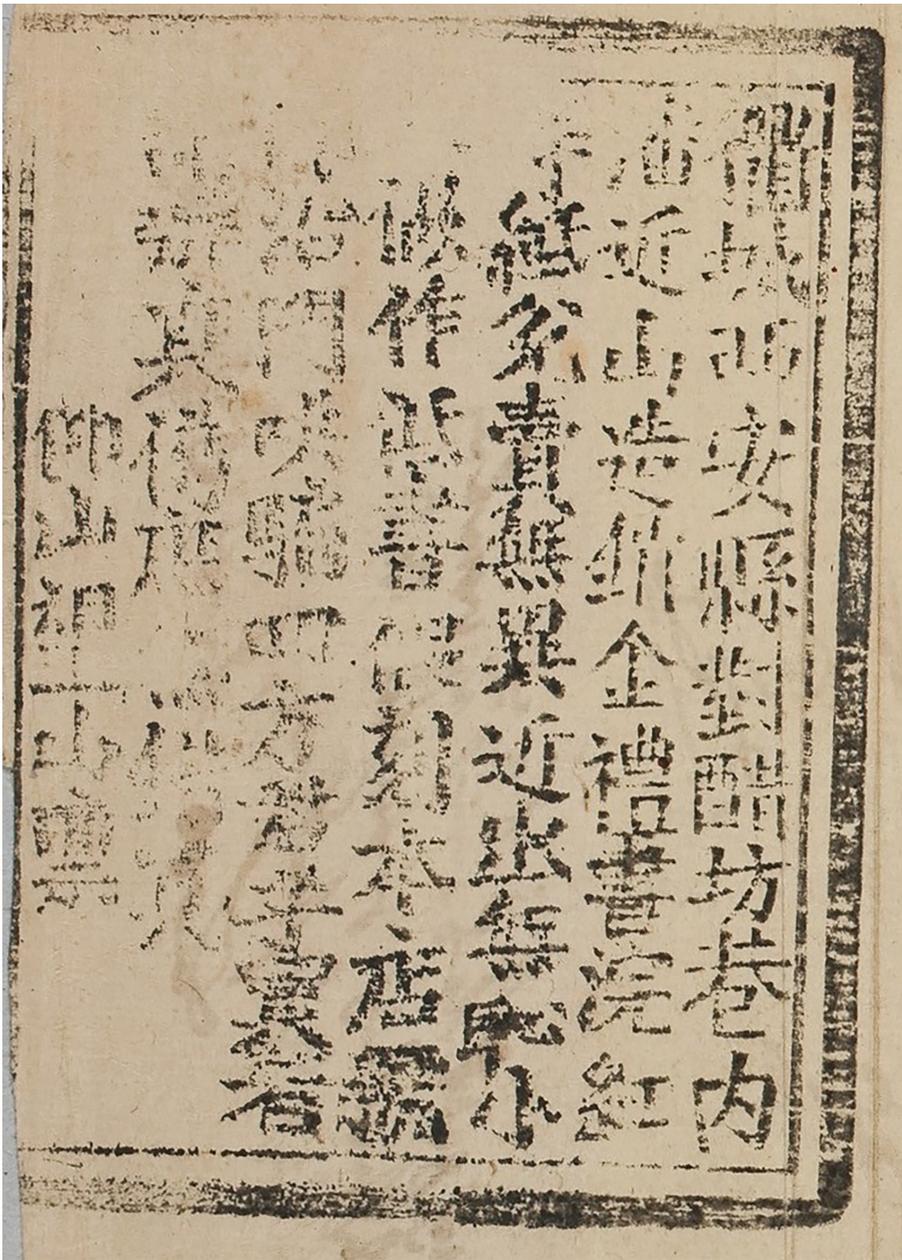


Fig. 5 Chinese woodblock printed text in the *Album amicorum* of Bernardus Paludanus, 23 June 1595, The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek. Because of the bad quality of the print it is impossible to identify the Chinese text. The text is accompanied by an inscription by Christoph Spindlerus: 'scripsi Christophorus Spindlerus [...] d. 23 Junij Anno 95 iam ia[nuarii] vii regnii China navigaturus [sum]', which suggests that he was on his way to depart with the eastbound fleet of Cornelis de Houtman of 1597.



Fig. 6 Page with six schematic renditions of meteorological phenomena, from *Wuche bajin* 五車拔錦 [Plucked Brocade from the Five Carriages of Books] (Jiangyang: Zheng Shikui, 1597), Franeker, Martena Museum.

fact, it is quite possible that he sent along a rather different type of Chinese writing. Colvius’s suggestion that his learned friend might copy the various Asian texts in her own hand makes it unlikely that they included an extensive page from an encyclopaedia – the leaf from *Wuche bajin* contains some six hundred characters, plus the six drawings. From the letter, one might rather conclude that the paper that was included contained only a score of characters. It may also have been a handwritten rather than a printed text.

This assumption is not as far-fetched as it may seem. In addition to the man mentioned by Colvius, there is evidence of two literate Chinese individuals who even performed their calligraphic skills for their hosts in the Netherlands. The first is the merchant Yppong, who arrived in Middelburg in 1600 and left six lines of Chinese writing about himself (fifty-four characters) in the album amicorum of a local lawyer, before returning to China (fig. 7).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Weststeijn and Gesterkamp, ‘A New Identity’. Yppong used a quill rather than a brush. Translation: ‘[I am] Xing Pu, a visitor from the Great Ming China [...] who came to the Lower Harbor Bantam, Zeeland, and then Holland, and [I now plan] to return to Bantam and the Great Ming. In Zeeland on Friday in January of the New [Year] of 1601, I leave these characters as my inscription.’

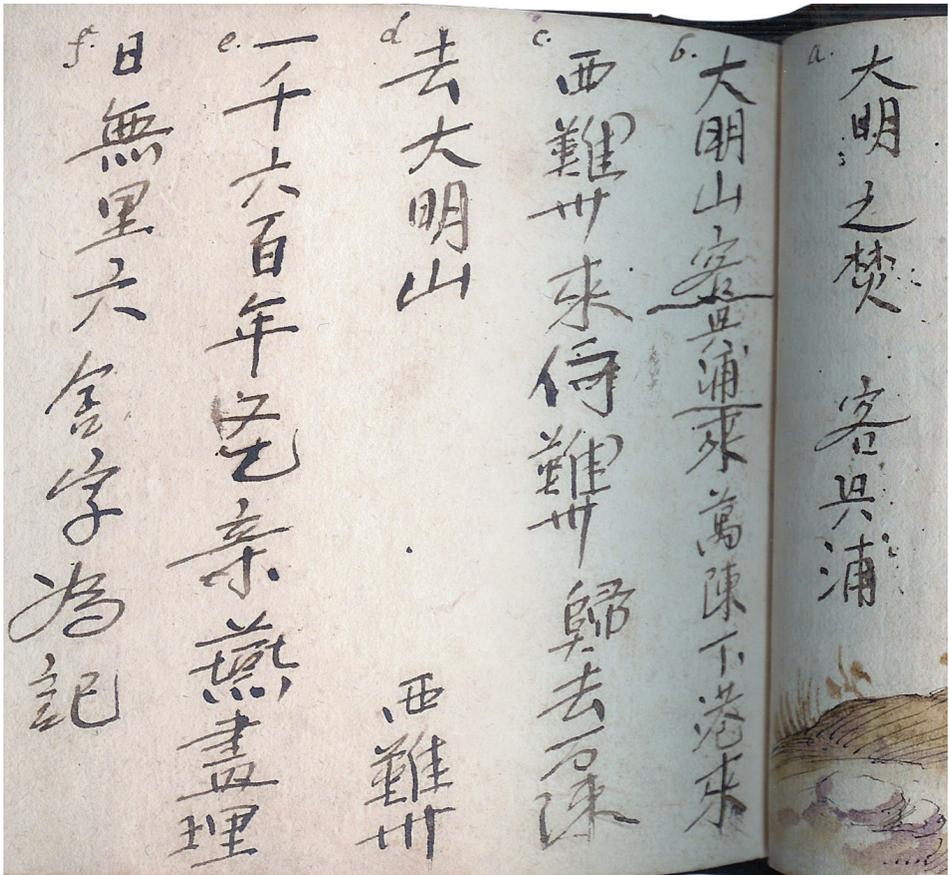


Fig. 7 Yppong, Chinese calligraphy on European paper, 1601, in the album amicorum of Nicolaas de Vrise, United States, private collection.

The second is Fichinpai, also known as Dominicus, the Chinese assistant of the Jesuit missionary Martino Martini who visited the Low Countries in 1654. A demonstration of his calligraphy in action was attended by the Leiden orientalist Jacob Golius (one of Van Schurman's correspondents).<sup>23</sup> Twenty-eight characters by Fichinpai's hand, relating to the Catholic Sign of the Cross, survive in the Royal Library in Brussels, pasted in a pharmacological album that was completed in Leuven in 1655 (fig. 8).<sup>24</sup> In addition, samples of

<sup>23</sup> Rome, Archive Pontifica Università Gregoriana, Ms. 562, fol. 139, Golius to Kircher, 11 June 1665. On Fichinpai, see Weststeijn, 'Just Like Zhou', 111-117.

<sup>24</sup> Brussels, Royal Library, Ms. 3510, *Onderwijs voor de eerst leerende apothekers, vervattende de beginselen van de pharmacie ende chymie*, 1655. The Chinese text reads: 'The sign of the Holy Cross. May God the Lord deliver us from our enemy. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.' See also Golvers, 'De recruteringsstocht', 342.

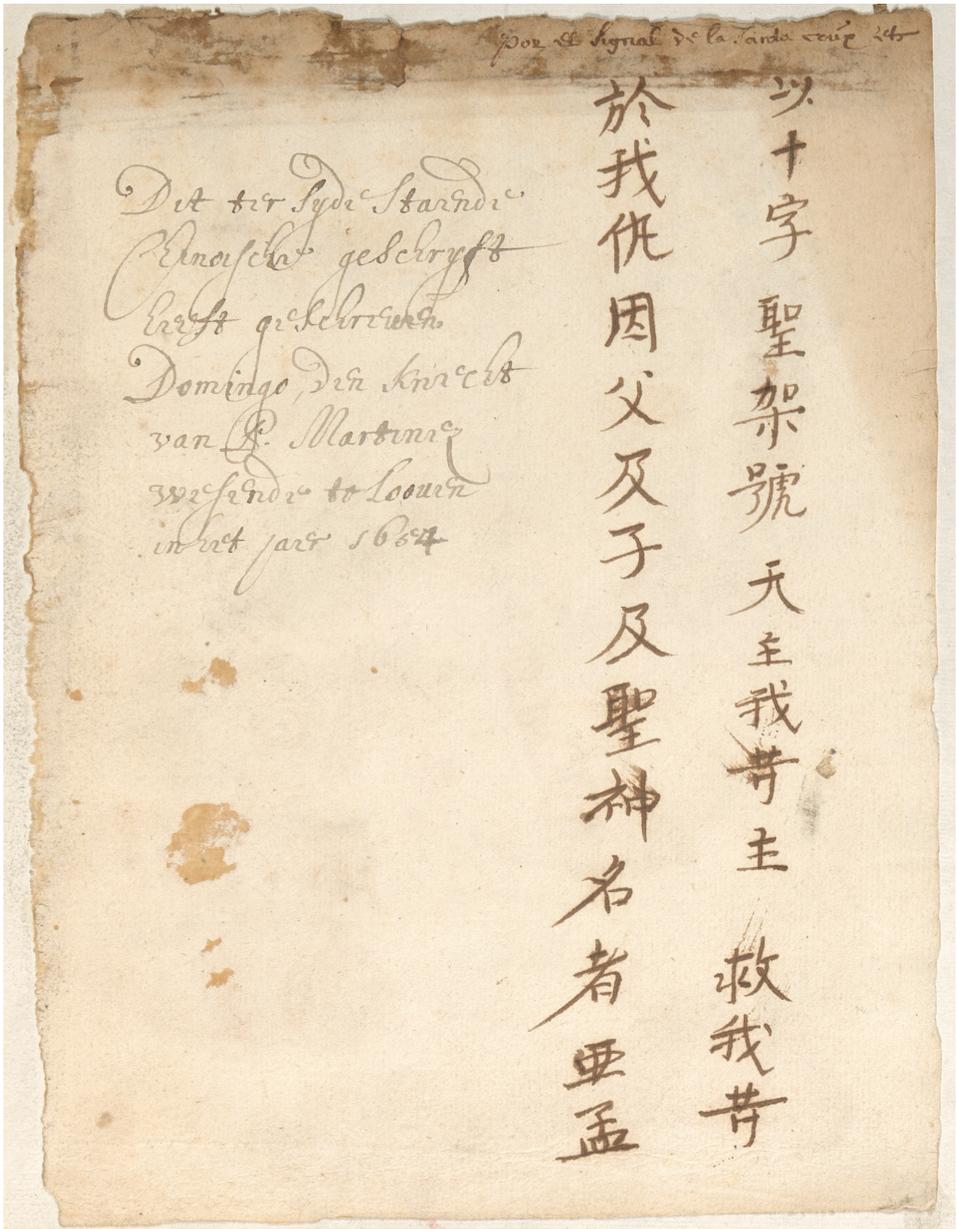


Fig. 8 Fichinpai, Chinese calligraphy on European paper, 1654, in *Onderwijs voor de eerst leerende apothekers, vervattende de beginselen van de pharmacie ende chymie*, Brussels, Royal Library. The explanation reads: 'Dit ter syde staende Chinoische geschryft heeft geschreven Domingo, den knecht van P. Martinez, wesende te Loouen in het jaer 1654'.

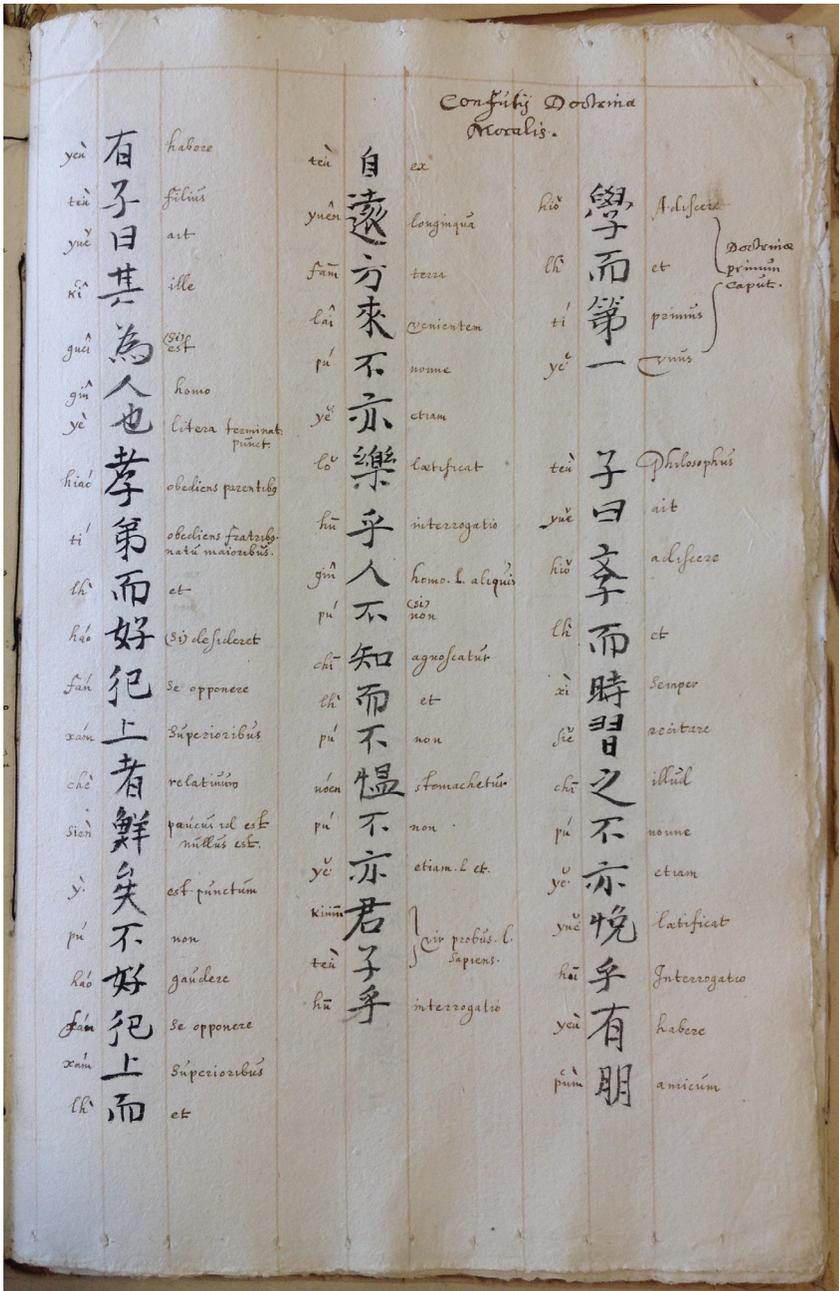


Fig. 9 'Confucij Doctrina Moralis' (The first lines of the Analects), Chinese text with Latin translation by Justus Heurnius, *Compendium Doctrinae Christianae*, 1628, Leiden, University Library.

Chinese handwriting sometimes arrived along with other goods on the ships of the East India Company. In 1628 the minister Justus Heurnius, based in Batavia, had a Chinese schoolteacher from Macao prepare a manuscript version of Confucius's *Analects* and a relevant thesaurus, for which he himself furnished the translation, which was sent to his brother in Leiden (fig. 9).<sup>25</sup> Another example was a Chinese 'book with fair-sized characters, not written with a quill but painted with a brush, on Chinese paper', in the collection of the Haarlem humanist Hadrianus Junius.<sup>26</sup> Finally, a remarkably elegant and artistic Japanese calligraphic text (partly written in Chinese kanji) survives in Brinck's aforementioned album: a tenth-century love poem by Minamoto no Shigeyuki 源重之 (fig. 10).<sup>27</sup>

What is more, in collections of exotica in the Netherlands one could find the Four Treasures of the Study (*wen fang si bao* 文房四宝) according to Chinese and Japanese tradition: the brush, ink stick, paper, and inkstone required for calligraphy.<sup>28</sup> As early as 1592, Van Linschoten brought a few Chinese brushes, ink, and paper back from Asia for a scholarly friend; in 1665 Johan Nieuhof wrote that Chinese inkstones were now on sale with Dutch paint sellers (*Verf-verkooopers*), but one had to be wary of fakes.<sup>29</sup> Their application was described and illustrated in the 1668 Dutch edition of Athanasius Kircher's famous book on China (fig. 11):

The Chinese do not use pen and ink like we do: but they rub some black on a marble stone, in which they wet the brush that they hold with their fingers when they write – or rather paint – in the manner that is shown in this image.<sup>30</sup>

The engraving illustrates correctly how in East Asia, the calligraphic brush is held perfectly vertical by all five fingers, with an empty palm and the elbow lifted off the table – writing is done with the arm rather than just the hand. The monkey that sits on the floor examining a piece of paper is a symbolic reference to the European notion of the visual arts as the 'ape of nature', emphasizing Kircher's understanding that in China, the status of calligraphy was not inferior to that of painting.

25 Leiden, University Library, Ms. Acad. 225, Compendium Doctrinae Christianae, Batavia, 1628. It was probably sent by Justus Heurnius in Batavia to Otto Heurnius in Leiden in 1629. The compendium contains *Confucii doctrina moralis* with five-sixths of chapter 1 of the *Analects* (fols. 11v-14v). See Kuiper, 'The Earliest Monument'.

26 *Catalogus variorum*, sig. 1 3: 'Liber grandiuscolo caractere non calamo scriptus sed penicillo pictus, charta serica. In quarto.'

27 The first two lines read 'みちのくにのあだちに侍ける女に、九月ばかりつかはしける', followed by the poet's name 重之, and the last two lines '思ひやるよそのむら雲しぐれつゝあだちのはらにもみちしぬらん'. I owe a debt of gratitude to Akiko Hakuno and Akira Kofuku for identifying and translating the Japanese.

28 For Golius's brush see above, note 23. According to Antoine Thomas, 'three Chinese ink sticks' were in the Jesuit college of Antwerp in 1683: Heverlee, Jesuit House, Antoine Thomas, *Liste de ce que j'envoie a Monsr. Balthasar Moret, de Macao*, 15 February 1683. This manuscript was previously kept at the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-College of Antwerp. In 1663 Ole Borch saw a 'Chinese ink stone in an oblong rectangular shape' in the collection of Paul Cordes in Amsterdam: Borch, *Itinerarium*, II, 88.

29 De Acosta and Van Linschoten, *Historie naturael*, fol. 132v; Nieuhof, *Het gezantschap*, II, 33.

30 Kircher, *Toonneel van China*, 281: '[D]at de Sinezen geen pennen, gelijk wy, en ook geen inkt gebruiken: maar zy wrijven op een marmere steen een weinig zwart, om de pinceel daar in te natten, die zy, als zy schryven, of eerder als zy schilderen, op deze wijze met de vingeren houden, gelijk in deze bygaande afbeelding blijkt.'

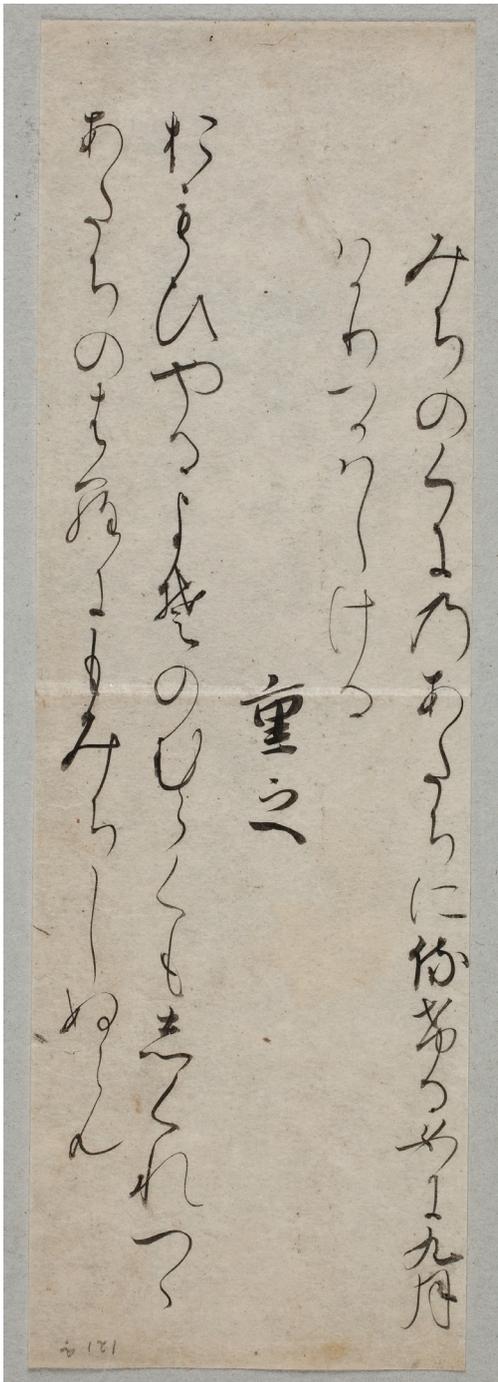


Fig. 10 Calligraphy of a love poem by Minamoto no Shigeyuki (tenth century), probably on Japanese paper, in the album amicorum of Ernst Brinck, II (1612-1635), The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek: 'This September, I wrote a poem dedicated to a woman who lives in Adachi of Michinoku. Shigeyuki [the poet's name]. I ponder and imagine, /meanwhile the group of clouds I see far from here will probably bring a shower to Adachi, /All leaves turn red and yellow.'



Fig. 11 Willem van der Laegh (attributed), 'Modus Scribendi' (the Chinese manner of writing), engraving, in Athanasius Kircher, *Toonneel van China, door veel, zo geestelijke als wereltlijke, geheugteekenen, verscheide vertonningen van de natuur en kunst, en blijken van veel andere gedenkwaardige dingen, geopent en verheerlykt* (Amsterdam: Johannes Janssonius van Waesberge, 1668) 281.

### *Friendship and Calligraphy in China*

If Colvius did indeed send Van Schurman a piece of Chinese calligraphy rather than the printed text that is now in the Martena Museum, he – unwittingly or, perhaps, wittingly, as we shall see – acted in line with a practice of friendly exchange in late Ming China. In early modern Europe, calligraphy was one of the minor arts and therefore often seen as an activity in which women could excel, as Van Schurman's own exchange with her scholarly contacts demonstrates.<sup>31</sup> In China, by contrast, calligraphy stood at the top of the hierarchy of the arts and was seen as an indispensable skill for men, in particular those of great social and political stature. The early Westerners who had access to the country were, in fact, well aware of this. The Jesuits who had been flocking to the Middle Kingdom since 1582 had soon understood the importance of calligraphic gifts in building and fostering a network of trusted friends reaching up to the upper crust of society, the imperial court.

31 Van der Stighelen, 'Anna Maria van Schurman als kalligrafe'.

The first European to access the Forbidden City was Matteo Ricci, known as the mission's founding father, whose account of his experiences, first printed in Latin in 1615, was widely popular throughout Europe. By the 1630s, it was available in six languages and the Latin edition had enjoyed six print runs; it was the basis for Vossius's above-quoted remarks and many other writings on China.<sup>32</sup> The book explained in detail the steps Ricci had taken to build a network of contacts in the Middle Kingdom as the basis for his missionary activities, starting from the first text that he wrote and had printed in Chinese: *Jiaoyou lun* 交友論 (*Treatise on Making Friends*, 1595). This collection of aphorisms from the European classical authors, devoted to the theme of friendship, was itself intended as a gift to Ricci's Chinese friends.<sup>33</sup>

Ricci had clearly recognized that friendship was a complicated issue for literati of the late Ming period. According to the dominant ideology of Neo-Confucianism, men were expected to foster five cardinal human relationships, the 'five bonds' (*wu lun* 五伦): between husband and wife; with one's parents; between brothers; between ruler and subject; and between friends. Of these five relationships friendship was unique; the others were overtly concerned with the maintenance of the imperial social order (or *guojia* 國家, literally the Chinese 'state-family'). Friendship was the only bond that was freely chosen. It could transcend social hierarchies and, apparently, also bridge cultural distances.<sup>34</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the central text of Confucianism, the *Analects* (c. 500 BCE), begins with a statement on friendship:

If you want to obtain wisdom from hard work  
Then you can expect friends and companions  
Chosen from faraway countries and honoured  
To be taught by you in the education of wisdom.<sup>35</sup>

This quotation follows a Dutch edition of 1675, the first printed translation of the *Analects* in any Western language; a manuscript of another translation also circulated in Van Schurman's lifetime (fig. 9).<sup>36</sup>

The bond of friendship could obviously be fostered by gifts, and in late Ming China calligraphy held an important position as a luxury and as a mark of status and literary taste.<sup>37</sup> Writing was the supreme form of visual art, more valued than painting and

32 Some of his Dutch readers were Johan Nieuhof and Justus Hoornbeeck: Dijkstra, *Printing and Publishing*, 54-55. Among the vast literature on Ricci see, most recently, Bernhardt, *La Chine en partage*.

33 Ricci, 'Jiaoyou lun 交友論'. Ricci also gave the book the Latin title *De Amicitia*. Written for the general non-Christian Chinese reader, it elaborates on the concept of virtuous friendship quoting Aristotle, Plutarch, Cicero, Seneca, as well as Christian thinkers such as Ambrose and Augustine. Ricci suggested that the treatise grew out of discussions with Zhu Duojie (1573-1601), prince of Jian'an, who, at the end of a banquet, had asked Ricci what Westerners thought of friendship: Hosne, 'Friendship among Literati'.

34 Kutcher, 'The Fifth Relationship', 1615.

35 Van Hoorn, *Eenige voorname eygenschappen*, 16: 'Als ghy wysheydt door beneerstingh wilt betrachten, /Soo hebt ghy mede maets en vrienden te verwachten/Van verre landen zelfs gesocht en oock vereerd/Om wysheydts onderwys van u te zyn geleerd.'

36 Dijkstra and Weststeijn, 'Constructing Confucius'.

37 Gift-giving was part and parcel of the daily routine of Chinese officials at the imperial court, under the rubric of 'civilities' or *yingchou* 應酬. For the Jesuits' understanding of this issue, see Menegon, 'Amicitia Palatina'.

sculpture, and ranked alongside poetry as a means of self-expression and cultivation. It was essentially a performative art: the resulting work documented the writer's life force or vital essence (氣 *qi*) in relation to the content of the words that were written. This explained its role to establish and mediate the problematic 'fifth bond' between friends.<sup>38</sup> Ricci therefore elaborated on the material and social aspects of Chinese calligraphy:

More than any other nation, they [the Chinese] are very devoted to painting their characters beautifully; which is the reason that not only a good calligrapher is esteemed and honoured with all kinds of duties, but also those who make the writing ink are not seen as practitioners of a [merely] mechanical art. They use [ink] on a marble tablet: [...] they rub their ink sticks against it with a few drops of water, and cover the stone with it. Then they take the ink with a brush of hare's hair, which they use for writing. [...] Those three things [ink, inkstone, and brush] that they use for writing tend to be decorated very beautifully and are esteemed highly, because naturally they are put to the service of such a serious matter as the art of writing, by men that are so full of gravity and majesty.<sup>39</sup>

Calligraphic gifts to friends included not only pamphlets or scrolls but also *chidu* 尺牘 (letters) and *bianmian* 便面 (fans).<sup>40</sup> The latter acquired a special performative role as they were passed between friends: a fan 'proclaimed its owner's artistic taste and social network every time it was used in public, but in a discrete manner that avoided flaunting'.<sup>41</sup> In Ricci's own words, the Chinese 'often write a beautiful sentence or poem on [fans], which is the most common gift that they send each other, to testify to their good will. We currently have a little chest full of these in our house, which our friends have given us to then pass on to others, as a similar assurance of friendship'.<sup>42</sup> In 1599 the retired governor Li Zhi 李贄, famous for his arrogance and limited circle of friends, had apparently presented Ricci with two fans in return for his *Treatise on Making Friends*. Each was decorated with a calligraphic inscription 'written by his own hands', one of them titled 'Zeng Li Xitai 贈利西泰 (Gift to Matteo Ricci)'.<sup>43</sup> Ricci, following the Jesuit strategy of accommodation to the foreign civilization, began to write his own Chinese calligraphy on fans, and he instructed two of his students, Manuel Diaz and João da Rocha, to do likewise.<sup>44</sup> His visual

38 Leys, 'One More Art'; Billeter, *The Chinese Art of Writing*; Bai, *Fu Shan's World*. On gifts of calligraphy, see esp. Shou-ch'ien, 'Calligraphy as Gift'; Clunas, *Elegant Debts*.

39 Ricci and Trigault, *Histoire de l'expédition chrestienne*, 19: 'Ilz sont sur toute autre nation fort adonnez à bien peindre leurs caractères; da là vient qu'un bon escriuain n'est pas seulement estimé d'iceux, & par tout honnoré de toute sorte de deuoirs, mas encor ceux qui font l'encre pour escrire ne sont past estimez mechaniques. Ilz se seruent d'icelui sur vne table de marbre; [...] ilz frottent leurs pains à escrire contre icelle avec quelque goutte d'eau, & en teignent la table. En apres ilz prennent l'encre avec vn pinceau de poil de lieure duquel ilz se seruent pour escrire. [...] ces trois choses qu'on employe pour escrire sont la plus part excellement ornées, & sont estimées, d'autant que de leur nature elles sont mises en ouure pour vne chose graue, telle qu'est l'escriture, par des hommes aussi pleins de grauité & maiesté'. Cf. Ricci, *Della entrata*, 24.

40 For the earlier period see McNair, 'Letters as Calligraphy Exemplars'; Tian, 'Material and Symbolic Economies'.

41 Wang, *A Social History of Painting Inscriptions*, 83.

42 Ricci and Trigault, *Histoire de l'expédition*, 20: 'Ilz font souuent escrire sur iceux quelque belle sentence, ou poëme, & cela est le plus commun present qu'ilz s'enuoient l'un à l'autre, pour tesmoignage de bien vueillance. Nous en auons presentement vn plein petit coffre en la maison, que les amis nous ont donné pour renuoyer apres à autres, pour semblable assurance d'amitié.'

43 Ricci, *Della entrata*, 310; Wei, 'Jesuit Figurists' Written Space'.

44 Wei, 'Jesuit Figurists' Written Space'.

and cultural sensibilities made Ricci the mainstay of the Jesuit mission, and he soon complained he had become too successful: 'I have friends everywhere, so many that they will not let me live, and I spend the whole day in living rooms answering different questions.'<sup>45</sup>

In so doing, Ricci had paved the way for the Jesuits' close bond with different Chinese emperors in the seventeenth century.<sup>46</sup> To illuminate the overarching social importance of calligraphy, one might quote no one other than the Kangxi Emperor, who accepted the throne in 1661 as a budding connoisseur of this art: 'I, the sovereign, took the throne at the age of eight and I already knew that I should be dedicated to study. [...] Since my childhood I especially enjoyed calligraphy. [...] My calligraphy is exceptional compared to others.'<sup>47</sup> Some Europeans expressed their amazement at this clear divergence from the Western hierarchy of the arts. In 1669, the Englishman John Webb – the only seventeenth-century architect whose designs were inspired by Chinese calligraphy – observed that the Chinese loved and respected their written characters so much that they valued them above other artworks:

The Chinois give willingly great sums of money for a copy of their antient characters well-formed, and they value a good writing of their now [*sic*] letters far more than a good painting, whereby from being thus esteemed, they come to be revered. Insomuch that they cannot endure to see a written paper lying on the ground.<sup>48</sup>

It is not impossible that a similar insight inspired Dutch scholars – collectors of Chinese books, readers of Ricci, Vossius, Kircher, and perhaps Webb – when they pasted pages from Chinese texts in *alba amicorum* or included them in letters to their friends.

### *Chinese Writing and Friendship for Colvius and Van Schurman*

The role of Chinese calligraphy in fostering and maintaining friendship explains why Yppong and Fichinpai presented a sample of their handwriting to their hosts in the Netherlands. The text that Colvius sent Van Schurman to copy by hand may likewise have been produced by a Chinese visitor (perhaps even the man in Amsterdam 'who knew how to read their writing'). It may be that the friendly exchange of East Asian writing between the two Dutch scholars reflected a basic recognition – an intuition or an insight based on the missionary accounts – of the value of calligraphy in relation to friendship in late Ming China.

Not unlike the Chinese situation, in seventeenth-century Europe scholarly friendships were cultivated through the exchange of letters and gifts.<sup>49</sup> Learned women could participate in this exchange even though their position in the Republic of Letters was

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Venturi, *Opere Storiche*, II, 376.

<sup>46</sup> On the Jesuits' success as based on a strategy of gift-giving, including works of visual art, see Menegon, 'Amicitia Palatina'.

<sup>47</sup> Kangxi Emperor, 'Shengzhu Ren', 616-717: '朕八歲登基，即知龜勉學問，彼時教我句讀者，有張 [...] 朕少年好學如此，更耽好筆墨。[...] 故朕之書法有異尋常人者以此。'

<sup>48</sup> Webb, *An Historical Essay*, 177. On Webb, see Bold, 'John Webb'.

<sup>49</sup> Thoen, *Strategic Affection?*; Brown, *Friendship and its Discourses*.

different from that of men, especially in regard to formal education.<sup>50</sup> Calligraphy was seen as one of the literate activities in which women could actually excel (as could be seen in the work of Jacquemyne Hondius, Kornelia Kalf, Anna Roemers Visscher, Maria Strick, and the French-born Esther Inglis) and it is therefore not surprising that Van Schurman chose it as suitable genre from which she might select gifts for her friends, sometimes including samples of her writing in Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, and Samaritan.<sup>51</sup> Her unique exchange with Colvius of East Asian scripts intended for copying by hand illustrates, however, how their relationship mirrored the Chinese practice of literati friendship as a bond that transcended, rather than confirmed, traditional social hierarchies.<sup>52</sup> Scholarly friendship between men and women was a fairly new phenomenon in the mercantile republic of the United Provinces. To some extent, this situation resembled contemporary China of the late Ming. Although in the Middle Kingdom women were excluded from the exchange, 'friendship appears to have been celebrated with unprecedented enthusiasm. In general terms, the commercialisation of the Ming economy, and the resulting enhancement of social and geographical mobility, created both new needs and new possibilities for friendship: the blurring of traditional social boundaries [...] tended to make Ming society less hierarchical, and thus more conducive to the cultivation of friendship among different social groups.'<sup>53</sup>

When viewed in the light of the Dutch Republic's intensive engagement with Chinese civilization that was unparalleled in Europe, both in regard to material culture as in regard to intellectual exchange, this intercultural symmetry may have been more than coincidence.<sup>54</sup> The many Asian luxuries and other imports available in Dutch cities were a source of amazement for, among others, the Danish physician Ole Borch. When he visited Colvius's cabinet in 1662 he only mentioned acupuncture needles, but it may well have included other Chinese objects and books.<sup>55</sup> A sizeable collection of Chinese volumes was in the possession of another of Van Schurman's supporters, the Leiden professor Jacobus Golius.<sup>56</sup> One more actor in this network was her professor at Utrecht, Johannes Hoornbeeck, whom she sent some of her non-Western calligraphy. Hoornbeeck owned a copy of the aforementioned manuscript translation of Confucius's *Analects* and knew a lot about China. In his treatise *De conversione Indorum et gentilium* (On the Conversion of the Indians and Heathens, 1669), which borrowed liberally from Ricci, he even described the role of friendship among the five cardinal human bonds of Confucianism.<sup>57</sup> Finally, a formidable figure in early Dutch sinology figured amongst Colvius's friends: Isaac Vossius, the

50 Van Beek, *The First Female University Student*, 194, 198-199.

51 Wolfe, 'Women's Handwriting'; Van Beek, *The First Female University Student*, 213, 216.

52 For a comparative analysis of friendship in seventeenth-century China and Europe (arguing that the European conception of friendship, as shaped by ever-shifting alliances, was 'much darker'), see Hosne and Kühner, 'Public and Virtuous?', 17.

53 Hosne, *Friendship among Literati*, 191.

54 Dijkstra, *Printing and Publishing*; Weststeijn, 'The Middle Kingdom'.

55 Borch was also shown some of Van Schurman's handwritten letters, possibly including her calligraphy: Van Beek, *First Female University Student*, 174; Jorink, *Het 'Boeck der Natuere'*, 305; Borch, *Itinerarium*, II, 171.

56 Van Beek, *First Female University Student*, 79; Duyvendak, 'Early Chinese Studies'.

57 Hoornbeeck, *On the Conversion*, 108-109.

most ardent Sinophile in seventeenth-century Europe, whose *Variarum observationum liber* (Various Observations, 1685) contained a notoriously over-enthusiastic paean to Chinese politics, scholarship, and material culture.<sup>58</sup>

Obviously, the Dutch understanding of the Chinese tradition of the calligraphic gift was limited. The exchange of writing samples between Colvius and Schurman, however, was meaningful even while the characters remained illegible (if one follows the sociological analysis of the gift, as spearheaded by Marcel Mauss). The Chinese and Japanese papers had accrued value merely through their distant origins; perhaps they had originated as friendly gifts, and their being re-gifted in the Dutch context confirms Mauss's insight that in pre-modern societies, gifts partook of the giver's 'spirit', they could not be owned but were always passed on.<sup>59</sup> In Van Schurman's case, they even carried an obligation: that she sent her friend copies in her handwriting, thereby demonstrating that she was worthy of her reputation as a prodigy.

### Conclusion

We do not know how much Van Schurman knew about Chinese ideals and practices of friendship and gift-giving. What is more, it remains unclear whether she eventually copied the East Asian characters, or reached out to the Chinese man in Amsterdam. But Colvius's calligraphic gift certainly tells us something about her reputation as a literate woman. Among her many correspondents, Colvius held a particular position: he was one of the three editors of her treatise, *Dissertatio de ingenii muliebris ad doctrinam et meliores litteras aptitudine* (On the Intellectual Aptitude of Women for the Sciences and the Humanities, 1641), which has been called 'the first Dutch feminist tract'.<sup>60</sup> In 1659 it was translated into English as *The Learned Maid; or, whether a Maid may be a Scholar*.<sup>61</sup> The book included, as an appendix, her appreciation for another of Colvius's letters, written in the same year that he sent the Asian texts. When he, provocatively, suggested to Van Schurman that too much study was unhealthy for a woman (or anyone), he provided her with the occasion for an elaborate refutation larded with quotations in Arabic and Hebrew, which was also attached in print to the treatise. Colvius's actual esteem for his friend's unmatched combination of linguistic and artistic skills was likewise evident in his gift of the Chinese and Japanese texts and his certainty that she would be able to copy them by hand.

His assumption is all the more noteworthy in relation to ideas about women's literacy that were current in the first half of the seventeenth century. Some doubted whether women should learn to write at all, let alone be able to rival the abilities of men. As John Davies wrote in *The Writing Schoolemaster* (1631), women 'naturally lack strength in their

<sup>58</sup> Vossius, 'De artibus et scientiis Sinarum'.

<sup>59</sup> Mauss, *Essai sur le don*. De Brune, *Bancketwerck*, 1, 44, describes how gifts remain in an endless cycle of giving: 'The first gift is the womb of the second, and of the third, and so forth.' See also Thoen, *Strategic Affection*, 227.

<sup>60</sup> Van Eck, 'The First Dutch Feminist Tract?'

<sup>61</sup> Van Schurman, *The Learned Maid*. The other two editors were Jacobus Lydius, a minister of the Reformed Church at Dordrecht, and the Dordrecht physician Johan van Beverwijck.

hand to perform those full strokes, and (as it were) to bruise a letter as men do'.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, calligraphy was seen in the Dutch Republic as an upper-class pastime that aligned with embroidery and paper cutting as feminine activities, designed primarily to avoid idleness and flaunt one's elegance, rather than subvert expectations. The disciplining of the hand was expected to discipline the heart.<sup>63</sup> Against this background, Colvius's expectation that Van Schurman could master the writing of East Asian logographic characters, which were a source of so much scholarly and philosophical speculation among her male peers, was in fact a radical challenge to the traditional notions of femininity. As late as 1772, a French scholar marvelled at Van Schurman's ability, 'admired in the entire universe', to write 'so well that it was difficult to believe that it was possible for a woman to draft such beautiful characters'.<sup>64</sup>

When Jan Lievens portrayed this 'learned maid,' he presented her as if just interrupted in the act of reading, with two fingers as a page holder (fig. 3). In the foreground are an inkpot and quill at hand – not dissimilar to how a painter's palette and brush might be included in an artist's portrait or self-portrait, as references to his or her virtuosity. When Colvius sent Van Schurman his gift of foreign scripts, both as a challenge to her linguistic and artistic prowess and as an endorsement of it, he conveyed an even more lofty sentiment about 'Natures master-piece amongst women, excelling the very Muses': he suggested that her talents extended beyond the world of the Western classics, to East Asia.

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62 Davies, *The Writing Schoolemaster*, sig. Aiv. See also Wolfe, 'Women's Handwriting'.

63 Jensen Adams, 'Disciplining the Hand'.

64 Dubois, *Histoire abrégée*, 120: 'Cette fille savante en tous genres, admirée de l'univers entier, écrivoit si bien qu'on avoit peine à croire qu'il fût possible à une femme de tracer d'aussi beaux caractères'. On Van Schurman's bending of boundaries, see De Baar, 'Transgressing Gender Codes'.

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