

Shanghai under siege: letters and photographs of Karel Frederik Mulder

The Dutchman Karel Frederik Mulder (1901-1978) lived as a businessman, journalist and amateur photographer in the Chinese treaty port of Shanghai. During the siege of the Shanghai International Settlement by the Japanese military (August 1937 -December 1941) he wrote reports and letters to his family. But there are also snapshots of the chaotic events of the Japanese attacks of the Chinese districts of Shanghai, of his personal life as a member of the International Volunteers Corps and of the changing political and human atmosphere in the Shanghai International Settlement. Louis Zweers interviewed his daughter Tineke Mulder (born in 1927, in Dairen, Manchuria), read the unpublished letters and researched the photographic material of his private collection.

Louis Zweers

MULDER STARTED HIS CAREER as a young planter of a tobacco-plantation near Medan in Deli (north-east Sumatra). The city of Medan developed rapidly as a trading centre, with a fast growing cosmopolitan population. In 1925 he moved to China as a businessman; first he lived in Dalian (Dairen), the commercial port of South Manchuria (at that time colonized by the Japanese), and then, as of the summer of 1931, in Shanghai, the treaty port at the mouth of the Yangtze River. The city flourished as a centre of commerce between east and west and became a multinational hub of finance and business in the 1930s. Mulder spoke fluent Japanese, Russian and Chinese (Mandarin) and some Chinese dialects, and was the owner of the Java & China Trading Company. But he was also a journalist and amateur photographer who delivered photos and articles about his travels in China to the Australian magazine *Argus* and the Dutch illustrated weekly magazines *De Prins* and *Het Leven*. In a letter to his brother Wim in Amsterdam, dated 20 August 1931, he wrote about his first impression of Shanghai:

— *Alles gaat hier op zijn Amerikaans: full speed, hurry up and the devil take the hindmost. Behoorlijke trams of autobussen zijn er niet. Ik heb een tweedehandse Chrysler gekocht. Iedereen die geld heeft, houdt er zijn lijfwacht op na, veelal Wit-Russen, vroegere officieren die zijn gevlucht tijdens de (Russische) revolutie van 1917.*

In the 1930s Shanghai was a metropolis; the population stood at three million. The city had a cosmopolitan reputation with frivolous clubs, the famous Cathay Hotel in Art Deco style, the classy Shanghai Club with the longest bar in the world, popular night-spots, beautiful cinemas, theatres, restaurants and many shops and stores with luxury goods. Foreigners – mostly Americans, British, French, Russians, Japanese and a few dozen Dutch – comprised less than three percent of the local population. They resided in the villas of the French Concession, on impressive avenues lined by plane trees, and in the International (Anglo-American) Settlement with its colonial buildings, mansions and apartments located close to the waterfront (the area known as the Bund, near the Huangpu River, a tributary of the Yangtze). These areas of the city were under foreign jurisdiction and foreigners lived an extraordinary and wealthy existence. They enjoyed the bulk of the city's riches and pleasures; the fabulous nightlife rivalled that of Paris or Berlin.

During the Sino-Japanese war, the occupation of Chapei (the Chinese area of Shanghai), and the siege of the International Settlement by the Japanese army in August 1937, life for most 'Shanghaiers' (as the expatriates were referred to) became hard but not unbearable. Although Shanghai found itself in the throes of war, every effort was made to carry on a semblance of the pre-war high life. But many immigrants like the European Jews (an estimated 30.000) and White Russians (20.000), although escaping Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, lived in desperate conditions in the poorest and most crowded area of the city.

The Jewish refugees sheltered in the small houses of the Chinese Hongkou district that sits north of the Bund and the Suzhou Creek. Most of them barely succeeded in staying alive. The situation was partly the result of the disapproving attitude of the Shanghai foreign communities towards the mass immigration of European Jews and White-Russians, nurtured by economic and political fears. The former Jewish quarter became a ghetto in WWII.

In his unpublished typewritten letters (250 pages) Mulder wrote to his family about daily life during the siege of Shanghai, the activities of Chinese warlords and guerrillas, the Japanese military, the International Volunteer Corps,

the international rivalries and national interests, the local Chinese residents, the Jewish refugee community, the nightlife, the opium-dens, the brothels, the gangsters and the ongoing anarchy in the declining and war-torn city. In his authentic reports he brings to life with clarity, not only one of the most convoluted episodes of modern Chinese history, but also the intensity of life experienced by the international community in the besieged treaty port of Shanghai.

For their own safety he sent his wife, daughter and son to family in the former Dutch East-Indies. However, Mulder visited Japan by boat as late as the autumn of 1938; it was a popular holiday destination for the expatriates of Shanghai. There was still an open connection with the outside world via the Yangtze River. Mulder stayed in the mountains near Kyoto and Nara; after four months he returned to Shanghai. About the military situation he wrote:

— *Under the Japanese regime the territory around Shanghai has become a no man's land, unsafe for citizens to visit. The country is overrun with guerrillas and robber bands. The river is just as unsafe and pirates frequently attack ships. Their junks are armed with machineguns and very often they succeed in taking a ship ... Ashore the guerrillas are having it very much their own way and the Japanese venture only in large numbers outside the occupied part of Shanghai, which has been transformed into a strongly defended camp. Even then they are not safe for the guerrillas to unite and form large detachments and sometimes full-sized battles are fought, each side using artillery. Gunfire is then audible all over Shanghai. The Japanese even use planes and when visiting the Eastern city limits it is not unusual to see bombers arrive at the military aerodromes and take off again fully loaded. Battles are fought so close to the city that the smoke columns of the exploding bombs are clearly visible. Similar reports arrive from other parts of China and it is evident that of the enormous territory, theoretically occupied by the Japanese, only the railways, the rivers and narrow zones along these communication routes are actually in Japanese hands.²*

In the spring of 1939 Mulder made a trip by car in the area occupied by the Japanese around Shanghai; he had been granted a special permit.

— *The Suzhou Creek, which flows through the town, divides what is left of the International Settlement from the Japanese occupied zone. Barbed wire entanglements close the bridge over the creek with only a small opening at both sides for pedestrians and a larger one in the centre for cars. British soldiers guard the south side of the bridge. The Seaforth Highlanders form part of Shanghai's British garrison and they make a picturesque show in their kilts. The Chinese call them 'lady soldiers'. Japanese soldiers and marines who keep a watchful eye on everything occupy the other side of the bridge. Chinese are carefully inspected but Europeans are not searched. The occupied area is deserted and quiet as the grave. The houses and shops are closed, most of them boarded up. Now come the first ruins: shelled and burnt houses, first isolated ones, then whole blocks. Tumbledown walls rise out of the debris. Here and there Chinese squatters have piled up bricks to make rough walls, using bamboo matting as a roof, and they live in these caricatures of human dwellings. It is remarkable how they manage to exist at all ... A curious thing is the absence of Japanese soldiers. This confirms the rumour that the Japanese are short of troops in the Shanghai area and it explains the fact that Chinese guerrilla bands dare operate within sight of the town and even in the Japanese occupied zones of Shanghai.*

The goal of his trip was to visit an American factory in the open country to the Northwest of Shanghai.

— *I leave the ruins behind me and drive past neglected fields. The farmers have fled and the land lays waste. Not a single living being in sight. This part of my trip is not entirely without danger as the country around Shanghai swarms with guerrillas and bandits.'*

He reached the factory without mishap, but on his way back Mulder was forced to brake hard and suddenly to avoid crashing into a tree lying across the road. At the same time a number of Chinese jumped out from behind a number of haystacks in the surrounding fields. They were dressed as peasants, but were armed.

— *The car has stopped and my hand rests on the butt of the automatic weapon under my right thigh. Now to keep cool! The leader comes up to my car and starts to talk to me. He speaks the Shanghai dialect that I fortunately understand. With a wide grin he asks for cigarettes. I have half a tin in the car, which I give to him through the window. He thanks me politely and divides the cigarettes among his men ... They belong to the Chinese 19th Route Army and have been in the neighbourhood of Shanghai since November 1937, harassing the Japanese. Sometimes they slink past the Japanese posts into the city, but most of the time they remain in the country. "We are going to win the war even if it takes us another ten years", grins the Chinese.'*³

In December of 1939 Mulder had the opportunity to visit Nanking, the former capital of the Republic of China, two years after the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and the plundering of the city by soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army. He wrote about his visit to this traumatized city that was still occupied by the Japanese military.

— *It seems that the Nanking Chinese lost the strength to go ahead. Everywhere is the sweet smell of opium. More than a third of the population is addicted to opium.'*⁴

It is impossible, Mulder reports, to give even an impression of the total sadness in Nanking.

His last 'Shanghai Letter', dated early May 1940, was sent to his family just before the Germans occupied the Netherlands. In the beginning of December 1941, after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese army invaded the Shanghai International Settlement with force. Some days later all the 'hostile citizens', such as the British, Americans, Dutch and Belgians, were ordered to register. Their factories, real estate, classic cars and bank accounts were registered too, later to be frozen or confiscated. In March 1942 they were ordered to wear red armbands for identification purposes; the armbands were marked with a letter to indicate nationality: 'A' for America, 'B' for Britain and 'N' for Netherlands. Armbands were not worn by 'non-hostile citizens', such as Germans, Italians and Vichy-French. The 'hostile citizens' were forbidden to enter parks, cinemas, theatres, bars, clubs and hotels. In November 1942 the Japanese imprisoned Mulder, along with many other Anglo-Americans, in the prison camps at Haiphong Road in Shanghai and later in Fengtai near Beijing, under exceedingly difficult conditions. He became an interpreter because he spoke fluent Japanese. There he lived in crowded, hellishly hot barracks until the end of the war. After his return to Shanghai he was reunited with all his documents, papers and photographs, which had been hidden and kept safe by a Chinese friend. When, in 1949, Mao Zedong's Communist Party took over Shanghai, Mulder departed for America. He lived in New York until his death in 1978.

Louis Zweers is an art and photo historian; Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. (zweers@eshcc.eur.nl)



1.

2.

3.

1. Shanghai, Chinese sector, summer 1939. Mulder drives his car through the western Chinese part of the city, which is occupied by the Japanese. In the forefront you see a man pushing a traditional wheelbarrow. Most of the shots taken in these Chinese neighbourhoods, also known as the 'badlands', were taken furtively through the window of his car. The neighbourhoods were not safe for westerners.

2. Shanghai, March 1939. Traditional riverboats waving the Japanese flag on the Yangtze river.

3. Shanghai, Chinese sector, summer 1939. Armed Japanese military march through the Chinese sector. Chinese children watch, enthralled.

4. Whilst the International Settlement in Shanghai was spared, the Chinese sector faced extreme destruction - Mulder visited the heavily damaged part of the city by car. At the beginning of March 1932 a ceasefire was declared. Shanghai, Chapei, 1932.

5. Shanghai, International Settlement, 1939. Mulder in the uniform of the International Volunteer Corps.

6. Shanghai, International Settlement, winter 1938. Rickshaws in the snow.

7. Shanghai, International Settlement, late 1930s. Mulder sitting behind his desk.

8. Karel Frederik Mulder, armed with just his camera, poses here next to a stronghold of sandbags, built and abandoned by Japanese Marines - the Japanese flag still flying. He went on to photograph human victims and city structures reduced to ashes by Japanese bombings in the Chinese sector. Shanghai, Chapei, 1932.

Additional photos from the collection can be viewed online at <http://www.ias.nl/the-newsletter/article/shanghai-under-siege>



4.



5.



6.



7.



8.

The photo collection (© K.F. Mulder)

The main part of Mulder's photographic work covers the period 1920-1939; it consists of thousands of photographs taken by Karel Frederik Mulder and prints belonging to international press photographers. There are photographs of Europeans living in the enclaves in East Asia, depicting social gatherings, festivals and sporting events. There are also travel photographs with nature scenes, temples, pagodas, ethnic minorities, street scenes and city landscapes. The lives of the Europeans and those of the local Chinese populations are kept mostly separate in the photographs. When photographing people and things in the European enclaves, Mulder brought his Exacta-camera in close, and the captions underneath the photographs include names. However, when photographing the Chinese, Mulder clearly kept more distance. In his albums, the series of photographs, which can be ascribed to the private sphere of the photographer - such as the snapshots of his holiday trips, parties, picnics, friends and family - are interspersed by photographs of socio-political and military events.

Notes

- 1 Shanghai Letter, 20 August 1931.
- 2 Shanghai Letter, 12 April 1939.
- 3 Shanghai Letter, 20 March 1939.
- 4 Nanking Letter, 6 January 1940.
- All collection K.F. Mulder.