

## INTERVIEW

### ‘Intellectual Histories of Chinese Studies’

Interviewee:                    **Prof. Dr. Em. Marcel Storme**  
   **Honorary Professor of the University of Beijing**  
   **Honorary President of The International Association For Procedural**  
   **Law**

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***Mieke: Professor, thank you for making time for this interview for the Oral Histories Project. My first question is about the very beginning of your China story, where your story with China starts. What is your first memory of China, if you recall?***

***Prof. Storme:*** In 1980, I was a member of the commission of foreign affairs. I have been senator for some time, and I was a member of the commission of foreign affairs and justice. One day we were invited by the Chinese government to travel to China and meet a delegation. Our delegation consisted of a group of Belgian parliamentarians who were members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I was a member of the Senate Committee. At the same time, there was a delegation of Ghent University. We went through a lot of things together. The ~~president~~ of Ghent University was there, Julien Hoste, so we could enjoy Chinese hospitality for two weeks together. I have to admit I was somehow a little surprised that we were invited for this, but the trip itself was absolutely wonderful.

It's just that I was a little bit surprised, I will tell later why we were invited there.

Our delegation was headed by Prof. Laurent Vandendriessche, the former president of Antwerp University. He was an alumnus of Ghent University, in sciences, and a very experienced China traveler. He had always been the head of their delegations to China and had been in charge of many things. The leadership was always handed down to someone he considered to be as capable as him.

While we were in China, I was really trying to figure out what the exact reason was why we were invited in this delegation. One day, we had an excellent interpreter, Liang Yi a very tall man who appeared to me that he was from excellent pedigree, the type of fine aristocratic figure. His French was excellent. His interpretation was always in French. Once on the train, I went to sit next to him, and asked him, "Why are we invited here?" "That is very simple", he answered. "This is because the Chinese government wants

*f. Rector*

Belgium to site nuclear warheads on their territory against the Soviet Union". I was so astonished. He said to me: "You have to convince.... – because he was really well informed (laughs) - ... your red companions." And of course he meant the senators of the Socialist party. According to his information, they still had to be convinced. This was the real purpose behind this invitation, to persuade the Belgian politicians that they should site nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union.

That was our story. It didn't have anything to do with legal education in China, but that indeed was the reason why I was allowed to be there. I was invited to be there, not as a lawyer, but as a senator.

**Mieke: Since at that time, there were no emails, no nothing;  
How did they know about our political issues?**

**Prof. Storme:** They were so well-informed, it is amazing.

But now, to complete my story of the nuclear warheads, it doesn't have anything to do with China. It still is a funny story. I have been teaching for years at the University faculty of law in Riga, capital of Lithuania, and other law faculties for over 10 years in the 90s. One day, we visited the Police Academy. They offered legal (juridical) courses. The director of the Police Academy showed us a big square, and he told me, to my utter dismay, "Here were the nuclear warheads for Belgium and the Netherlands." (laughs)

**Mieke: What a story!**

**Prof. Storme:** I come back to China. We were in Beijing for about a week. I visited the burial place of Father Ferdinand Verbiest, which was completely neglected. Have you been in China?

**Mieke: Yes, many times.**

**Prof. Storme:** Well, we stayed in the only hotel accessible for foreigners, the Beijing Hotel.

To describe the Beijing of that time, our room faced the big central boulevard, and there was only one car in the morning at eight o'clock, with the official flag of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. In the evening, at seven o'clock it returned. C'est tout, that was it. My wife took position at the corner of the street, and registered how many bicycles past. This amounted up to 10,000. I've still seen the *hutongs* in Beijing, which to our great regret were destroyed later, old quarters, ... but also antiquities, old maps, old drawings - that are worth a lot today - that I bought for next to nothing.

But well, here is where my story starts:

It was 1th of September 1980.

In Belgium this is the opening of the legal year. On that very day in my hotel room in the Beijing Hotel, every day, we got a copy of the Beijing News. I don't know if that newspaper still exists. (laughs)

The news was the following: "Today we re-open our Ministry of Justice". And I said to myself: " This I have to see!" We had scheduled a visit to the Imperial Gardens, which I missed, so I went to the Ministry of Justice. I asked our interpreter how to get there, and he said he I would announce my visit in advance.

I arrived in an old, neglected building, and had a discussion with about three, four or five people. They were the newly appointed directors of the Department of Justice. I told them, that I was very happy and honored to be granted the opportunity to join them in the event that day.

I explained to them that we in Belgium are armed to support them in this and would be able to give them advise whenever needed. I told them we live in a country where in one day you can drive back and forth to the biggest judicial institutes in Europe: Strasbourg, Luxembourg, and The Hague. This was an argument that impressed them. I told them we recently had a new law book (Judicial Code), and since 1970 a new one for Procedural Law. I suggested that we could help them with drafting law codes. Thirdly, we could provide training. We are internationally oriented. We speak different languages, we could help in your endeavors in Europe etcetera. This all was without any official engagement of course. All this was diligently noted down.

After I returned back home, about two years later, I think it was a fax I got from the then Belgian ambassador in China. *"You are invited to come in a group of about five people that Denorme can choose, to come to China to elucidate your plans with regard to legal education in China here in Beijing."*

I couldn't believe my eyes! (laughs).

We traveled back to China with the team of five people, among whom Prof. Jacques Bourgeois, who had worked in the European Union; who is now Professor at Ghent University and lawyer at the same time in Brussels, Roger De Meyer who is an authority on administrative law, and Jules Dhaenens who is into criminal law, and Marc Maresceau (European law).

So this was in 1982 and we went to China for about two weeks. We held meetings with representatives of different departments. At a certain moment I asked them why they choose us for further cooperation. You know, although the Chinese are sometimes very close, they won't disclose things easily. I don't know how they are now but at that time they were worse than the Japanese. The problem is they hide behind the difficult language. There are two languages I never managed to learn, and that is Chinese and Japanese. We had two Chinese people working with us here, two doctores *honoris causa*. Jian Ping, who has been president of the University of Beijing was sent to the pigs, because he was one of the big leaders of the Tiananmen revolts. Jian Ping studied in Belgium, and I recall that during his laudation, I made an attempt to speak some Chinese, but he didn't understand a word. (laughs) I realized I should not continue in Chinese.

And then we had Cao Jianming, who worked for a year as a researcher for Professor Johan Erauw.

He later became Executive Vice-President of the Supreme People's Court, the highest court in China. At the start of 2009, he was appointed Attorney-General for China. He was thus raised to a status equivalent to that of the Chairman of the Supreme Court and of Deputy Prime Minister of the nation. In 2001, he was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Ghent. He is a very charming man. But don't start to talk about Tibet with him because then he starts to rage. (laughs). He even has been a guest at my home.

Okay, back to 1982.

It turned out we had made an huge impression on the Chinese. And I could not keep myself from asking again and again, why Ghent University? At a certain point, the leader of the commission that was working together with us, let himself out and said: "Because you were the person who worked the hardest". But I have to tell you, this working, it mostly was so that we were all sitting in my room, late in the evening drinking this strange Chinese rice wine, in white bottles, talking together and having fun. And when someone knocked on the door, and asked why we were still working so late, we dropped all the papers on the floor and told him we were preparing for the next day. (laughs) It had made an impression.

**13:40**

Later we got the message that the Minister of Justice would come to Belgium, to sign a contract with the law faculty of Ghent University. I think I still was the Dean at that time. We received the Minister who was an agricultural engineer. He was mostly interested in visiting the faculty of agronomy instead of the Ministry of Justice. But he did anyway, and this is when we signed a contract. But do you know that part of the archives of the faculty of law at Ghent University have disappeared? He signed this document of vital importance, in which it was agreed that we, here at Ghent University, would train the future Chinese lawyers. We really were the first faculty in the whole world who was allowed to do this. No one ever believes me when I say this, but it is the truth. It was before the American universities started to do this. All this because we supposedly worked very hard during the time that the Chinese government had invited university people from all over the world. Apparently we had made the biggest impression.

And so the delegation of the Ministry of Justice of China came to visit Ghent and I managed to arrange a meeting with the then Belgian Minister of Justice, Jean Gol.

This is also an hallucinating story. So I got to see Jean Gol and the cabinet chef, Holsters who later became judge of cassation. Holsters welcomed me in his cabinet. He was the type of dry cynical person. He told me: "Prof. Storme, you are a very fortunate man, because you will be granted the opportunity to meet my minister for more than 30 minutes. As a cabinet chef, I never managed to do that!" Can you imagine?"

At the Department of Justice Gol was vice premier, minister of the institutions, the minister of Foreign Trade and the minister of Justice.

We had a meeting with Gol, together with the Chinese minister, with some excellent interpreters. During this time, the spoken language was always French. Yes, the Chinese minister came to Ghent university. There is a picture of this in my memoirs, the Green book. Do you have this?

**Mieke: No.**

**Prof. Storme:** There is a picture taken of the moment where he signed the agreement for providing legal education for Chinese lawyers. That was in 1983, if I remember well. It really is quite an unbelievable story.

**Mieke: So there was no legal education training in higher education at all in China at that time?**

**Prof. Storme:** Well, we did two things.

Firstly, we said we would provide legal education for Chinese here in Belgium, or in Europe.

You know, I always had very good relations with the major players in the fields of procedural law.

I had my network. I could include a lot of people from Germany, France, the Netherlands in the program.

The aim was double: We received Chinese students hearing Ghent, we managed to collect enough war booty let's say, money to finance that. With that war booty, ... So firstly, as I said, we had Chinese students.

I recall the first group coming to Ghent, of which some were able to work here in my office. There was this one guy who greedily used the phone, which resulted in telephone bills of more than hundred thousand Belgian francs. (laughs) We didn't control that, you know. And one day I told them that I would provide prove the same day that in one day we could visit all the judicial colleges in Europe. I found two colleagues of my office who were ready to leave at 5 o'clock in the morning and drive four or five Chinese people to Strasbourg. There, they were received by Hugo Vandenberghe, who was a member of the commission of the

court. By the evening, they were back in Ghent. And then of course they went to The Hague, and then to Luxembourg. Idem dito. And so I proved to them that in one day, you could reach the international courts back and forth from Ghent. So that was 1983.

**Mieke: Was this a master training at UGent, or was it part of their training in China?**

*Prof. Storme:* Well, I give you an example. There was a student called Hu Yuanxiang. He was a student of Beijing University. He was sent to Ghent. You should actually ask Prof. Maresceau, he knows. In those days, I was the Dean of the faculty of law. That must have been around 1984, 1985. And I remember the day when Hu arrived in Ghent. He was sent by Jian Ping. And so here in Ghent, he studied European law.

**Mieke: In which language?**

*Prof. Storme:* In Dutch! Unbelievable but true. I was teaching European law on Mondays from 5 to 7 o'clock. And I can tell you, in this course, we had more French-speaking students than Dutch-speaking students. They primarily came from Liège and from Louvain la Neuve, to obtain a degree in European Law, and to study Dutch language.

I recall a young lady. After she graduated from Ghent University, she took part in a comparative exam for diplomacy, and she came out first. I met her a few months later when she was already appointed in diplomacy, and she told me that it was thanks to her study at Ghent that she succeeded in the exam. "It was because my Dutch is very good", she said.

So Hu arrives, on a drowsy day in Ghent, and he comes to my first class. I think I was already teaching about one month. And I ask him, in Dutch: "Mr. Hu, can you please read out loud article 177"? This was the basic article on pre-judicial procedures for the court in Luxembourg. And he starts reading in Dutch, and then I refrained myself of saying: "How wonderful it would be if the Walloons would speak as well Dutch as this Chinese person did". But I didn't say it out loud, because then I would lose all these students. Instead I said "If the students of Ghent University would be able to read as well Chinese as this person reads Dutch, ..." (laughs). And this Chinese student obtained a doctoral degree at Ghent University. Hu Yuanxiang was the first Dr. in European Law of 1 billion Chinese, and he graduated from Ghent University. His supervisor was Prof. Maresceau, and he was allowed to write his dissertation in English. It was about the trade relations between China and the European Union, an excellent work, very good.

He went to work in a law firm in The Hague, who had learned that he had obtained his doctoral degree here. By that he was included in the big, international law firm. But he didn't stay long. I think he met a Chinese friend whom he married. After that he went back to China. Today he's the big chief of the ING bank in Shanghai. An alumnus of Ghent University.

So we continue. This mutual exchange, it worked quite well. There have been many colleagues from the French-speaking part of Belgium that I included in the program. Thanks to me, they went to China to teach. And the other way around, there were Chinese professors who came here to teach, so this went quite well. (1983-1986). In 1988, I was invited by a brilliant Chinese, brilliant, intelligent, but very opportunistic, and he managed to attend conferences at our expenses, have our people write articles for him et cetera. I had to decline him. Well, he invited us to organize the colloquium for practitioners in law, lawyers magistrates, in

1988, a whole week on the deontology of advocacy. So we have been teaching there for a whole week on criminal law and administrative law. Dhaenens, De Meyer, Maresceau, they all jointly participated, so we were in the same team. There was also a German guy and a Danish woman. I think there were about 300 Chinese participants.

**Mieke: And this was part of their training in Beijing University?**

**Prof. Storme:** I think so. And one Friday evening, I got a phone call at my hotel room by the guy who was leading the colloquium. He asked me if I could dedicate one more day, Saturday, to the deontology of advocacy, and in particular to the duty of Professional confidentiality. This was really something to them, that it was possible to maintain duty of professional confidentiality against the state security. Unthinkable for them. So we spent a whole day on trying to explain this to them. I think we succeeded more or less. In the evening there was a huge banquet planned. At 7 o'clock something. We said: "No, we have to continue at least one more hour!" Mark Maresceau said "You can't keep them waiting and mess up their program", but I persisted to wait until we are finished. And this is how it happened. That was in 1988.

I recall very well that I gave a kind of a farewell lecture, at the University of Beijing. They had made me Honorary Professor of the University of Beijing. They offered me that certificate, and I said a few words of thank you. My last sentence was: "There will be no rest for the Chinese lawyers". I meant to say that they had to work hard to build a constitutional state. This was my plead. So we said goodbye, and went back home.

Then, in 1989, there are the Tiananmen revolts. And I know with absolute certainty that a few of my students were murdered in the alleys along the square. I was really angry, and decided by myself, without consulting my colleagues, who blamed it against me, and I can't blame them, that we would abandon all cooperation. Prof. Bocken and some other young colleagues were not happy with this of course. I understand their irritation, that I didn't first consult with them about this issue. But I really couldn't do it anymore.

One week later, I got a phone call from a Dutch colleague from Amsterdam, who told me, "Colleague Storme, I was asked to take over your project on legal education. Could you please give me some advice or offer some help". I can tell you, I smashed down the phone. (laughs).

**Mieke: So brutal and impolite.**

**Prof. Storme:** Yes, very dirty. He asked me how to proceed in a project. And ever since I've never been back to China. Cao tried to convince me to forget about all this.

**Mieke: What do you mean, forget about all this?**

**Prof. Storme:** Well, to come back to China, and continue the cooperation. If I remember well, it was in the magazine *Streven*, that I once read an article - I'm quite sure you can find it back - of a political scientist who said: "Deng Xiaoping could do nothing but crush the rebellion, because he wanted to avoid going back to the Chinese middle ages". That sounds quite reasonable, I don't know if it's true, but Deng thought they would go back to feudal China, with the casts and everything. And therefore, they had to murder, and shoot

people down. I am not so sure.

But anyway, at this moment, the project is still running. And now there are colleagues going to Shanghai and Beijing, and even to Taiwan. My son is at the University of Leuven. He has also been in China to teach. In the past I think it was Prof. Dirix. This was for the summer school. Later, my son took over, I think it was in Shanghai or in Beijing.

**31:34**

***Mieke: I know that the faculty of law of Ghent University has an excellent corporation, for more than 25 years now, with the Shanghai East-China University of Politics and Law (ECUPL). This is mainly led by Prof. Bocken. I have been often in contact with him about his corporation when I worked at the China Platform of Ghent University.***

***Prof. Storme:*** That is very well possible. It is certainly the case that Prof. Maresceau and Prof. Erauw have put it on the rails again, and made our corporation workable again after my absence in the project. After I left the project, I had meetings and dinners with several Chinese ambassadors, and they all asked me why I didn't come back to China. I explained them why. And they were very surprised. A little bit shocked too. I just told them that a few of my students had been murdered around Tiananmen Square in 1989, and that I cannot forget that. And they persisted on telling me I had to come back. "We will welcome you as a king", they said. (laughs) That is my story!

***Mieke: So you did not cooperate with China after that in any possible way?***

***Prof. Storme:*** Not me, but Prof. Hubert Bocken did so after me, and then also Prof. Erauw.

***Mieke: Even not in the field of research? Chinese law?***

***Prof. Storme:*** No, nothing. I got the corporation on the rails, then quitted after 1989. That was it!

***Mieke: And what about your contacts?***

***Prof. Storme:*** Well, when delegations came here of course I met them. When Cao became the doctor *honoris causa*, I received him at my home. There is a Chinese lady/colleague, I don't remember from which faculty, I think it's in Shanghai too, who still sends a silk scarf every year to my wife. Apart from my own stubbornness, I have the best souvenirs from dealing with China. It's absolutely unique, such an experience.

***Mieke: Especially in those early days of foreign cooperation. In this sense, your story definitely shows a historic account.***

***Prof. Storme:*** Well, I have to say that as a team, we were not brainwashed at all. We could say whatever we wanted to say.

***Mieke: I can imagine, in those days, there was quite a lot of freedom of speech. Between the 80s and 90s., a lot was possible, and allowed. It's only later that the censorship became more fierce, and China became more closed again.***

**Prof. Storme:** Well I don't know how it is now, but in those days, we definitely had a feeling of freedom of speech. Of course we had to be a little bit prudent,...

**Mieke:** *You never had doctoral students or Chinese colleagues at your office again after 1989?*

**Prof. Storme:** No. Of course, when they came here at the faculty, and with my contact with Cao, I saw a few of them again, for instance at receptions. I'm not that stubborn.

**Mieke:** *And your relations with Taiwan? You mentioned a kind of cooperation with Taiwan. What about them?*

**Prof. Storme:** In those days there was nothing with Taiwan. It was really not done. You know, I recall when I invited Jianping to teach about Chinese law here for four colleague Bocken. The first evening he arrived, we went to pick him up at the station and we brought him to his hotel, my wife and me. He is a very amiable and easy-going person. His English was quite okay too. Well, he jumps up and down in the streets and told me that he was the happiest man in 20 years because he was able to phone to his brother in Taiwan for the first time. Literally. You don't forget such things.

**Mieke:** *And Hong Kong? Any cooperation or experience there?*

**Prof. Storme:** No, not that I remember. We did visit Hong Kong after having visited China. I think even twice. But it was not my cup of tea. I had problems with the food too. Because Hong Kong had become westernized again and the food was fat and greasy. But in China it was mainly cooked; no fried food. Soup at the end, well you know what I mean...round tables... (laughs).

It was so nice to be in China. I was the leader of the delegation in 1982, but also the second time in 1988. This included all the speeches that had to be done. But it was not so difficult, because there was always translation. So we had a lot of time to think. You tell something in French, then it is translated by the Chinese interpreter, and in the meantime you had time to think. Especially Prof. Jules Dhaenens, he was always so kind to say, "You really held a lot of speeches there. Maybe even a hundred". (laughs)

I remember we were in Shanghai once, in 1982, to discuss our plans with the Ministry of Justice. We spent a week there. Very beautiful city, Shanghai. We stayed in a very old English hotel, with beautiful rooms with parquets, copper handles,... in the city centre. Wonderful!

And so we arrived in Shanghai one Saturday evening, and our guide said: "Okay, this is the program for tomorrow". I said that I really wanted to go to church the next morning. My colleagues were not so happy with me because we didn't discuss this in advance. (laughs). And they asked me how long it would take. I said: "I don't know". I repeated that I really wanted to participate in a mess tomorrow. And then they agreed. They would arrange what they could. I told them not to change the program. The program starts at nine, and we should keep that. They phoned me in my room - I stayed there with Prof. Dhaenens, at the room door was written: "Jules and Marcel" (laughs) - I think it was about 11, 11.30 pm, to tell me that they would come to pick me up at 5.30am the next morning. I thought to myself, oh no, not in the middle of the night. Which region are you from?

**Mieke:** *I am from around the Kempen. But I studied a long time in Ghent.*



*Prof. Storme:* So you know the dialect of Ghent? Well, Jules Dhaenens said: "It is well spent", which means that I earned it, that I had asked for it (laughs). And so the next morning the taxi was waiting outside at 5.30am, and to my surprise, except for one person of the delegation, all others joined me to go to church. We got to a church, and it was a Protestant church. I did not agree. I wanted a Catholic church. And we managed to get there anyway, an old Catholic church, at around 6.30am. It was a huge church in Shanghai, almost like a Cathedral. I think there were about thousand people. It was really packed with people.

**41: 50**

And the mess was done according to the pre-conciliar rites, with the priest's back facing the people. With the latest gospel, the priest gave his blessing, then, left at the altar.... I asked: "Jules, what is he going to do"? And he replied: "Well, did you forget, this is the latest gospel". And I was surprised that it really still existed. When we left, of course everyone saw this strange group of 7, 8 foreign people. Outside there was a Chinese nun. A young non-with the beautiful hat. She spoke fluently French, and said to me, "Monsieur, nous sommes unis dans le Seigneur" [Trans.: We are united through the Lord]. She spoke excellent French! She had studied in France. It's a hallucinating story. I wrote an article on this, and it was published in the magazine *Tertio*. They had changed the sentence that I wrote, "a beautiful Chinese nun was waiting for us", into "a friendly Chinese sister". (laughs) I was really angry. They did this without asking me, so pointless. Oh, there are many of these kinds of stories that still surface when I start thinking about it again.

***Mieke: Yes, but it's really impressive, this church story!***

*Prof. Storme:* I recall there was a very good assistance at the embassy, Bavo, a journalist of the Belgian radio and television. I forgot his full name. He helped me a lot, the first time in China in 1980. He was there with his wife and two children. I think the children even had a Chinese name. And I asked him if it was possible to visit the burial place of father Verbiest. The people at the Belgian Embassy in Beijing didn't even know it existed. But we found it, in the outskirts of Beijing. I took a taxi for which I paid five Belgian francs. It took one hour to get there, one hour to get back. Later, I wrote a letter to the pastor of Pittem, the village of Verbiest, to tell him that the grave needed maintenance urgently. No response. Then I wrote a letter to the mayor. Again, no response. They told me it was not so surprising, because the mayor and the pastor were in a fight. But later, they renovated the grave, and it was given a beautiful memorial tablet.

**45:04**

At that time there was only one shop in Beijing, the friendship store. I remember, that one day, I left my camera on the table, and two hours later, I found it back at the same place. That was still possible then. And I remembered they came to sell us things, a hat costed about one Belgian franc, a beautiful straw hat. And I wanted to give a little bit more, and the Chinese were shouting at me, that I should not give more. (sighs) Giving tips was absolutely out of the question, even for a taxi driver. This was in the 80s. I can imagine this is not the case anymore nowadays.

***Mieke: Giving tips is accepted now, but it's is still a quite recent phenomenon.***

*Prof. Storme:* Of course, it can be considered as corruption, but there is no aspect of corruption to it. But they can consider it like that. But I recall very well the shouting that I should not pay more than the one Belgian franc.

**Mieke: This was the time when foreigners in China still had to use a different currency than Chinese.**

**Prof. Storme:** Does the Beijing hotel still exist? There was a big hall and a big map of the world saying, we have friends all over the world. (laughs)

**Mieke: Yes, it still exists. This indeed was the first and in the beginning only hotel where foreigners could stay.**

**47:23**

**Prof. Storme:** But you know, we have still known China in poverty. I've never understood how they managed to build such an imperium in 20 years' time, that this is even possible economically. But it really was a poor country at that time. But the people were fed well, they were dressed decently. I have still seen them all wearing Mao suits, in 1980, men and women, all wearing Mao suits. I still can see the children wearing beautiful white shirts to go to school. The old China was really something special. And the Beijing duck? We were granted the opportunity to enjoy this a few times.

**Mieke: Have you been in other places than Beijing and Shanghai?**

**Prof. Storme:** Oh yes. The first time, I traveled a lot with the group of the commission of foreign affairs. The group of senators and colleagues of the University, I don't remember if they joined too. But we went to the beautiful collection of the Xi'an terracotta warriors, the memorial of the Qin Emperor. We have done the four important places, the Yellow River, and the place where mountains look like horses. In these buses that took us everywhere, driving at night without lights. The streets were not lit, people were sitting under lanterns reading a book. And buses just passed them. And then we also went to Nanjing and Kanton. The Cantonese cuisine, is absolutely top quality. And there is the Chinese saying that says that you can't die without having seen....

**Mieke: Hangzhou? With the lake that was made manually?**

**Prof. Storme:** And then all the trees that were linked up.

**Mieke: So there is Hangzhou and Suzhou, the Venice of China, with this network of small rivers.**

**Prof. Storme:** I recall one time, we travelled by train, from Beijing to Xi'an. We left on Saturday evening by train. I was always a bit of strange because we got a special treatment, we were privileged. There was always a mass of people, big queues of people, and we were allowed to go first.

**Mieke: That is not the case anymore.**

**Prof. Storme:** Probably not, but at the time it was still the case. This was end of August, beginning of September, 1980, when the big portrait of chairman Mao was hanging at the railway station at the big square. When we past there back a few days later, the portrait was gone. I admit people's memory is bad, but anyway, I told my fellow men that the portrait had disappeared. And they asked me if I was sure that was there hanging before we left. I said I was. And I also told the guide that the portrait was gone. And he had the same reaction: "Are you sure there was a portrait before we left"? So he wanted to make me doubt

this. The portrait was really gone. A bit later, when I came back home, the newspapers showed a picture of Beijing titled: "This picture was taken away tonight in Beijing". September 1980.

I still have a lot of these strange souvenirs of my stays in China.

But Hong Kong, I found it terrible. We were received there by the Belgian consul general. He had a beautiful consulate that is sold now. Alas. We were received there at a reception.

And we got a lot of whiskey there (laughs). But somehow I was not used to the food anymore, and couldn't take it very well. And all these people packed together, altogether on such a small piece of land.

***Mieke: Didn't you have that same feeling in China?***

***Prof. Storme:*** No.

***Mieke: But by then there were no skyscraper in China yet?***

***Prof. Storme:*** No no, only small ramshackle houses, houses without electricity, ... No, it's really a kind of fairytale history, in those days in the early 80s.

***Mieke: Do you have an still earlier impression of China? Can you imagine something from even earlier related to China? What did you think of China when you were young? You must have also had a vague impression of China when they asked you to go there in 1980?***

***Prof. Storme:*** I will tell you, although it might sound rather puberty-like: but the only impression I got from China is from the comic strip Tintin. Tintin en Chine. And I recall when we flew to China, it was not as easy as it is now. It was a real expedition, about 23 hours travelling to get there. One time we flew with British Airways from London, and another time from Zürich, Switzerland. Of course there were no direct flights yet. We slept in our chair, hunched up. Vandendriessche, who was a bit older than me, got in his chair and immediately fell asleep. But I couldn't do that. So we were flying to Beijing, and then at a certain moment, we flew above the Yellow River. I recall that I was in complete awe, for this Yellow River. And I have to tell you, China was for me of course unfamiliar, a strange world. And so my knowledge on China was limited to what we knew from the comic strip Tintin. Tintin had this Chinese friend. This was a real Chinese boy, who has existed for real. He has been in Belgium. Of course I've dreamt of being able to visit it once but I could not imagine that I would really get the chance to do that.

And then later, in 1992, I went to Japan. And strangely enough, at first, Japan didn't appeal to me. In comparison to China, I mean. But now, I have been at least eight times in Japan to teach in Tokyo, Nagasaki, Kyoto. I did receive an invitation to teach for four months in Japan. I was already retired at that time. So in theory, it was possible. But I told them, four months is really too long. And four months living at their expenses, I could not agree. I told them I would love to come and asked how many hours I had to teach. And they replied: "One hour a week". (laughs) So I suggested: "Okay, let's arrange this in one month, four hours a week". And so I went for a one-month teaching. My wife and I lived there in a tiny apartment, as big as this room, but equipped with everything: kitchen, living room, bedroom, bathroom. This was at the University.

**Mieke: This was in 1992 that you were teaching?**

**Prof. Storme:** No this was much later. In 1992, I went to a Congress in Tokyo. This was my first introduction to Japan. Ever since, I've been back at least 8 to 10 times, to teach, or to participate in conferences. Anyway, in China, it has been very difficult to get this started. I have been president of the World Organization of Procedure for 12 years. We have a whole lot of Japanese members, observers, excellent people working for us, but in China we don't get our business started. We finally found one or two people that were willing to play intermediary, to become a reporter for us, but it's very difficult.

**Mieke: How would you explain this?**

**Prof. Storme:** Well, it is about procedural law. This is not the most evidence branch of law. It's a very complicated branch. But anyway, we now have about two or three members. And so this organization, of which I was the president for 12 years, is planning to organize a world Congress in 2019 in China. I don't know where exactly.

**Mieke: It appears to me, that during those visits in the 1980s, language was not so much of a problem. You managed with using French and English, also when you received delegations here. And that the Chinese also studied Dutch.**

**Prof. Storme:** Language problems? It appears to me, there were not too many language problems.

**Mieke: I find it quite strange, because nowadays, it seems to me that language still is a limitation in dealing with Chinese people, according to many people, to do business for instance.**

**Prof. Storme:** Yes maybe, but we had excellent interpreters at that time. I remember (starts laughing), these interpreters were the bosses. They controlled everything. And I remember, when the contract was signed in 1983, we went to attend a course by colleague Willy Callewaert. He was a close colleague from Ghent, left-wing, and he started to lecture in French, also for the Chinese who attended the delegation. He was talking about Mao. (laughs), "Mao, le grand timonier" [trans.: Mao, the Great Helmsman] (laughs). And the interpreter went pale. Of course he didn't translate this, although Mao had been thrown aside a long time ago. And that time, it really was Deng Xiaoping, the living spirit of Chinese politics. We were received by the president of the People's Republic, and went to visit Mao's Mausoleum at Tiananmen Square. There was a huge queue. We were welcomed in a huge building, I can't remember what kind of building, by the government and president of the People's Republic. I still have a wonderful picture of this.

**1:02**

And I recall, it was in 1988, during this colloquium, we also visited I think the Minister of Justice, I don't remember who it was, and he gave a very critical speech. Critical in the sense of "We Chinese still have a long way to go before we arrive in the real China". We still have to work very hard to get there et cetera et cetera. He was very critical concerning the current state of affair at that time. And I will never forget, a month later, I visited the Polish Minister of Justice. That was 1988, so before the fall of the Berlin wall. And these Polish people, they were full of praise for communism. And during the reception, I went over to talk

with the Minister. I said: "I'm just coming back from China. And I can tell you people are very critical about the regime over there. That obviously is not the case here". And he was really upset. And people asked me: "Storme, do you really dare to say that?". And I replied: "I say things the way they are". I never keep my mouth shut, for nothing". "One day, they will take you into custody", they said! (laughs).

We were talking about Poland. In 1966 I taught classes in Krakow. Long time ago. At that time, no one dared to go to Poland behind the Iron Curtain. One day a letter arrives in the Faculty of Law, that the first batch of people could go to Poland. Rector Bouckaert had arranged this. Two professors could go to Krakow, the next year two professors could go from Krakow to Ghent University. And so the Faculty of Law was allowed to send someone. And we were all asked during the faculty board, if we wanted to go. I was the youngest of all professors at that time. And nowadays, in such an occasion, everyone would like to go. But at that time, I just waited until it was my turn to say something. And I told the Dean that if there is really no one who wants to, or dares to, or is able to go, I would like to go. And I had a wonderful time there, two weeks in 1966. I even visited the Archbishop of Krakow at that time, who later became the Pope. I talked with him for two hours.

***Mieke: I don't think that would still be possible nowadays.***

***Prof. Storme:*** I have to say, China is very special, but to me, Poland has left the most pressing image of what I was able to experience in the world. Krakow was besieged by the regime, because it still was an intellectual city. The fronts against the regime, the intellectual opposition were there. And at some point we went to Danzig where the famous Eurovision song festival was held. A huge hall, and Gomulka was president at that time. And my wife, who just like me sometimes, says everything that comes to her mind, said to the Polish guy, who would lead us everywhere and who was a government commissioner from the Communist Party at the University: " Mr., what would happen if we said Gomulka is a fool? Will we be taken into custody? " And he looked around to see if no one heard what my wife had said, and replied: "They will ask you to leave the country". (laughs)

We also visited Auschwitz from Krakow. (sighs) I feel so privileged that I was able to experience so much, that I had the opportunity to teach in all European countries, that I have known the regimes from behind the Iron Curtain. Iași is one of the oldest universities in Europe. I went to teach there in 1976, under the reign of Ceausescu. Terrifying, horrible,... At nights in the woods, next to our hotel, the dissidents were shut dead. I always mentioned there, "At nights they are doing some hunting here". And they looked at me as if I was a fool. These were the dissidents that were liquidated without any form of legal process. My telephone in my room was tapped, and I was followed. They came into my room and told me that my telephone didn't work. "We have to repair it", and so they took it. And they brought it back with a chip in it. And that feeling, I never had in China. I've been there three times, still under the Mao regime, and later Deng Xiaoping. And I never had a feeling, in my hotel room or on the streets, that we were followed. I find this quite remarkable. Chinese communism is still different from communism in other parts of the world.

***Mieke: Yes but as I said before, the 1980s until the Tiananmen revolts in China were quite free. Everything got more strict after 1989, and especially now, but you don't see or feel it at the surface. I really think you've been there in quite open-minded period.***

**Prof. Storme:** I have to say, when you ask me what I think of China, when I visited it, I found it a miracle how they could feed one billion of people, give them a roof above their heads, and have them going to school. Ce n'est pas rien ça. [Trans.: This not easy].

**Mieke: *Still today they do manage quite well. But actually you stopped being engaged with China after the Tiananmen revolts?***

**Prof. Storme:** Well, now that you ask me, without even being completely conscious of it, I completely dropped out. It has been a very interesting story for me, but I somehow gave up on China. Justifiably or not, I don't know.

**Mieke: *I'm just wondering if the contacts you had for instance at the University, did they continue and are still ongoing?***

**Prof. Storme:** No, not for me. But I was happy to see that my colleagues continued the cooperation.

**Mieke: *And today's discussion in law studies, for instance about the rule by law and the rule of law in China, you don't follow it?***

**Prof. Storme:** (laughs) Now you mention a very complicated term, rule of law. ... no, for the Chinese the most difficult to deal with was the issue of duty of professional confidentiality. It was unthinkable that someone could hide behind professional confidentiality. They always came to ask about this.

Still, I always had the impression that they were really interested. Very attentive too. Even more, the Chinese people that I have met, here and in China were always very open, open-minded. If this really was the case or it was just at the surface, I don't know. I have to say that I have a very positive image of this "transit China", "China in transition".

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**Mieke: *Have you maybe been inspired by a Chinese scholar, or a Chinese intellectual, or other Chinese person?***

**Prof. Storme:** No, not really. But I was very engaged with the Chinese at that time, and we also did a lot for the Chinese student here in Ghent. He lived here for many years, got a doctoral degree here. And even now, not more than a month ago, I still receive the mail from him to tell me how he's doing and so on.

**Mieke: *I find that typically Chinese, it's really a Chinese characteristic to be able to treat you as if you just met for the last time yesterday whereas in reality years have passed. Once a friend, always a friend.***

**Prof. Storme:** I still often trumpet about the fact that the first Chinese Dr. in European Law, out of a billion of Chinese, came to Ghent to get his doctoral degree. And no one will ever deny that. It also wouldn't be possible. Back in 1988, I already experienced that the Americans wanted to infiltrate in China. But we were the first. The Faculty of Law of Ghent University.

**Mieke: Have you never experienced any difficulties or misunderstandings due to cultural differences? Not with the Chinese students here, neither when you were in China?**

**Prof. Storme:** No no. The only thing that struck me, was the fact that they were very closed. It was not easy to get information. Was that because of language problems, I don't know. They really didn't know any other language than Chinese. Everything was in Chinese and that had to be translated. I also recall that sometimes we had to switch interpreters because of the different dialects in different parts of China, in Beijing and Shanghai. So we got another interpreter in the south of China. We couldn't understand that, this common written language, spoken very differently in the north and south of China.

Also I did not get to know the daily life of Chinese people, did not penetrate in the life of common Chinese. This was impossible for us. I know a lot of people in Japan whose homes I visited. This seems to me quite unthinkable in China.

**Mieke: Nowadays, this is not a problem anymore. I can imagine people didn't invite you at their own homes because they felt a bit ashamed. Especially at that time. Or maybe they didn't have a place of their own.**

**Prof. Storme:** I never had the feeling that they were ashamed about anything. Moreover, we were always received as Kings. Copious dinners, diner somptueux. (laughs)

**Mieke: Indeed, almost impossible to reciprocate when they come to Ghent.**

**Prof. Storme:** With one of them, I went to the Club Lorraine in Brussels, for a lecture on China by De Witte, a lawyer in Brussels. He still is a lawyer in Brussels. He was also in contact with China. And then in Louvain, there was the guy who tried to scramble anything on China, Father Hendrickx. We had to be very careful he would not poach under our preserves. (laughs) He had been a missionary in China, spoke Chinese,...

**Mieke: Could you indicate other people of whom you think they have a long history with China, or any other important experience with China?**

**Prof. Storme:** Well, there is Laurent Vandendriesche, who has passed away. He had the time of his life in China. He flourished in China. He collected Chinese porcelain, the grayish porcelain, I forgot the name. He had a beautiful collection of this kind of porcelain. His wife is still alive, she might be willing to give an interview.

**Mieke: I might still interview Prof. Bocken, and Prof. Erauw. In fact, it was Prof. Bocken who advised me to interview you because of this interesting story.**

**Prof. Storme:** Indeed, it's a remarkable story. (Laughs)

**Mieke: Of periods that we don't know so much about.**

**Prof. Storme:** I remember very well my consternation when I received the invitation of our ambassador, the moment they invited to me to elucidate my plans of helping them with legal education. But what were we going to say there? And then finally it all worked out fine.

[...]

*Mieke: Thank you very much Professor. I'm very glad we could have this interview together. And I'm happy that your remarkable story enters the oral histories of Chinese studies. Because that is certainly one of the aims of the project, to keep all these personal China stories alive, and learn something of it.*