

JIABS

Journal of the International
Association of Buddhist Studies



Volume 31 Number 1-2 2008 (2010)

The *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (ISSN 0193-600XX) is the organ of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Inc. As a peer-reviewed journal, it welcomes scholarly contributions pertaining to all facets of Buddhist Studies.

JIABS is published twice yearly.

Manuscripts should preferably be submitted as e-mail attachments to: editors@iabsinfo.net as one single file, complete with footnotes and references, in two different formats: in PDF-format, and in Rich-Text-Format (RTF) or Open-Document-Format (created e.g. by Open Office).

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Cover: Cristina Scherrer-Schaub

Font: “Gandhari Unicode” designed by Andrew Glass (<http://andrewglass.org/fonts.php>)

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GesmbH, A-3580 Horn

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In memoriam

Erik Zürcher

(13 September 1928 – 7 February 2008)

Jonathan A. Silk

Erik Zürcher was born in Utrecht, in the center of the Netherlands, where he was educated through secondary school.¹ Although he originally intended to study Egyptology, when he came to the University of Leiden he began the study of Sinology with Gan Tek Chiang, later curator for the Chinese department of the National Museum of Ethnology (Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde) in Leiden. Zürcher was soon invited to join more advanced classes with Jan Julius Lodewijk (J. J. L.) Duyvendak (1889–1954). During this time his interests in art led him to Sweden, where he worked with Osva Siren (1879–1966), this resulting in one of his first publications, “Imitation and Forgery in Ancient Chinese Painting and Calligraphy,” *Oriental Art* (1956): 141–156. Later he was to publish a few other papers also concerned with art and material culture, although this never became a major research interest. At Leiden

¹ I have been fortunate to be able to make use of a variety of materials including Stephen Teiser’s Foreword to the third edition of Zürcher’s *Buddhist Conquest* (“Social History and the Confrontation of Cultures”), Tim Barrett’s “Erik Zürcher, 1928–2008: Buddhism and the European Understanding of China” (*The China Quarterly* 196 [December 2008]: 919–923), the memorial note by my colleague Barend ter Haar found at <http://www.hum.leidenuniv.nl/medewerkers/forum/index-108/im-zurcher-engl-108.html>, and the remarks of Wilt Idema in *Levensberichten en herdenkingen 2009* of the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2009): 100–108.

Zürcher worked under Duyvendak's successor, the historian Anthony Francois Paulus Hulswé (1910–1993), who served as his doctoral supervisor. In 1961 Zürcher himself took up what had been the chair of Colonial History, renamed “Far Eastern History, in particular the contacts between East and West.” Important formative influences included Zürcher's study in Paris with Paul Demiéville (1894–1979) and his friendship, if not rivalry, with Jacques Gernet, whose interests were so very similar to his own in many respects. From 1976 to 1992 Zürcher was co-editor together with Gernet of *T'oung Pao*, which had always been a joint Leiden-Paris effort, and remains the oldest continuously published sinological journal. In the preface to his *Buddhist Conquest of China* (see below), Zürcher also mentioned his appreciation of his “honoured friends Et[ienne] Balázs ... and P[iet] van der Loon” and his “commilitones A[rthur] F. Wright ... and L[eon] Hurvitz.” These connections with the most excellent ranks of Sinologists and students of Chinese Buddhism were clearly important for his trajectory as a scholar. Zürcher was, among other things, a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (from 1975) and Correspondant étranger de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres in Paris (from 1985), and his close connections with the tradition of French sinology are thus obvious in multiple dimensions.

It is impossible to come to terms with any full scholarly life, certainly that of a great scholar like Zürcher, in the few words allotted for a memorial, and the bare facts of his career offer little hint to Zürcher's impact on his chosen fields of study. One thing to be made clear is that, despite the contributions discussed below, Zürcher himself would not have characterized his field as Buddhist Studies *pur sang*, but rather perhaps as Chinese History, with a focus on the integration and naturalization of the foreign into Chinese culture. In particular, at least in so far as they are preserved in the form of written documents, Zürcher's scholarly interests were almost equally split between (earlier) Chinese Buddhism and Christianity in China. Here I will attempt nothing more than a brief appreciation of his contributions to the field of Chinese Buddhism.² The

² For an appraisal focused on Zürcher's work on Christianity in

importance of these contributions may be capsulized by saying that they were, in a much overused but here entirely apt characterization, seminal. They are represented, however, relatively sparsely: one monograph, a small general book, a volume of translation and some thirty papers. But oh, what a monograph! This study, with which he launched his career, is of course the monumental *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, being his doctoral thesis, first published in 1959 and reprinted in 1972 and 2007.³

The main theme of Zürcher's research was cultural interaction, which in the case of Buddhism meant the ways in which this foreign religion found, or forged, a home in China. Or perhaps this is the wrong way to put it for Zürcher, since he was not interested in seeing the process – pace the provocative title of his book – from the point of view of the foreign invaders, as it were, but on the contrary squarely from the side of the Chinese themselves.⁴ As will be men-

China, see Nicolas Standaert, "Erik Zürcher's Study of Christianity in Seventeenth-Century China: An Intellectual Portrait." In the press in *China Review International* 15/4 (2010): 472–502.

³ These are referred to by the publisher as new editions, but in fact are virtually identical as far as content is concerned, only the typography having been updated: in the second edition Zürcher's elegant but poorly reproduced calligraphy was replaced with type-set Chinese characters; in the third edition the whole text is reset and the romanization changed to Pinyin, but the pagination is retained. It is a pity that this recent reprint appears not as the original in two volumes, with text and notes separated, but in a single binding, making reference to the extensive notes laborious.

⁴ From another point of view, see also Arthur Wright's comment in his review of *Buddhist Conquest* (see 2d in the list of publications): "The title is surely a misnomer, for this is a close and careful study of two cultures – Chinese and Buddhist – interacting with one another, with neither, at the period's end, 'conquering' the other. I doubt that military metaphor is ever applicable to studies of culture contact and acculturation. It certainly is not here."

Zürcher was not altogether unaware of this imbalance of his study. In the preface to the 1972 reprint, he wrote: "The reader may feel that in describing the process of acculturation I have somewhat overstressed the Chinese side. The reader is right: it takes two to acculturate. More stress

tioned below, he found the contrast with the case of Christianity in China interesting and challenging. Zürcher approached both sets of questions of acculturation (or ‘inculturation,’ although he did not use this missiological term, as far as I have noticed) entirely from the side of reception. He paid careful attention to early Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures, for example, but even in his grammatical discussions almost never entered into considerations of the sources the Chinese (or Central Asian) translators were attempting to render, although he could not avoid such obvious issues as the introduction of mid-sentence vocatives, previously unknown in Chinese and appearing only as a calque on Indic sentence order. This concentration on the Chinese reception of Buddhism yields many advantages, but at least as far as translation goes, one cannot escape the conclusion that a rather great deal may be learned by studying both the input as well as the output of the process, as it were, as recent work by Seishi Karashima and Stefano Zacchetti, for instance, attempts to do. It is worth noting that both of these scholars benefitted from Zürcher’s advice.

Although he did touch upon later Chinese Buddhism in some publications, the lion’s share of Zürcher’s attention was devoted to the earlier periods, with the fifth century a tacit upper limit (and he more than once explicitly limited his interest to the period between the first and fifth centuries). The primary thrust of Zürcher’s research was to build up, stone by stone, as comprehensive a mosaic of early Chinese Buddhism as possible. He began this effort with his *Buddhist Conquest of China* which was, however, as he acknowledged, largely concerned with literate, socially and politically prominent elites. In his Foreword to the 2007 reprint, Stephen Teiser wrote (p. xv):

The most important sources come from two classes of Chinese Buddhist writing. One class consists of the early biographies of famous monks and nuns and a history of the formation of the Chinese Tripiṭaka. The second class is what Zürcher terms “early apologetic

could have been given to the ‘donor’ side – the way in which the foreign missionaries consciously or unconsciously responded to the Chinese public and its demands.”

and propagandistic literature,” that is, works written by Buddhist devotees, both lay and monastic, designed to defend the faith from the criticisms of its cultured despisers. ... [W]e should pause to note what Zürcher is leaving out and to appreciate the weight of the unannounced tradition that he is arguing against. Zürcher intentionally ignores the great number of texts in the Chinese Buddhist canon that were translated during this period from Sanskrit and other Indian languages. As Zürcher writes elsewhere, the canon is an embarrassment of riches; its sheer volume seems to suggest how well it represents Chinese Buddhism.

Teiser’s points here are, first, that Zürcher’s sources belong to the small slice of elites at the top of the Buddhist pyramid, second that the texts in question are mostly self-consciously propagandistic, and last that he turns away for the most part from translations in favor of native compositions. It could certainly be argued that to a very great extent these choices alone strongly determined the kind of picture Zürcher was able to paint.

Teiser goes on to point out how reliant Zürcher is on the work of the Chinese scholar Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 and his *History of Buddhism during the Han, Wei, Two Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties* (*Han Wei Liangjin Nanbeichao fojiao shi* 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史), published in 1938. But he concludes, interestingly (p. xix):

In the end, I believe that Zürcher’s reliance on Tang’s work is in fact a strength. As an in-depth, modern guide through the complexities and problems of the primary sources, Tang’s book remains the indispensable starting point for any serious work in early Chinese Buddhism. Zürcher’s use of Tang is a testament to the interconnections between two great traditions of modern scholarship, both a sign of the past and an augur for the future.⁵

⁵ It should further be pointed out that unlike the work of Tang or the Japanese scholar Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆, Zürcher was compelled not to quote his sources in the original Chinese but to offer an interpretation in the medium of translation, a far from trivial task with such difficult materials. From this point of view, even a mere translation of Tang’s study, along the lines perhaps of Hurvitz’s rendering of Tsukamoto’s *Chūgoku Bukkyō Tsūshi* 中国仏教通史 (1968) as *A History*

Teiser further points out that “since 1959 no original work in a western language broadly covering the same period of Chinese Buddhist history has been published.” This is certainly due to several factors – the excellence of Zürcher’s book, a growing recognition of the availability of previously unexplored sources (much of this awareness in its turn thanks to Zürcher’s own further studies), and an appreciation of the difficulty of such comprehensive surveys. For, tackling big questions requires big theoretical assumptions, which are out of favor in some quarters these days, especially among the more philologically minded who dare to delve into the very difficult old materials which provide the fodder for such research.

Teiser devotes a number of pages of his Foreword to criticism of Zürcher’s book, some of which concerns these very theories. In this respect, one point of interest is that although Teiser notes in his bibliography Arthur Wright’s review of *Buddhist Conquest*, implicitly noted by Zürcher himself in his 1972 Preface when he avers that he would not again use the term ‘gentry,’ for example, Teiser does not anywhere actually refer to Wright’s review, nor, as far as I know, did Zürcher himself explicitly acknowledge the sometimes detailed critiques his book evoked from Wright and others. He did write in the 1972 edition: “It goes without saying that a new version would bear the marks of beneficial criticism, made by masters and colleagues in reviews and personal correspondence,” and the reprint contains two pages of corrections of Zhou Yiliang (hidden after the index). But G. E. Sargent’s corrections of Zürcher’s translations, for instance, are passed over in silence by all concerned. This, however, certainly does not mean that Zürcher considered the work begun in *Buddhist Conquest* completed by that work.

In fact, he evidently regarded this study as a mere beginning, in part because of the range of materials which it considered; he more than once characterized the types of information available from

of Early Chinese Buddhism, From Its Introduction to the Death of Hui-yüan (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1985), would have constituted a substantial contribution. What Zürcher accomplished is, however, much more than this.

written sources as not only biased but distorted out of all proportion. But such “official” sources of information are not in fact the only ones available. A similar distinction has been pointed out vividly for a later period by the lamented Antonino Forte in his review of Stanley Weinstein’s *Buddhism Under the T’ang*, in which Forte praises Weinstein for exhausting traditional sources, but critiques him for, inter alia, ignoring other materials,⁶ many of which Forte himself mined to such brilliant ends. For the earlier periods under Zürcher’s lens, however, even such unofficial materials are rarely available; how can one learn to see the invisible?

His thesis seems to have taken the wind out of Zürcher’s sails, and through the 1960s and most of the 1970s he published very little on Buddhism, save a couple of general surveys. He was not idle, however, and the next decades reveal the fruit of his work (and of course, he was extremely active on other fronts during this period, including initiating the highly successful Documentation and Research Center for Contemporary China).

In 1980 Zürcher published his survey “Buddhist Influence on Early Taoism: A Survey of Scriptural Influence,” followed quickly by “Eschatology and Messianism in Early Chinese Buddhism” and “‘Prince Moonlight’: Messianism and Eschatology in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism.” These papers reveal more than Zürcher’s vast reading in the Daoist canon (of which he seems to have made little use thereafter). While they certainly stand as a contribution to Daoist Studies, I read them differently. I think they mark the first sustained effort to try to overcome the horrible imbalance Zürcher lamented in his evidence about early Chinese Buddhism. The problem to which he returned again and again is how to squeeze from sources which do not explicitly deal with Buddhism information nevertheless relevant to its reception in China.

In early texts of Daoism he thought he found a way to backlight, as it were, the types of concerns which could only have shone or reflected onto Daoist surfaces from otherwise invisible Buddhist faces. In other words, what he looked for in seeking out Buddhist

⁶ *T’oung Pao*, 2nd Series, 75/4–5 (1989): 317–324.

influences on Daoism were Buddhist elements in contemporary Chinese society which left no palpable trace elsewhere. Almost as with the fossilized impression of a dinosaur's skin left in mud, Zürcher sought in these papers to learn about Buddhism by studying the impressions it made on another object, in this case, the formative thought of Daoism. Few efforts have been made to follow up this methodological insight.

Despite his rather clear, if tacit, presupposition of the nature of correct and proper normative Buddhism, Zürcher is especially interested in what he does *not* find reflected in Daoist texts: the “complete absence of typically scholastic terminology” indicates “a very low level of doctrinal sophistication” (Buddhist Influence p. 119). “Taoism,” he writes further, “was not influenced by ‘professional’ Buddhism, but through the distorting and simplifying filter of *lay* Buddhism; we must assume that the human contacts which formed the channel of transmission must not be sought in the monasteries or the *ch'ing-t'an* salons where learned monks were present to explain the doctrine ... but rather in lay society where Taoists and Buddhist devotees met...” (p. 143). This leads him to conclude (p. 146) that “the selection of Buddhist ideas, particularly at the level of complex borrowings that we find in Taoist literature, gives a very valuable clue as to what ideas were the ‘focal points’ in Buddhism with the strongest appeal – so strong that they could influence Chinese thought beyond the limits of the Buddhist community and be accepted by its greatest rival.” He immediately continues:

But if we agree with the conclusion drawn above, that Taoism in fact got its Buddhist impulses from lay Buddhism, the information is even more valuable. We actually know very little about that sector of Buddhist religion in mediaeval China. ... It could well be that a more detailed analysis of Buddhist complexes mirrored in Taoist literature could teach us much about contemporary lay Buddhism, in spite of all misunderstandings and distortions. But perhaps such misunderstandings and distortions were also widely spread among the simple Buddhist believers themselves. Perhaps we are – as so often happens – handicapped by the fact that we can only observe Buddhism and Taoism at the very highest level, that of the religious “professionals” and their written texts – the tops of two pyramids. We may consider the possibility that at a lower level the bodies of the pyramids merged

into a much less differentiated lay religion, and that at the very base both systems largely dissolved into an indistinct mass of popular beliefs and practices.

In his studies on eschatology, Zürcher directed his attention to materials which either fell below the radar of the official arbiters of Buddhist norms, or which were actively suppressed by them. He linked these in a number of cases to the Buddho-Daoist substrate which he postulated to run beneath, as it were, the high traditions as a common river. And this pattern can be detected in other studies as well, although perhaps not in exactly the same manner. For example, Zürcher devoted a number of studies to the earliest translations and translators. On the one hand, this topic involves the court and official sanction or canonization of translations. At the same time, much translation, and other scripture production, as with certain eschatological texts, took place outside of and alongside official channels. Zürcher's interest in these translations extended to the language in which they were composed, and while it is hard to say which came first, this interest in the translations as preserving evidence of the early sources of Chinese Buddhism also proved to be a key to thinking about early vernacular Chinese language.

The way in which texts were rendered from foreign tongues by those outside the educated literate elite allowed Zürcher to speculate that it is possible to discern traces of “the living language of second century Loyang” among these earliest works by An Shigao and a few others. The problems were naturally not only linguistic; as Zürcher says in “A New Look at the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Texts” (p. 278), “The question will be to what extent, and in what ways, these archaic translations can be made to yield information about the intellectual and social context of the very first stage of Chinese Buddhism.”

I mentioned above that despite few publications on Buddhism during this period, Zürcher was evidently not idle during the 1960s and 1970s. One fruit of this period remains almost unknown, and might even appear to be a non-scholarly product. That is his *Het leven van de Boeddha* (Life of the Buddha) of 1978. Published in a popular series, without a single Chinese character in evidence, this is nevertheless a monument of learning, an integral translation of

the *Xiuxing benqi jing* 修行本起經 (T. 184) and *Zhong benqi jing* 中本起經 (T. 196), the two-part hagiography dating to the second century. That this work remains nearly unknown is due, without doubt, entirely to the fact that it is written in Dutch.

It is impossible to discuss all of Zürcher's papers here, of course.⁷ Nevertheless, it is good to draw attention to his important remarks on "Buddhism and Education in T'ang Times" and "Buddhist Art in Medieval China: The Ecclesiastical View," subjects which are hardly noticed by other scholars, or at least not by scholars sufficiently equipped to deal with them. (Recent publications on Chinese Buddhist art, at least by scholars writing in English, seem all too frequently to highlight the vast chasm separating those who specialize in visual culture from those trained to read written sources. Scholarship by the former in particular sometimes contains statements that make a textual scholar cringe.)

I referred above to Zürcher's parallel interest in Christianity in China. These two interests were clearly not distinct for him and, on the largest scale, they form two poles, as it were, of a common problem. In fact, Zürcher explicitly confronts this issue in a short but extremely interesting paper translated into English as "The Spread of Buddhism and Christianity in Imperial China: Spontaneous Diffusion Versus Guided Propagation." Here Zürcher attempts to understand why it is that the foreign religion Buddhism succeeded in implanting itself in Chinese soil, and why Christianity, in the form of Roman Catholicism, failed. Zürcher's conclusion is as follows:

We find a whole range of contrasts and oppositions. Spontaneous infiltration versus guided introduction. Unprepared roaming monks versus well-trained missionaries. Monastery versus church and mission house. Free Buddhist laity versus bound Christian converts. Pluriformity versus uniformity. Indigenous sources of income versus external funding. Homogenous status versus a broken, dissonant role

⁷ A more comprehensive version of the present short appreciation will be included as the introduction to the volume I am now editing in which most of these papers will be reprinted; it will be published from Brill in the near future.

pattern. Many oppositions, that yet have one thing in common: they all are related to the character of the Jesuit mission as a guided process. And that is the great paradox. Planning and guidance were factors of weakness, whereas Buddhism was strengthened by the very absence of planning and central guidance, by its spontaneous and totally uncoordinated development.

There are naturally some topics which Zürcher intended to address but never did. In his “Eschatology and Messianism,” for example (p. 42) he promises to examine theories of *mofa* (‘decline of the teaching’), a project of which we hear no more. Perhaps the most disappointing loss is the apparent disappearance of a draft grammar of Kumārajīva’s translation of the Lotus Sūtra. I have been assured of its one-time existence by my colleague Barend ter Haar, but am so far unable to locate a copy.

It must come as something of a surprise to realize that Zürcher only directed two doctoral theses on Buddhism, those of Barend ter Haar (published as *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* [1992]), and Valentina Georgieva, “Buddhist Nuns in China from the Six Dynasties to the Tang” (2000, regrettably still unpublished; the advisor was Tilmann Vetter, with Zürcher as co-advisor). Through his published writings, however, he leaves a much greater number of students around the world, who join with his more direct disciples in mourning his passing.

Erik Zürcher (Xu Lihe 許理和 / 许里和)

1959

1. “Zum Verhältnis von Kirche und Staat in China während der Frühzeit des Buddhismus.” *Saeculum* 10/1: 73–81.
2. *The Buddhist Conquest of China: the Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*. Sinica Leidensia 11 (Leiden: E. J. Brill: 1959; 2nd ed. 1972; 3rd ed. 2007, with a new Foreword by Stephen Teiser, pp. xiii–xxxvii).
 - 2a. Japanese: Ēriku Churuhyā エーリク・チュルヒヤー, *Bukkyō no Chūgoku Denrai* 仏教の中国伝来. Trans. Tanaka Sumio 田中純男, Watarai Akira 渡会顕, Naruse Yoshinori 成瀬良徳, Tanaka Fumio 田中文雄. (Tokyo: Serika shobō せりか書房, 1995). With a new preface (*jobun* 序文) by Zürcher dated Dec. 1993, pp. 9–16.
Reviewed: Hirai Yukei 平井宥慶, *Buzan gakuhō* 豊山学報 40 (1997): 186–195.
 - 2b. Chinese: *Fojiao zhengfu Zhongguo: Fojiao zai Zhongguo zhonggu zaoqi de chuanbo yu shiying* 佛教征服中國：佛教在中國中古早期的傳播與適應. Trans. Li Silong 李四龍, Pei Yong 裴勇, et al. *Haiwai Zhongguo yanjiu congshu* 海外中国研究叢書. Nanjing 南京: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe 江蘇人民出版社, 1998, 2003, 2005.
 - 2c. Partial translations into Korean by P’yo Chōnghun 表晶勛 and Choi Yun-sik remain unpublished.
 - 2d. Reviews: Hans Steininger, “Der Buddhismus in der chinesischen Geschichte (Zu den Arbeiten von E. Zürcher, J. Gernet und A. F. Wright).” *Saeculum* 13 (1962): 132–165 (esp. 133–143); Paul Demiéville, *T’oung Pao*, 2nd Series 47/3–5 (1959): 430–435; Edward Conze, *The Middle Way* 34 (1960): 173–176; Leon Hurvitz, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 80/3 (1960): 277–279; Giuseppe Tucci, *East and West* 11/4 (1960): 295–296; Jacques Gernet, *Journal Asiatique* 248 (1960): 408–410; Arthur F. Wright, *Journal of Asian Studies* 20/4 (1961): 517–520; Janusz Chmielewski, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 25/2 (1961): 140–144; Conrad M. Schirokauer, *American Historical Review* 67/1 (1961): 139–140; K[atherine] P[o] K[atherine] Whitaker, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24/3 (1961): 599–600; T[imoteus] Pokora, *Archiv*

Orientalní 29 (1961): 172–174; G[alene] E[ugene] Sargent, *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 57/1–2 (1962): 82–85; André Barea, *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 50/2 (1962): 564–569; J[aroslav] Prusek, *Central Asiatic Journal* 8/1 (1963): 67–70; 2nd edition: W[erner] Eichhorn, *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 71/5 (1976): 509–510; Chuang Shen, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 13 (1974): 175–178; Zhuang Shen 莊申, *Xianggang Zhongwen daxue zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao* 香港中文大学中国文化研究所学报 / *Journal of the Institute of Chinese Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong* 8/1 (1974): 365–367; 1975 Tzevi Shiprin, *HaMizrah hehadas* / *New East, Quarterly of the Israel Oriental Society* 1–2 (97–98) (1975): 128–129.

1961

3. *Het Boeddhisme: ontstaan en verbreiding in kaart, woord en beeld*. Beknopte geschiedenissen van wereldgodsdiensten. Dutch trans. by Max Schuchart (Amsterdam: De Brug–Djambatan).
 - 3a. English: *Buddhism: its origin and spread in words, maps and pictures* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962).
 - 3b. Danish: *Buddhismen. Dens oprindelse og udbredelse i tekst, kort og billeder* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962)
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