

Hans van de Ven

Born 1958.

Life story interview by Alan Macfarlane.

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Contents

1. Family Background
2. School
3. University
4. Cambridge
5. China

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1. Family Background



I was born in 1958 in the Hague, Netherlands; we have family trees which go back to the fifteenth century but I don't really pay much attention to that. In living memory my paternal grandmother is an important figure, but more important is my maternal grandfather who I never knew for the simple reason that during the war he was taken prisoner by the Germans and ended up as slave labour and died near Berlin in the last days of the war. As an image he became a very important figure; his body was never found. A couple of years ago we went with cousins, nephews and some of my children to retrace his steps, so it keeps echoing through; war memories round that are very important.

He was a very interesting man, a happy man it seems, very proud of the place he lived, Schiedam near Rotterdam. He had been trained as a sailor for the Dutch Merchant Marine and just when he was about to take over a ship they discovered he was colour-blind which was a problem at night at sea because you can't see green and red, and he was let go. He came from a Protestant family but he married a Catholic and he adopted her faith in what was a very Protestant community in Rotterdam. He became one of the town's notables and enjoyed lots of things, messing about in boats, going to London to buy antiques because they were very cheap there at the time, and we still have antique furniture he bought at that time. The family were in the wine, beer and gin business, and the gin, especially, made money as the drink of the poor Rotterdam proletariat.

My father was born in 1927-8 and his life was heavily shaped by the war because he was a teenager in Holland and had to flee; the Germans would come and round up young men for the armed forces, and they would hide in the countryside to escape. In 1945 when he was eighteen he decided he wanted to be a hero; he went to Indonesia and fought there for four years, fighting young men who also thought they should be heroes in the war against the Dutch.

It is interesting that the Dutch Empire gets written out of everything, and forgotten by the Dutch, shamefully enough. So my grandfather was a resistance worker,

helped pilots, stuff like that, there is a lot of stuff we don't really know but there is a certificate declaring him a war hero. Of course, my father ended up the opposite and he suffered from that a great deal, not that he ever talked about it in after-years; he worked for the Catholic Church so a Catholic background is an important part of my own background.

My mother suffered polio as a young child so was in bed for a long time; I think it is that and the death of her father at a very vulnerable age, with families falling apart all over the place, then of course the hunger-winter when everywhere there was serious famine, shaped her life; then I think their marriage was profoundly affected by the death of my younger brother who drowned in 1961-2. He was about two years old and had walked into a ditch; I think very few couples survive that kind of thing and they broke up; my father went to university but for Catholics there was only one university to go to in Holland. It was an issue then but not later; and then he worked as an economist for the Dutch Catholic Church; they didn't go for any higher degrees, but he loved learning and read widely; he was deeply interested in history and I think that did affect me, and he had a real interest in the world beyond Europe.

His Indonesian background must have mattered as a real curiosity; for my mother, her stubbornness is something I share and I'm usually grateful for but not always. The stories she told about her own upbringing with her father before the war, which were full of adventure and fun in the countryside, walking, building things with your hands and so on, I think has rubbed off on me in many ways. We own a sail-boat and I think that that is a big part of my life, and that echoes through

I have an older brother; he never went to secondary school but he is a great hero of mine; he is a wonderful brother, extremely supportive, and has achieved things in his life that show great character. He lives independently, he has a fiancée who he has had for 35 years; he has been very good to my children and is fun-loving; he knows his own short-comings, doesn't ask me for help but asks my sister. That works very well and I am very proud of him, genuinely proud, and I think he knows it.

I have two sisters, one is now in her fifties, lives in Holland, is married and has two daughters; she has gone through difficult periods but is now settled and very happy and productive, running various civil society concerns; my second sister unfortunately died when she was thirty-one by suicide.

My first memory is my younger brother dying; I didn't see it but I know the place; the complete panic, the ambulance coming, and people trying to console people. Not the greatest of first memories.

We moved from this area near the Hague to a place near Haarlem which is itself near Amsterdam, above the North Sea canal which cuts through the province and connects Amsterdam to the sea; this was still the time of the division in education, at least between the various religious groupings in Holland.



North Sea Canal

2. School

I went down the Catholic stream until university; we had several teachers whom I liked; one that stands out was in the fifth year of my primary school; there was a teacher who liked history a lot and was very good at telling stories; I was thinking about this the other day.

The other thing I remember about my primary school was that we were reading all these Catholic hagiographies; I thought they were great, all this wonderful stuff happening, and I just devoured them; I am sort of kind of sorry for the Protestants that missed this; hagiographies are more important in Chinese upbringing, of course, and you get them back in Maoist cartoons which are often very hagiographical; I fancy there was a connection there and I understand where it is coming from.

I did Latin in my secondary school, and there was a wonderful teacher, an older woman who was extremely encouraging and I think helped me a lot to grow intellectually, but she also made it absolutely clear that I should not continue with my Latin; but she sent me on and I became much more mathematical than linguistic. Another teacher who very clearly shaped me was a teacher of English and I had him for the last three years of my secondary school; at this time I was in a boarding school, I was there from fifteen to eighteen, and that school was terrific because we could hang out with very similar sorts of people. He was great, definitely odd, super-bright, had travelled the world, I guess, but tossed the textbooks away and we learnt English by listening to the songs of Bob Dylan, reading Kurt Vonnegut, and all that stuff; the kind of stuff you would read in the 70s if you wanted to be cool.

He took us to English language theatres in Amsterdam; we went hiking together; some other teachers - they were really dedicated teachers with us as students; it is something we sort of do in Cambridge which is a great thing; they took us on trips to Paris and would hang out with us; that was really good. It was a single-sex boarding school but had just begun to admit girls, who could not board of course. There were only two or three girls when I was there; it was a very free-spirited school, funded by the Dutch State but not under its control; it was run out of two Bishoprics and they did just what they wanted to do, which was great. We read all kinds of literature, did all kinds of music and theatre, we had the run of this place in the evenings – great.

I was not very good at sport; I played hockey in my home town at weekends, but not for the school; I was good for a bit and then was not so good, but it was a club of friends, some of whom I have known since I was five, and some of them I still see regularly and we go sailing together, so bonds were made. Of other sports I did sailing and became a sailing instructor, little dinghies, nothing seaworthy at that point; that is not athletic but could be called a sport.

I didn't really have other hobbies but played a bit of chess; I didn't collect things; I played the flute for a while, but this is all part of the aspiring bourgeois social stratum we belonged to; so in order to show your status you were supposed to play hockey, music, and that sort of thing; I was never really committed to that and

found it pretentious. I was interested in listening to music, collecting records like all teenagers do; I still listen to music and am extremely eclectic, ranging from classical, which I picked up from my wife, to very jazzy - hip-hop goes too far for me. My sons shape my music as I listen to the stuff they listen to; I don't work listening to music

Confirmation is important in the Catholic Church and in our case happened in the last year of primary school; one of my anxieties - which Protestants wouldn't have - was having to go to Confession, which seemed to be a very odd thing to do; but the Dutch Catholic Church at that time - and my father was part of the movement - was very liberal, and they decided that it was absolute nonsense to have twelve year-olds go to Confession; so I was spared that routine.

Then quickly after that the wave of letting go of religion and breaking down all the barriers between the various religious groups in Holland swept through, and certainly swept me away and I very quickly stopped going to church by fourteen-fifteen. Now I don't go to church, don't read the Bible (which Catholics don't have to do in any case), and I am not interested in spiritual things. I recognise the importance of religion, of course; I like the way that Chinese go about religion which is much more lively and fun and colourful, so I am an enthusiastic observer but not a participant.

I was politically conscious at school. I did write stuff for the school newspaper and did political commentary which must have been completely embarrassing on so many levels; again, we had a very good history teacher, and Dutch history text-books - this was when the EU began - were completely pro-Europe. I was bolshy and rebellious and said this was just propaganda; the teacher asked if you were to criticise the EU what would you criticise it for. I thought it was just for business and enterprise, what about workers? I think that Corbyn is stuck in that age; however, the text-book was chucked out and people started talking; but I remember that there was quite a lot of debate but text-books gave a version of the past and of the future which needed to be thought about.

3. University

At university I studied sinology and Chinese culture. My choosing this subject had nothing to do with China. I am often asked why I did it and I don't have a very good answer. In Holland the system is that if you pass in a certain type of secondary school it gives you access to any course you want given that you have done preparatory work; so I couldn't have done medicine because I didn't do chemistry, but I could have done mathematics, theology, history, English.

I thought about English for a while as I was actually very good at it and I liked reading English literature a lot; but in the end I decided to choose between Arabic, Russian and Chinese for two reasons. My father was urging me to do something more global than just a European language, and he wanted me to do Arabic and that was one good reason not to do that; but I also thought about it - the Middle East was a mess and I couldn't see how that was going to change in my lifetime.

Russian seemed rather dark for some reason and I didn't like the Soviet stuff, but China was a blank slate at the time; this was in 1976 but was before the death of Mao; the other set of reasoning is that to be a sinologist is absolute evidence that you are very smart, and proving that I am was very important to me, and I think it is to very many sinologists in both the US and here.

The course comprised of an introduction to the modern language which was taught in a modern way, there was a bit of culture and history, and actually it was a very good course; aside from the modern language, we were essentially prepared for the Chinese Civil Service examinations. So we read the classics, poetry, and we still do it, and maybe that's not such a bad thing; we do it here; our students read much of the same stuff; so there was a lot of memorization. But again it was a good group of students and we became good friends, and there were very good teachers.

Erik Zuercher who was a great expert in Buddhism, a rather distant figure, but he had in my second year suggested I read the the Gaozengzhuan (Biographies of Eminent Monks)' which is a sixth century selection of articles in classical Chinese, and that I should go to the library and work it out. We had to learn thousands of characters. It was just constant. Another teacher was Wilt Idema an amazing person, a great translator who ended up teaching at Harvard. He won the Erasmus prize in Holland, and translated stuff both into English and Dutch so brought all this stuff to Europe and the US, and he knows Chinese literature inside out. He would just get us together and make us read that stuff; he has that kind of feel for classical Chinese that felt normal, and he just introduced it that way through that world, juxtaposing really important facts with funny stories

There was no time for involvement in student politics or anything else; student societies in Holland were rather like those in the US and tended to be obnoxious groups with slight fascist tendencies as far as I could see. I was one of the "nihilists" who refused to participate in that kind of thing. But we did have a group of friends who were entirely obnoxious in believing that we would read on our own and so put the world to rights. My assignment was to read Heinrich Heine, somebody else did some Japanese stuff, then we would get together and talk, which was all great fun.

At the end of the third year some of the group went to China for a year of study, the first group to do so; I didn't go as I needed a break and this was utterly critical in my life; one of my modern Chinese language teachers came from the University of Pennsylvania and suggested that I went there for a year. There I met this absolutely superb woman historian, Susan Naquin. I didn't do any courses or anything like that, but she met me every Friday afternoon to discuss various monographs. She was a Ming historian; she told me to choose what I wanted to read and then write a report on it, and then we would talk about it for an hour.

I fell in love with America and had a great time; I liked that much broader approach to thinking about history, literature and culture, debate, argument, travel; I applied to various universities she sent me on to Harvard; for me doing Chinese is that you do one step, then the next step comes, then you go to China and have a good time there, archives open up and so on.

I went to Harvard in 1980; John Fairbank was still there but he no longer taught. My teacher was Philip Kuhn who was an amazing mind, a very interesting person; the American system is very different and you do a lot of course work; you are left on your own to read everything there is and you are finally allowed to begin your Ph.D. In all it takes 7-8 years - you do a bit of teaching, spend a year in China; I went to Taiwan in 1983 for a year which was a waste of time in terms of writing a dissertation because I was writing on the Chinese Communist Party. In Taiwan there was still martial law and no archives were open at all, let alone about the Communist party, so this was a most irresponsible step by my supervisor to let me do that.

But I met a lot of people at Academia Sinica where I was working, and I did read quite a bit; it was unproductive but it happened. In 1986 I went to China; I had a good idea of what I wanted to do, the sources were still a problem, but in the 80's in China sometimes things were very tight, at others, open, but there was enormous energy and intellectual curiosity, liveliness.

I was at Peking University and I was already looking at a lot of material that nobody else had seen in the US or Europe. But I was talking with other graduate students and made connections that way; at one point a student at the Peoples University, Renmin, said I needed to use a certain set of classified documents; he would give some stuff to me at the end of the day - he would smuggle it out, I think.

I would run down to the offices of the Washington Post and copy it through the night; in the end I had two very big bags of documents and I left with all the material I needed for my dissertation; the materials were about the first years of the Communist Party so included all the internal resolutions, all the reports, lots of letters and memoirs; it was clearly not complete and the archives are still not open, but there was a vast amount that nobody had seen that allowed me to write about this process, the first seven years of the Communist Party in an entirely new way.

The material is still there; what I decided to do was to give it to the Fairbank Center, to Nancy Hearst, the Librarian who is still there; then fortunately most of my fellow graduate students and others who went to China, who were all bringing back material, also gave it to the Fairbank Center, so they have a vast amount, the best

collection on Communist Party history. Rod MacFarquhar is an example and has used similar stuff.

One of my lovely moments as a very young graduate student trying to write a dissertation, was Stuart Schram, the great scholar on Maoism; we were going through some papers and he was clearly interested; he repeated the phrase "power comes out of the barrel of a gun" saying it was from 1935; my riposte was "No, 1927 and here is the evidence"; that material at that level of revelation forced a re-thinking.

I had no difficulty publishing my thesis but it has never been translated into Chinese, and is the only one that hasn't been; I know it has been widely read in China and downloaded from one website at least 60,000 times; when I now meet some colleagues for the first time they recall 'From Friend to Comrade', so it is circulated; it has never caused me to be blocked from going to China as the early history of the Communist Party is not sensitive enough.

On my conclusions, the title 'From Friend to Comrade' illustrates the point; this was a group of idealistic young men who travelled to France and Moscow, clearly superbly bright, from all over China, had been chatting in various dormitories, tea-shops, and so on, and got caught up in the revolutionary wave that swept through China in the 1920s.

They realized in the end that they needed a vast amount of discipline to make this work as a party, were very tough and would need a lot of violence if they were going to succeed in changing China. That was one level, the other was that they were just human beings and in any political party they are nasty to each other, and at times can sound quite silly. There is one bit where I write about Mao.. 'For Communist Revolution we need Party, Army, the masses, and free vegetable gardens...'; I was examined by Ben Schwartz and Philip Kuhn's, supervisor, and I don't know that anyone else had to read it; Benjamin Schwartz was an extremely wise person, widely-read, of course, and I think his crushing comment was that it was a nice dissertation but I should go to the beach and think for a while, which I guess is why I am in Cambridge

After that I went to Berkeley which was great, and I talked to publishers and the thesis was published after two or three years; I was only in Berkeley for about four or five months, and half-way through I did apply to come to a lectureship here [Cambridge, UK]; in Chinese studies.

Berkeley was empty at the time; the great people in the field were just not there; there were some Japanologists but not Chinese scholars; in February 1988 we moved here; I met my wife at Harvard where Chinese studies were on the third floor and Middle Eastern studies on the fifth floor, and there was an elevator in between. We married before I went to Taiwan as I didn't want to go there alone and she wanted to go too; we were 24 and 25 at the time. Our neighbours to their great credit refused to believe that young Americans ever got married.

The critical development in that year was that my Father in Law, who was the President of the American University in Beirut, was murdered by Hezbollah; that

was another reason why Taiwan was simply not productive; it was disastrous, very difficult; my wife was born in Beirut as was her father, so a deep Middle Eastern connection. She did study at the American University in Cairo for a while, and we meet many people with that sort of connection which has been a very interesting part of our lives, but confirms me in my belief that it's much better to stay in China than the Middle East.

She did Arabic at Oberlin as part of her undergraduate liberal arts degree; she loved music and Oberlin is famous for that; then she did a Ph.D. in education at Harvard, and I think for her to come here was a difficult thing. I came to a lectureship in Chinese which was attached to a college; this was rare at the time because people in my Faculty were useless to colleges given the number of students we had; the then Master of St Catherine's was a good friend of Merle Goldman who was a figure in Chinese studies at Harvard, and so when I was still at Berkeley I received a call; the first sentence I remember clearly was "do you want a parking place in the middle of Cambridge?" so I said yes, and the deal was done; the Master was Barry Supple.

4. Cambridge

Cambridge was a complete shock for me, coming from Holland then the US. We were still recovering from bits of trauma relating to my Father in law's death. It is such a different world; I think part of the problem was that we, in our late 20s, arrived to find that most of my colleagues were much older; it was the wrong time in the life cycle and they were busy with children and their careers, so it took us a while to adjust.

The teaching system is very different; class is such an important part, and the rituals around this place; I was appalled and thought it was stultifying, but because of people like Chris Bayly who understood, that was a great help; Chris was very gentle, maybe not that outspoken, but I think very observant of people, and acutely aware, maybe because of his own experiences in India, how different life can be, and how odd English life can be to outsiders.

He would regularly have little chats and talk and encourage; then, and to a certain degree now, what was then Oriental Studies was heavily philological, and I am not and will never be; the same to some degree was true, certainly in Middle Eastern studies and Arabic, and also in Indian studies, Sanskrit being so dominant. I think he saw that struggle quite clearly and encouraged me to follow my own way which was much more like his own way.

I think the real shift came when we had children and through the playground, and life moved quickly on; first of all it changed our perspective on life and enjoyment, but also we live in a small village, and in many ways it is a very open place, once you have been there for a while and are part of a community; we lived first in Foxton and then Meldreth, where we still live, which is very pleasant; now whenever somebody asks me how long have I lived here, I am now so old that I can say "longer than you"

I quickly came to appreciate the teaching and supervision system; I liked the very personal, individual relationship with students; unlike some of my colleagues I really enjoy teaching, more and more so; if you had asked what would you like to keep then teaching would be first I think. I have a room in some ways like this, and I sit around with my students and we talk. The students are bright; they may not always be as prepared as you would like, they tend not to be, but they are just very bright and very engaging; that side of Cambridge I think is superb.

I like all types of teaching, undergraduate to Ph.D, and lecturing, which is a performance, but that's all right, and small-group teaching and seminars I very much like; the seminar that I like best is the one on the Second World War in China because we have fourth-year students, M.Phil and Ph.D. students, so British students but some of the M.Phil and Ph.D. student will be from China for whom this is a topic which cuts closely to the bone, of course. To get them all to engage - some are from America, some from the military - all very small groups, never more than ten, that is an absolute delight to see happening.

On administration, the Faculty went through a very difficult period and I was Chair at the time; people were commenting that you walked in the building and could feel the tension, and I didn't like that, it was a terrible time.

Following that there is more and more bureaucracy which seems to me nonsense - form-filling, surveys of this and that, driven by various legal provisions. Nobody's guilty but it is taking over life and that's not good and I don't want to do that. As an act of resistance of the powerless, I refuse to fill out the TAS (time allocation survey). Every year there is a reaction; the computer must be programmed to tell the Head of Department to push me to fill it in, and I think they then email me and I say yes/no I'm not going to do it, then it tends to end.

5. China

My abiding interest in China is the whole theme of violence, war, organised and disorganised, partly because it is a reality of Chinese history for the last two centuries; hopefully, now, it is expunged from the system for a while.

I found that interesting academically because people wrote about the Communist revolution as if there had been no violence, and I thought that was just the oddest way of thinking about it; of course, China was written out of the Second World War in both the US and here; talking in China with people the violence is obviously there and has left all kinds of people issues to be dealt with; it also relates to my own childhood and I find it very interesting that I can talk with my generation, not necessarily the younger generation, in a way that I think people that have grown up in America or Britain probably couldn't.



General Joseph 'Vinegar Joe' Stilwell.

Holland went through all the troubles of occupation, collaboration, starvation - we can share stories, so it has clearly come out of that; it is a subject I try to escape but I get pulled back into all the time; the first thing I wrote on the subject was 'War and Nationalism in China: 1925-1945'; academically it was an argument saying that the American judgement of China in the Second World War was completely wrong and they had been completely misguided by the whole Stilwell narrative that Stilwell was a great hero and the Chinese were incompetent and not willing to fight Japan.

None of that is true; when I first started talking about this in the US people got very upset as I was taking down one of their heroes; so it took a while in America to be

accepted but it is now; for the Chinese, I was using archives in China, real serious archives, and was the first to do that.

The Stilwell myth of the Nationalists being incompetent and unpatriotic had a lot to do with America's decision not to support Chiang Kai-shek, especially during the Civil War of 1948; that was General George Marshall; the third was the self-justification theme; within the China field especially in the US that is sensitive because if you challenge that it means also saying that the judgement of the field that the Nationalists were a lost cause is wrong and has political implications, and because McCarthyism is involved, so many people in the China studies field I think this is why things became so stuck.

Fairbank himself was implicated; one of the Chinese reviewers had a wonderful line saying this is great, it is serious history, but bloody hell, first it's Fairbank and then it's one of his students who get to say what's what, and this is not good. Coming to Cambridge opened up to me the ability to write about military history as the subject is a dead-end in the US and it wasn't here, and there were great military historians in the History Faculty then.

That was very helpful, and I have been writing about this in a couple of edited volumes, and more recently 'China at War' which challenges, which tries to put the Civil War and Revolution plus the war against Japan and even Korea, into one narrative analytical framework, in part to tell the Chinese this is not just about Japan, you were killing each other too, don't forget that; there were reasons for that and you need to understand; that is one argument, but the other side of the argument is to try to de-centre the Anglo-centred view, the Churchillian view, of the Second World War to say that people fought the Second World War for many different reasons. In China, as in India, as in Indonesia, that was to get rid of the Europeans; so the Churchillian view must come down. It sold much better in China than it has here; one reason I was writing it was the Brexit argument and that is clearly there; I am moving towards trying to write a genuinely global history that takes all these various disparate aspirations in all these different regions, including the Middle East.

One of the next books might be looking at historians reformulating the past and therefore also the future, during the Second World War, in China, India, Indonesia, maybe Germany, maybe the US, maybe Japan, and look at it that way; I have done some of it for China and that is very interesting; it's not just about Communism or Nationalism, but many deeper questions about civilization and what it stands for that emerged at that time; it might be a way of reviving interest in Toynbee which would be interesting too; so that military side will keep going, there is so much to do, so much more to say

From the point of view of Japan, there is a great deal of ferocity but I think that they are far more sophisticated in their approach than we have assumed or allowed to admit. They were trying to create a China of a whole range of regional and local government, and that actually had a lot going for it and had quite a lot of support; one thing in doing this and beginning to look at this in a broader way, I was quite shocked and interested and surprised to see that when the Japanese invaded

Indonesia, and this is from the Dutch national history, they were welcomed absolutely.

I had always argued that the massacre in Nanjing, or the bombing more than the massacre, had eradicated sympathy for the Japanese across Asia; that is not true, they were welcomed; they knew about it as it happened in 1937 and was certainly reported in India and in Holland, so it was not a secret. In Indonesia they did not like the Dutch so that for a range of reasons the Japanese were welcomed; Burma is another example; even, I have discovered, they were first welcomed in Nanjing.

Even from the way I am talking now this is just in the bones, but the other side, and this is more by accident I have been very interested in the history of globalization. I have been very fortunate that I discovered the archives of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service in Nanjing; I always talk to archivists and have always had great luck in finding things in China; they had not been hidden but they had begun to collect them from across China in the 1980s.

I was working on my military history and became friends with some of the archivists, then they said they had a building with about half of their holdings full of materials concerning the Maritime Customs Service, it is in English, and might I want to help. I said that as it was in English I wasn't interested, but I took a look at it, saw it was very interesting but needed to be catalogued, and ultimately I ran a project to do so,

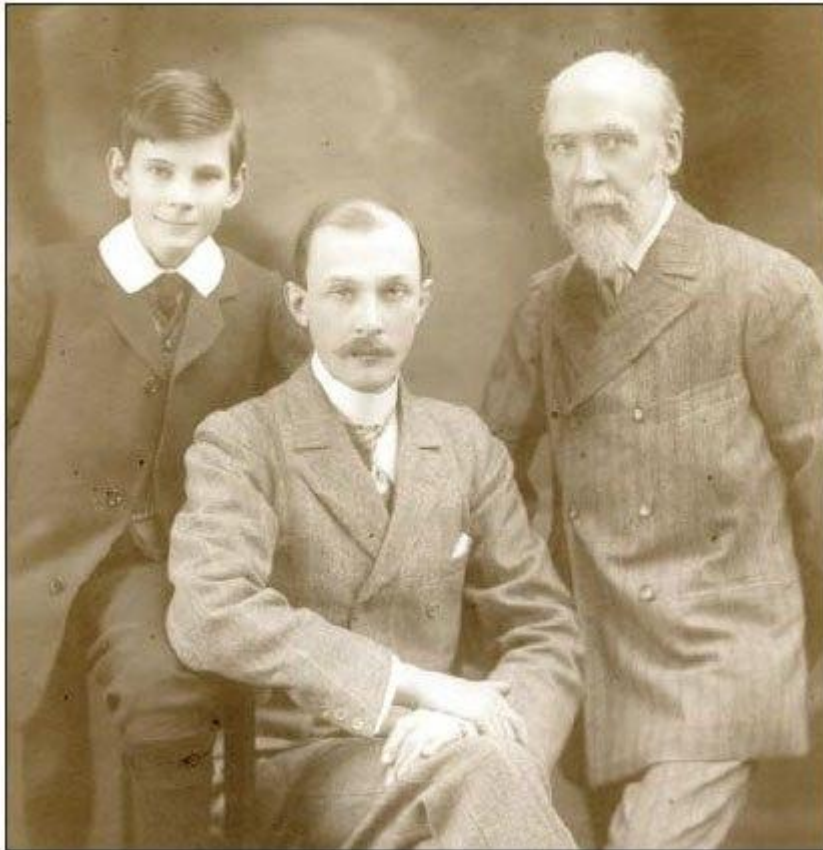
You begin by taking every file off its shelf; it was a very simple archive but we restored the original Customs indexes and catalogues so that we then could use their own search tools to go through, and that has been very productive.

One reason I wrote the book 'Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China', was a concern for globalization; I was very interested in the whole process of globalization, but Customs is a very curious organization; it's not British as many people believed; it was subject to the Chinese State, first Qing then the Republic, and various Republican governments, and they dismissed people so they were not completely powerless.

The upper levels were run largely by foreigners but from all over the world; so you had some interesting British people, but also Belgians, Italians, Russians, Americans, Dutch, Japanese. When Japan invaded China in 1937, the Head of the Customs Service was Japanese, and he used that to dampen down the effect it could have; so you get all kinds of stories that don't fit the narrative that we are used to.

Robert Hart is a very good example of that; Hart was absolutely despairing of what the British were doing in China; he had seen the occupation of Canton, for instance; he was a very religious man and he wanted to do good in China, and he believed that carving out a place to trade on the basis of a commonly accepted set of rules would be the best way to do that, and it took off from there. Of course, Robert Hart is from Ireland and I think that positioning is something that Chinese need to be told before they understand the implications.

For him the potato famine was current memory; he wanted to be part of the British elite but like many people from that kind of background, they stream through various institutions of empire to do that, but with their own Irish background very much in mind. One way to drive that home is that the post boxes in China, the Post Office colours in China, are green not red, and that is because Hart chose green, and it's exactly the same in both Taiwan and the mainland, but not in Hong Kong; I think that says a lot.



Robert Hart (right) with his son and grandson in 1909.

I think Robert Hart is a model of sense; he learnt Chinese deeply; he went to Ningbo first, he was very good at languages and his Chinese teacher prepared him for the Civil Service exams. He had the ability therefore to engage with Chinese elites on a virtually common basis, a base of equality. He had a real respect for Chinese learning and Chinese ways of living, Chinese food, Chinese dress. Of course, he had Chinese children, we know that now, but he was also a master at running a difficult bureaucracy over a very large Empire, using both what we would understand as Weberian bureaucratic means, but also traditional Chinese ways when he thought preferable and superior.

I think he helped put the country together after the Taiping rebellion; he shepherded it through the disasters of the Boxer rebellion, but he died just before the 1911 revolution. He gave China an institution which was a model institution, at a very important moment when very little else seemed to be working, but which also simply delivered the goods in terms of money for the State which needed it badly. The alternatives would have been horrendous; his phrase was always, "as long as we are helpful we will be OK, and as long as we keep in mind that those we serve

are first of all those who pay our salaries, the Chinese". So I really think he set a model for engaging in China with China that remains valid today. He is hugely respected in China now, the most famous foreigner in China; when you go to China and go through the Customs, that's it. Certainly all historians know about this, and in secondary school textbooks he is there; he's the most famous British person - not Churchill, Hart.

I think China now on the one hand has reason to be enormously proud of what has been achieved in three or four decades. I enjoy being in China tremendously, I have good friends and feel very comfortable and would happily live there. But of course what the Government is doing in terms of shutting down debate, discussion etc. is certainly for intellectuals, a disaster. I am sure if there was an election Xi Jinping would win hands down, that's how it is.

I think there are elements of development, the pollution, I worry about. I worry about the countryside a great deal; it seems China is so busy with all its high-rises in cities like Shenzhen and Shanghai and is forgetting its past. Some people have a new longing for the countryside but it is usually managed by taking a drive out and having a cup of tea, a lovely meal, and then go back. That's not what I mean. The countryside is not a good place to be; the suicide rates are very high in China in any case and you would understand why I am concerned about that sort of issue, but they are terrible in the countryside and this needs to be faced. Farming is done by women and children, the men are in the cities, and the whole of nature has been destroyed.

The fate of the farmer across the world has not been a good one, but they were used by the Communist Party to seize power in 1949 and almost as soon as they could after that they left the countryside, and left the farmers to their own fate, made them second-class citizens with the 'Hukou' system, and now the rich on the coast are becoming rich because these farmers are now cheap labour for them. This is not good and actually should be a real point of shame; Xi Jinping is trying to do something about it, I think that's true, but it clearly isn't going far enough

I think Xi Jinping is trying to do something that is very difficult and has never been done successfully before which is to turn one country into a superpower. The Dutch didn't do it very well, neither did the British, the Russians were terrible at it and so were the Americans, so there is going to be problems that are inevitable, absolutely inevitable.

But I think at least there is that history, and we know that the elites in Beijing are aware of that history; they talk about Japan and Germany as negative examples, but it is a difficult task. I am an optimist; I think there are a number of short-term then longer-term problems; the financial troubles, the credit and debit issues. The debt is terrible, pensions, the basic problems of a huge population that is very uneven, both in its gender division and young and old distribution, these are problems of governance which are tremendously difficult. There is also the issue of security; China doesn't feel secure; it needs a navy, a powerful navy; that navy needs to go somewhere and we do know that the First and Second World Wars began or were

partly created by failures of sitting powers to deal with the naval aspirations of up and coming powers. These are all difficult questions.
