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 humanizing and changing 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 Louis Zweers interviewed his daughter Tineke Mulder (born in 1927, in Dairen, Manchuria), read the unpublished letters and researched the photographic material of his private collection.

**Mulder started his career as a young planter of a tobacco-plantation next to Medan in Deli (north-east Sumatra). The Dutch East Indies were a growing centre, with a fast growing cosmopolitan population. In 1925 he moved to China as a businessman; first he lived in Dalian (Dairen), the commercial capital of South Manchuria, later he was living in Shanghai.**

\[\text{In his unpublished typewritten letters (250 pages) Mulder spoke fluent Japanese, Russian and Chinese (Mandarin) and some Chinese dialects, and was the front line correspondent of the Chinese press. But he was also a journalist and amateur photographer who delivered photos and articles about his travels in China to the Australian magazine Argus and the Dutch illustrated weekly magazine De Pinte et Het Leven. In a letter to his brother Wim in Amsterdam, dated 20 August 1937, he wrote about his first impression of Shanghai:} \]

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**— All goes her on zijn Amerikaans: full speed, hurry up and the devil take the hindmost. Behoorklike trams or autobussen zijn er niet. Ik heb een tweedehandse Chrysler gekocht. Iedereen die geld heeft, boude er zijn lijfwacht op. Favela WiliRuss, vroegere officieren die zijn gesigneerd 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 large group of Dutch – comprised about 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 surrounded by 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 international rankings and nationalities, the local Chinese residents, the Jewish refugee community, the missionaries, international businesspeople, 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 consolylated episodes of modern Chinese history, but also the intensity of life experienced by the international community in the besieged treaty port of Shanghai.

In Shanghai under siege: letters and photographs of Karel Frederik Mulder

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**— The car has stopped and my hand rests on the butt of my revolver. With a wide grin he asks for cigarettes. I have half a tin in the car, which I offer. He thanks me politely and divides the cigarettes among his men … They belong to the Chinese 19th Route Army and they are not safe for the guerrillas to unite and form large units.**

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 still was 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.**

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, clubs and hotels. In November 1942 the Japanese imprisoned Mulder, along with many other Anglo-Americans, and sent him to the camps at Hosheng Road in Shanghai and later in Fengtai near Beijing, under exceedingly difficult conditions. He became an interpreter because he spoke fluent Japanese. Then he lived in crowded, badly crowded 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 stored by family friends.**

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The Study

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, Chinese sector, summer 1939. Mulder drives his car through the western Chinese part of the city, which is occupied by the Japanese. In the foreground 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.
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, Chepul, 1932.

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