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JAPANESE BUDDHISM IN THE 16TH CENTURY

Letters of the Jesuit Missionaries

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Vienna

Preface

At the present moment, Buddhism is a very popular religion in western society. In Europe, but also in the whole western hemisphere, interest in Buddhist teachings, ritual and culture continues to grow. More and more people are starting to practice Buddhist meditation methods or even converting to Buddhism. For over a hundred years many people with a Christian background in Germany and other European countries have been declaring themselves as Buddhists and organising Buddhist associations or meditation groups¹. There are several factors contributing to this development. The first factor is the popular opinion that Buddhism is a rational way of life, without a belief in heaven or a higher god, which offers practical methods for salvation. After the period of Enlightenment and secularisation in Europe this religion has seemed to offer an alternative to the Christian faith in an uncertain, distant god. The second reason is that Buddhism appears to be a religion and culture of peace, humanity and tolerance - in contrast to some violent episodes in the history of the Christian church. While Christians nowadays are well aware of these latter facts, the wars and conflicts in Asia in the name of Buddhism are almost completely unknown in Europe. The third factor is that the Dalai Lama and a number of other Tibetan lamas (high religious leaders), as a result of their exile, now frequently visit the West to teach Tibetan Buddhism. After the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese army in 1950, the Dalai Lama and most of his political and religious leaders fled to India in 1959. Since then they have tried to gain and direct the world's attention to the occupation and the political situation in Tibet as well as toward Buddhist ideals. The lamas are regarded as charismatic, highly spiritual leaders and have a number of followers and students in all European countries.

¹ See: Martin Baumann, *Deutsche Buddhisten. Geschichte und Gemeinschaften* (=Religionswissenschaftliche Reihe Vol.5, Marburg 2 1995).

For all these reasons interest in Buddhism in western culture has been continuously increasing, while scientific research has also been directing more attention to Buddhist themes. Hence, the history of Europe's engagement with Buddhism is a field of its own within the comparative science and history of religions. Several scientific articles, books and research bulletins now deal with the beginning and the historical development of the reception of Buddhism in German-speaking countries² and other parts of Europe. In all essays on this subject, the first transfer of information about Buddhism is said to have taken place at the beginning of the 19th century (with the establishment of the first chairs of Sanskrit and Indology, publications of the German author Arthur Schopenhauer who referred to Buddhist terms, the first manuscripts in Pali and Sanskrit in Europe, etc.). All these studies make little mention of the fact that information had come to Europe through missionaries and travellers in Asia already in the 17th and 18th centuries³. None of the studies mention the Jesuits' letters from Japan, which had been the first sources about Buddhism and Japanese culture in Europe. The Jesuit letters are well known in the history of the Christian mission in Japan and in comparative cultural research, but not in the history of Europe's engagement with Buddhism. My research about this channel of information aims to fill this gap in the history of the reception of Buddhism in Europe in modern times.

1. Knowledge about Buddhism in Europe prior to the Jesuits

The first contact between India as the country of Buddhism's origin and European culture occurred in the period of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE. Diplomatic and economic contacts also led to an exchange of philosophical and religious ideas. Greek historians and writers mentioned Indian culture, while Buddhist missionaries were sent to the Hellenistic world⁴.

In the Early Middle Ages these contacts broke down due to Islamic expansion, which cut off the connection between the Orient and Occident⁵. This situation lasted until the Late Middle Ages, when the French king, as well

2 See: Volker Zotz, *Zur Rezeption, Interpretation und Kritik des Buddhismus im deutschen Sprachraum vom Fin-de-Siècle bis 1930. Historische Skizze und Hauptmotive* (phil.Diss. Wien 1986); Wolfgang Poier, *Buddhismusrezeption in der österreichischen Moderne* (phil. Dipl.Univ.Graz 1990); Ernst Benz, "Buddhismus in der westlichen Welt", in *Buddhismus der Gegenwart*, hg. Heinrich Dumoulin (Freiburg i.B. 1970).

3 See: Stephen Batchelor, *The awakening of the west. The encounter of Buddhism and western culture 543 BCE - 1992* (London/San Francisco 1994).

4 Deborah Klimburg-Salter, „Indien zur Zeit der Mauryas“, in *Buddha in Indien. Die frühindische Skulptur von König Ashoka bis zur Guptazeit*, hg. Wilfried Seipel (Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien 1995), p. 54.

5 Henri Pirenne, *Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte Europas im Mittelalter* (Tübingen 1986), p. 6.

as the pope, sent diplomatic missions eastwards to the Tartar tribes, who after their return reported about Buddhist-Lamaist rites and practises⁶. Other travellers to Asia like Marco Polo or the Franciscan monk Odorich de Pordenone wrote about Buddhist legends, holy places, temples, rituals and teachings as well as about popular opinions⁷. Information about Buddhism from the travel reports was taken up by other writers like John Mandeville and spread through the whole of Europe⁸.

But accurate and scientific information was still very poor and fragmented. The European reader had no access to a correct and complete image of this Asian world religion with its deep philosophical teachings and meanings. This further step was taken by the Jesuit missionaries who came to Asia after 1541 CE. They described the culture, behaviour and rites of the Asian peoples their missionary work was directed to in a very detailed way in their letters back to Europe. The first missionary was Francis Xavier, one of the founder members of the Jesuit Order and the head of the so-called Indian mission. During his visit to Japan in 1549-1552, he and his companions gathered all available information about Buddhism. They documented this information in their letters to the Order General Ignatius de Loyola and to the Houses of the Jesuit Order in Italy, Spain and Portugal. These letters were published in many countries as an early form of “media campaign” and reached a large public audience during the second half of the 16th century.

2. The Japanese mission of Francis Xavier and his companions

15th century Portuguese expansion in Africa and in India had always been accompanied by Christian missionary efforts. The Portuguese king acted as the protector of the church in the new settlements and also as ecclesial administrator. “The close and inseparable connection between cross and crown, throne and altar, faith and empire, was a major preoccupation of

6 Wilhelm von Rubruk, *Reisen zum Großkhan der Mongolen: Von Konstantinopel nach Karakorum. 1253-1255. Neu bearbeitet und herausgegeben von Hans Dietrich Leicht* (= Alte abenteuerliche Reiseberichte, Stuttgart 1984); Folker E. Reichert, „Begegnungen mit China. Die Entdeckung Ostasiens im Mittelalter“, in *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Quellenkunde des Mittelalters*, vol. 15, Hg. Horst Fuhrmann (Sigmaringen 1992), p. 230.

7 Marco Polo, *Von Venedig nach China. Die größte Reise des 13. Jahrhunderts*, Hg. Theodor A. Kunst (Tübingen/Basel 3 1974); Konrad Steckels deutsche Übertragung der Reise nach China des Odorico de Pordenone, hg. Gilbert Strasmann (= *Texte des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, Heft 20, hg. Hugo Moser, Ernst A. Philippson, Karl Stackmann, Berlin 1968).

8 Xenja von Ertzdorff, „Gedruckte Reiseberichte über China in Deutschland im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert“, in *Reisen und Reiseliteratur im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*, hg. Xenja von Ertzdorff, Dieter Neukirch, Rudolf Schulz (= *Cloe. Beihefte zum Daphnis* Vol.13, Amsterdam/Atlanta 1992), p. 421 f; Jean de Mandeville, *Reisen*, hg. Ernst Bremer, Klaus Ridder (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 1991).

Iberian monarchs, ministers and missionaries alike”⁹. In 1514 king Manuel I founded a bishop seat in Funchal, Madeira for all overseas territories from Brazil to China. For the Indian mission he installed a general curate in Goa, the centre of Portuguese territory in East India. In 1534 Goa was made into its own bishop seat by Pope Paul III. Although there were some Franciscan and Dominican missionaries and friars in Goa, efforts to convert the native people did not meet with great success.

It was in this situation that king João III heard about the young and enthusiastic Jesuit Order, founded by Ignatius de Loyola and his companions in 1540. One of the commitments of the Jesuit Order was to bring the Christian teachings to the Muslims and to all pagans. So João III ordered missionaries from the Jesuit Order in Rome to go to his domains in Asia. As a result Francis Xavier, who had just been appointed apostolic nuntius, left Portugal in April 1541 with the East Indian fleet and reached India in May 1542 with two companions.

Once in India, Francis Xavier took charge of the Christian mission in Goa and on the Southwest coast of India. From there, he proceeded further to the important trade harbour Malacca and to the Indonesian Spice Islands, where he did missionary work on the Molucca Islands¹⁰. It was in the year 1547 that he first heard from Portuguese sailors about China and the discovery of the Japanese islands by the Portuguese. In December 1547 the Portuguese captain Jorge Álvares visited Francis Xavier in Malacca, bringing with him a Japanese man named Anjirô who wanted to see the “Holy Father” and to confess some severe sins¹¹. Anjirô had killed someone in his home country and escaped from there, and his conscience was pricking him. Attracted by the charismatic personality of Francis Xavier, he converted to Christianity and started to learn Portuguese and the catechism in the mission college in Goa. Francis Xavier was very impressed by his intelligence and enthusiasm. Xavier collected all the information he could get from Anjirô about the Japanese people, culture and religion. The stories of this highly intelligent and rational nation fuelled his wish to take his mission to Japan¹². There, he hoped to gain many converts by presenting logical arguments for the Christian religion. In order to convince the General of the Order and the Portuguese king of his plans, Xavier added a report on Japan and its culture

⁹ Charles Ralph Boxer, *The Church Militant and Iberian Expansion 1440-1770* (London 1978), p. 77.

¹⁰ Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol. 1: *A century of discovery*, book 1 (Chicago 1965), p. 281.

¹¹ Georg Schurhammer SJ, *Franz Xaver. Sein Leben und seine Zeit*, vol. 2: *Asien (1541-1549)*, SubVol. 2: *Indien und Indonesien 1547-1549* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1971), p. 60.

¹² Letter of Francis Xavier from Cochín to the Brothers of the Jesuitic Order, dated 20.1.1548.

given by Jorge Álvares. This report was the first source about Japan and Japanese Buddhism by a European eyewitness¹³.

In April 1549 Francis Xavier left Goa with two companions, the Spanish father Cosme de Torres and the Spanish brother Juan Fernandez, as well as with the converted Anjirô and his servants. They travelled the long and dangerous way from Malacca to Japan in a Chinese ship and reached Kagoshima, Anjirô's hometown, on August 15, 1549. The news of the arrival of several foreigners spread immediately and a lot of people came to see them. Impressed by the fact that the white men had come the long distance just to speak about God, some Japanese converted immediately to Christianity. The local *daimyô* Shimazu Takahisa welcomed the missionaries and granted permission for evangelisation¹⁴. Xavier stayed in Kagoshima for several months to learn the Japanese language and to observe the native religion. During this time he visited Fukushôji, a huge Buddhist monastery of the Soto-Zen-school¹⁵. With the old abbot and Zen master named Ninshitsu he discussed theological and spiritual questions and was deeply impressed by the dignity and wisdom of the old Zen teacher, but he was not able to convert him to Christianity. In the same way Xavier visited other Buddhist monasteries in Kagoshima for discussions with the monks, trying to convince them that their own religion was not perfect. He also criticised Buddhist priests by publicly denouncing their sins in an open manner. In his "Great Letter" of November 5, 1549 to his Jesuit colleagues in Europe Xavier described all his experiences and observations in detail. This letter also contained extensive descriptions of the Buddhist religion, its teachings and practices.

The time in Kagoshima was only the first step in Xavier's mission strategy. He planned to go to the capital Miyako to get permission from the Japanese emperor to evangelise as well as to visit the Buddhist universities in the famous monasteries in the mountains around Miyako. As part of this strategy he translated the Christian catechism into Japanese with the help of Anjirô. The different terms in the two religions resulted a number of mistakes in the Japanese text. This had a big impact, leading to a wrong understanding of the Christian religion by the Japanese and it made the common people laugh. Nevertheless several people in Kagoshima had already converted to Christianity and the Buddhist priests became angry about this threat to their

13 Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol. 1: *A century of discovery*, book 2: *Japan, First notice* (Chicago 1965), p. 657 f.

14 Lach, *Asia*, vol. 1, book 2, p. 666

15 Georg Schurhammer SJ, *Das kirchliche Sprachproblem in der japanischen Jesuitenmission des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts. Ein Stück Ritenfrage in Japan*. (Tokyo 1928), p. 7.

own existence. The Jesuits were then forced to leave Kagoshima and to move on to another place.

In August 1550 the Jesuit missionaries went first to Hirado, a harbour in the northwest of Kyūshū. While Cosme de Torres stayed there to evangelise, Francis Xavier travelled further with Juan Fernandez and a converted Japanese called Bernardo. At the beginning of November they arrived in Yamaguchi, one of the largest and wealthiest towns in Japan with a number of Buddhist monasteries. The very powerful *daimyō* Ōuchi Yoshitaka gave them an audience, but the visit had no consequences. Because the Jesuits met with little success preaching the catechism in the streets, the small group went on to the Japanese capital Miyako, which they reached in the middle of January 1551. But the missionaries became very disappointed. The capital had been ransacked and burned by the civil war and the *Tenno* was a poor and powerless man who resided in a simple house. Bearing no expensive gifts, Xavier was unable to obtain an audience with the *Tenno*. The same thing happened in the famous monasteries around Miyako. The guards refused to admit Xavier because of his poor appearance and his lack of costly presents for the monasteries¹⁶. After eleven damaging days of failure the group left the capital and went back to Hirado where Cosme de Torres gave them a warm welcome.

At the end of April 1551, Francis Xavier travelled to Yamaguchi again, where he hoped to win over the powerful duke Ōuchi Yoshitaka for his ideas. This time he took his best clothes, introduced himself as the official representative of the Portuguese Vice Roy of India and the Bishop of Goa, and presented splendid gifts. The *daimyō* was so impressed that he gave permission for evangelisation and also an empty monastery as residence to the Jesuits. From then on many Japanese warlords, aristocrats and high priests came to the missionaries and listened to their lectures. Francis Xavier spoke on religion as well as about modern European mathematics, physics and astronomy. His speeches were translated by brother Juan Fernandez. There were also daily discussions between Xavier and priests of the different Buddhist schools about the truth of each religion. Many auditors were so impressed by the Jesuitical rhetoric that in a few months over five hundred aristocrats were baptised¹⁷. Xavier described all these successful events in his letter to the Jesuit brothers in Goa in July 1551.

At the end of August 1551, Xavier travelled with some Japanese converts to Bungo, another harbour on the northeast coast of Kyūshū, where a Portuguese trade ship had landed. Before his departure he ordered Father

¹⁶ Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 3, p. 210.

¹⁷ Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 3, p. 468.

Cosme de Torres from Hirado to Yamaguchi to take charge of the Christian mission there, together with brother Juan Fernandez. In Bungo, Xavier was happy to meet a number of well-known Portuguese sailors and captains. Together with them Xavier visited in splendid habitude the local *daimyô* Ôtomo Yoshishige who was a friend of the Portuguese traders. He had a strong interest in their firearms and gave the foreign missionaries a friendly reception. He granted permission for evangelisation and offered an empty flat to Xavier. Because no letters from his Jesuit brothers in Goa had reached him so far, Francis Xavier feared what might be happening there and decided to return to India immediately. Before he left Japan, two letters from Cosme de Torres and Juan Fernandez reached him at the end of October 1551 in Bungo. In Yamaguchi a civil war had started because a warlord had revolted against Ôuchi Yoshitaka who lost his life. In this situation the Christian missionaries were also attacked because they had presented strong competition to the Buddhist monks. Cosme de Torres and Juan Fernandez lost their flat and all their money, but were able to save their lives. Xavier sent them some money to continue their mission work there.

Francis Xavier left Japan in the middle of November 1551, accompanied by four Japanese converts and a diplomatic envoy of the *daimyô* of Bungo. He reached Cochin on the southwest coast of India on January 24, 1552. There, he immediately wrote four letters to Europe, one to the General of the Jesuit Order Ignatius de Loyola, one to his brothers in the Jesuit houses in Europe, one to Simão Rodrigues, the leader of the mission college in Portugal, and one to the Portuguese king. In all these letters he described his adventures and experiences in Japan. He provided information about Japanese behaviour, culture and religion and he shared his knowledge about Buddhist teachings and practises.

Although Xavier never returned to Japan - he died on December 3, 1552 while trying to enter China - he set the foundations for the Japanese mission. Other later missionaries profited from the experiences of Xavier and his detailed plans for a further mission.

3. The letters of the Jesuits as source on Japanese Buddhism

As source for the description of Japanese Buddhism I examined the following letters: the report of the Portuguese captain Jorge Álvares¹⁸, which he wrote on the demand of Francis Xavier in 1547 and which was the first European eyewitness account of Japan. Xavier sent it to Europe at the beginning of 1548 together with his own letters. The intention was to prepare

Ignatius de Loyola for his idea of starting a mission in Japan, a country that didn't belong to the Portuguese empire.

Then there was a narration by the Japanese convert Anjirô, given in the mission college in Goa and written down by the Italian father Niccolò Lancilotto¹⁹. This letter was one of several versions and contained descriptions of the religious and social life in Japan.

The main source utilised for my examinations are the letters of Francis Xavier. The first one, with descriptions of the Buddhist priests and the meditation practises in a Zen monastery, was written on June 22, 1549²⁰, when Xavier was on his way from Malacca to Japan. The details he knew were provided by Anjirô. The next letter is the "Great Letter" from Kagoshima dated November 5, 1549²¹. In the letter from July 1551²² Xavier reported on the religious discussions he had had with Buddhist monks and priests in Yamaguchi. His last letter about Japan was written after his return to India on January 24, 1552²³. In this letter he discussed the different Buddhist schools, also called sects, and the teachings and practises of the Buddhist monks as far as he had observed them.

Another source are the letters of Father Cosme de Torres. The first one was addressed to the Jesuits in Valencia - in order to awaken European interest in the Japanese mission - and the second one to the Jesuits in Goa²⁴. In both letters, dated September 29, 1551, Cosme de Torres reported his way of life, the story of the journey to Japan and the teachings of the different Buddhist schools. The next letter, which Cosme de Torres started writing on

18 In German translation in full length in: Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 2, pp. 64-73. Also in: *Japan in Europa. Texte und Bilddokumente zur europäischen Japankenntnis von Marco Polo bis Wilhelm von Humboldt*, hg. Peter Kapitza (München 1990), pp. 62-66.

There is a short version in: Haas, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, pp. 269-279 which is a German translation of H. J. Coleridge, *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, vol. 2 (London 1882).

Another short version is in: Charles Ralph Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1967), pp. 32-36. And in: Lach, *Asia*, vol. 1, book 2, pp. 657-660. For the original text see *Documentos del Japón*, hl. Juan Ruiz de Medina SJ (Rome, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu 1990) vol. 1, pp. 1-24.

19 Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 2, pp. 273-275.

20 In full length in German translation in: *Kurtze Verzeichnuß und historische Beschreibung deren Dingen so von der Societet Iesu in Orient von dem Jar nach Christi Geburt 1542 bis auff das 1568 gehandelt worden: Erstlich durch Ioannem Petrum Maffeiū, aus portugalesischer Sprach in Latein und jetzo neben etlichen japonesischen Sendtschreiben vom Jar 1548 bis auff 1555, allen frommen Catholischen zu Lieb und Trost ins Teutsch gebracht und zum ersten mal an Tag geben durch weylandt den hochgelehrten Herrn Joannem Georgium Götzen* (Ingolstadt 1586), pp. 98-111.

A short version in modern German translation in: Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 3, p. 20.

21 Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 3, pp. 87-90.

22 *Leben und Briefe des heiligen Franciscus Xaverius, Apostels von Indien und Japan*, hg. Eduard de Vos SJ vVol. 2 (Regensburg 1877), p. 150.

23 Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 3, pp. 465-471.

24 In full length in German translation in: *Die Disputationen des P. Cosme de Torres mit den Buddhisten in Yamaguchi im Jahre 1551. Nach den Briefen des P. Torres und dem Protokoll seines Dolmetschers Br. Juan Fernández SJ*, hg. Georg Schurhammer SJ (= *Mitteilungen der deutschen Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens*, vol. 24, rTeil A, Tokyo 1929).

October 5 or 6, 1551 and finished on October 20 in Yamaguchi, was sent to Francis Xavier in Bungo²⁵. It reported on the current development of the mission and on the local conflicts. This letter was forwarded to Europe by Xavier when he returned to Cochin in 1552.

In a similar way Juan Fernandez wrote a letter on October 20, 1551 to Xavier in Bungo²⁶. In this letter he described the religious discussions Cosme de Torres had held with the Buddhist monks. It contained a number of details about the teachings of Zen Buddhism.

4. Problems in the evaluation of the letters

a) The personal and subjective view of the authors

A very important point in the evaluation of the letters is to understand that most of the authors brought their personal views to bear in their description of Japanese culture and religion. The Jesuits were strongly influenced by their personal religious understanding and convictions. Their ambiguous feelings about a foreign religion were always part of their observations and influenced the style of their letters. Even the content of their letters was selected according to certain rules.

The only European who reported in a neutral way and without an emotional tone was the Portuguese captain Jorge Álvares. He was the first - and for a long time the only - lay person who wrote about Japan. Although he was a faithful Catholic and had great respect for the "Holy Father" Francis Xavier, his report contained neither discriminating statements about the foreign rituals nor religious prejudices. Even the fact that Buddhist monks had sexual relations with the aristocratic boys they had to teach, was reported by Álvares in an impartial way. Other modern historians also make reference to captain Álvares' objective narrative. The German specialist Peter Kapitza stated that his presentation of the Japanese religion without any prejudices and with an openness for a foreign culture renders the report very important²⁷. The American historian Donald F. Lach wrote that Álvares must have been a well-educated man with a sharp sense of observation. Although he visited only a few places in Japan he gained more than a superficial impression of the country and the inhabitants²⁸.

25 In full length in German translation in: Schurhammer, *Disputationen*.

26 In full length in German translation in: Schurhammer, *Disputationen*.

27 Kapitza, *Japan*, p. 62.

28 Lach, *Asia*, vol. 1, book 2, p. 657.

Álvares had sailed along the coast of the southern island Kyūshū in 1546 and stayed for a while in the harbour town of Yamagawa. He visited only the surrounding area and a little of the inner countryside. Nevertheless he precisely observed the daily life of the Japanese including religious ceremonies at home and also the daily life in a Buddhist monastery. He must have also spoken with some believers as he knew a great deal about religious customs. He not only observed, but also made logical connections between various phenomena. In the Japanese monasteries he noted that the language of the holy scriptures was of Chinese origin and that the ceremonies began with the ringing of bells as in Chinese monasteries. Because of this, Álvares concluded that the origin of the Japanese Buddhist order was to be found in China. In fact, Buddhism was imported to Japan from China via Korea in the 6th century CE. For all these reasons Jorge Álvares' report is a very useful source of information about Japanese Buddhism.

Anjirō's narration has to be seen in another context. Of course, as a native Japanese he knew a lot about the religious customs and rituals of his people, but only on a very popular level. He had no idea of the highly philosophical ideas of Buddhism or of the deeper meaning of its teachings. He was familiar only with popular tales, e.g. the legends of Buddha's birth, childhood, enlightenment and death. His descriptions of these myths sometimes sounded bizarre to the Europeans. The Jesuits had already remarked that Anjirō was not a well-educated man as far as religion was concerned. Father Niccolò Lancilotto wrote at the beginning of his narration that it was the view of a common man and that Anjirō had no higher education in religious matters²⁹. It is important to note that Anjirō's poor knowledge was representative of the religious situation in Japan. Only the monks in the monasteries were able to read the scriptures in Sino-Japanese characters and to understand the inner meanings of Buddhist teachings³⁰. The common people were taught in a primitive way about the most basic ethic values and believers had to feed the monks and to pay them for performing rituals. They were to respect the priests as high spiritual beings although the latter sometimes lived in luxury and in an offensive manner.

The next problem was that Anjirō was familiar with only some of the teachings of the Shingon school, which he had belonged to and which was one of nine different Buddhist schools. By drawing on Christian terminology in his description he caused some serious flaws in the Jesuits' understanding. For example, in the centre of the Shingon teachings stood the admiration of the

29 Schurhammer, *Sprachproblem*, p. 20.

30 Otto Ladstätter, Sepp Linhart, *China und Japan. Die Kulturen Ostasiens* (Wien 1983), p. 290.

transcendent Buddha Dainichi Nyorai who represents a cosmic Buddha figure outside of the world. Anjirô described Dainichi Nyorai as the “only God” and the “Creator of all things”³¹. These Christian terms are not valid translations, as the Buddhist understanding has no creator god. In the same way Anjirô spoke of a “trinity,” probably because he had seen a iconographic picture of Dainichi Nyorai with three heads³². The open question is whether these terminological mistakes are due only to Anjirô’s errors or also to those of the Christian interviewer Niccolò Lancilotto. In any case, the information on Buddhism that Anjirô provided was very difficult to interpret and, for the Jesuits, hard to understand. And the European reader of the letter received a wrong impression of Buddhism and its inner values. Hence, this source is of only little value to our research and has to be interpreted very carefully.

The letters of Francis Xavier cause some other problems of interpretation. First of all, Xavier was totally convinced of the truth of his own beliefs and could therefore not accept the Buddhist teachings as true or valuable. For him, all other religions were just pagan errors that had to be destroyed. Hence, Japanese religions were enemies he had to vanquish: “This country is full of idol worship and enemies of Jesus Christ”³³.

The range of Xavier’s reactions and emotions in Japan, as seen in his letters, is indeed astonishing. On the one hand he had great respect for the Japanese culture and people because of its high standard of civilisation; on the other hand, he was very indignant about the homosexual practises in Buddhist monasteries. He used this latter fact to discredit the monks and priests in public. But at the same time he felt great respect and friendship for the old Zen master Ninshitsu of the Fukushôji monastery because of his dignity and wisdom. It seems that Xavier’s positive or negative judgements tended to be very subjective and dependent on his actual experiences.

The next remarkable thing is that Xavier - although he thought negatively about the foreign religion - observed every ritual and custom with great interest and curiosity. From the better- educated Japanese among the new converts he collected all the teachings and legends of the different Buddhist schools they were familiar with. The way in which Xavier attempted to examine everything about Buddhism (and Shintoism as well) was scientific in a modern sense. In his letters, he carefully described everything he could see, hear, recognise or experience. At this point in time the Jesuits did not yet have

31 Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 2, p. 277.

32 Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 2, p. 278.

33 Letter of Francis Xavier from Kagoshima, dated November 5, 1549. See Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol.2, subvol. 3, p. 96.

the knowledge to differentiate between serious religious teachings and popular myths, which were widespread in the Japanese population.

Of course the curiosity of the Jesuits had a strategic goal. Xavier collected all this information in order to construct strong arguments against the Buddhist monks and to disprove their teachings and reply to their comments in theological discussions.

One important point to be kept in mind in researching the Jesuitical letters is the fact that the Jesuits made a strong selection as to what went into them. This selection was based on the question of what was useful for the Jesuits in Europe to know. The function of the letters was not only to inform the brothers of the Order about affairs in the Asian mission, but also to win financial and personal support for its further development. Francis Xavier knew that his letters and those of his colleagues were read not only in the houses of the Order but also by a wide public in the whole of Europe. For this reason, the letters had to report about the glorious success of the Jesuits in Asia to win further support and to make the order famous. To fulfil this function, Buddhism was described in a very negative way to convince readers of the need for the Jesuit mission in East Asia. All these aspects have to be taken into consideration when looking into the letters of Francis Xavier and his companions.

Father Cosme de Torres was a well-educated man who had worked as professor of grammar in Mallorca before he entered the Jesuit society. He was described as a talented and scientific man³⁴. Although Xavier did not think him qualified enough to debate against the Buddhist high priest, in fact he led the Japanese mission for the next twenty years and achieved a veritable success. He was accepted by his brothers and even by the Japanese aristocrats and dukes. Although Torres was also against Buddhism, he was less of a fanatic than Xavier, and his letters provided a valuable source of information about the various Buddhist schools.

Juan Fernandez was a merchant before his life as a Jesuit. He was chosen by Xavier to travel to Japan because of his intelligent and humble manners. He learned the Japanese language very quickly and worked as a translator for Xavier, Torres and other missionaries. He became the most successful missionary in Japan and gave lessons to all newcomers in Japanese language and behaviour. His protocols of the discussions between Torres and the Buddhist priests, especially the Zen Buddhists, were accurate and full of details. His letters therefore provide a very good source for this research.

³⁴ Schurhammer, *Disputationen*, p. 12.

b) The problem of foreign language and translation

It is very difficult to say how well the Jesuits could understand and speak the Japanese language³⁵. In their letters home they claimed they could it speak quite well. But this does not seem to be the case. Xavier had to make use of a translator during his entire stay in Japan. The same could be said for Cosme de Torres. He still needed a translator in the year 1555³⁶. Brother Juan Fernandez was the only one who could speak and understand Japanese quite well in a short time. He acted as translator for Francis Xavier and Cosme de Torres. But for the translation of theological scriptures into Japanese he still needed the help of a converted Japanese. This collaboration led to many problems because the Japanese assistant was familiar only with the religious terminology of Buddhism, which was totally different from that of the Christian religion. For example, Anjirô used the name “Dainichi Nyorai” - a transcendent Buddha - for the word “God”. Francis Xavier did not notice this mistake until his stay in Yamaguchi, when he came into closer contact with the priest of the Shingon sect. In these discussions Francis Xavier remarked that the meaning of “Dainichi Nyorai” was not comparable to “God” and immediately replaced it with the Latin word “Deus” or the Spanish word “Dios”³⁷.

As a result of the discussions between Xavier and the Buddhists in Yamaguchi, the Jesuits were able to correct a number of their own wrong views about the foreign religion. Now they could understand the faith of their “enemies” in a better way. Yet this presented a very serious problem to the Europeans, because there were nine different Buddhist schools whose teachings differed a lot from each other. In the Jodo and Jodoshin sects the adoration of the transcendent Buddha Amida existed (and still exists), who was regarded like a god. There were magical practises in the Shingon school and there was a strong ascetic style in the Zen schools. The teachings of Zen Buddhism were especially hard for Christians to understand. Zen knows no god or eternity. The spiritual goal is to reach enlightenment, i.e. the realisation of the oneness of all. Everything comes from emptiness and returns to emptiness. The Zen Buddhists explained to Cosme de Torres: “There is no need to search for a way (to holiness). Because Nothing has changed into Being it can do nothing else but change back into Nothing. Through the realisation of this

³⁵ See: Schurhammer, *Sprachproblem*.

³⁶ Letter of the Jesuit Baltasar Gago from Hirado, dated September 23, 1555. Schurhammer, *Sprachproblem*, p. 13.

³⁷ Schurhammer, *Sprachproblem*, p. 33.

truth the search for a goal is over”³⁸. The Jesuits were not interested in understanding the deep philosophy of another religion, but they utilized this information to discriminate against “religious enemies” and to discredit their explanations with rhetorical questions and tricky arguments.

The protocols of Juan Fernandez showed that his Japanese was good enough to translate these difficult religious talks and to understand the other’s arguments. When in their letters the Jesuits still wrote falsely about the teachings of Buddhism, it was the result of their different philosophy and of the differences between the teachings of the nine Buddhist schools in Japan.

5. The value of the letters as sources of information on Japanese Buddhism

The Jesuit letters did in fact contain a wealth of information on Buddhism, such as on specific appearances as well as on various teachings, sometimes in great detail.

In his letters, captain Jorge Álvares described a manner of public religiosity he observed in everyday life, including daily meditation in private environments³⁹ or a day spent in a monastery⁴⁰. He wrote about architectural aspects, Buddha-statues, the schedule of the monks and the rules of the community. He was even able to differentiate between different schools according to the habits of their nuns and monks⁴¹. He also discovered that besides Buddhism, there was also Shintoism, the traditional, native religion⁴².

Anjirô explained in his report about Japan, which was translated by Niccolò Lancilotto, the details of the Shingon-school. He described the popular legends about Buddha’s birth, life and death⁴³. As can be read in Francis Xavier’s letter of June 22, 1549 from Malacca, Anjirô also described the Koan practises of the Zen monks and even divulged some of the very secret Koans⁴⁴.

Cosme de Torres described the different Buddhist schools⁴⁵, mostly the schools of Pure-Land-Buddhism, who call on the transcendent Buddha Amida as saviour⁴⁶. In these sects the admiration of the Buddha Amida became stronger

38 Letter of Juan Fernandez from Yamaguchi, dated October 20, 1551. Schurhammer, *Disputationen*, p. 66. See also Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Zen und die Kultur Japans* (Hamburg 1958), p. 24.

39 Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 2, p. 69.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 278 f.

44 Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 3, p. 73. See also: Götz, *Kurtze Verzeichnuß*, p. 108.

45 Letter of Cosme de Torres of September 29, 1551, Yamaguchi; quoted from Schurhammer, *Disputationen*, p. 48 f.

46 Amida is to be seen as the Emperor of the “Pure Land,” a paradise which lies in a western direction. There, the deceased go and look to find final redemption. Remark by author.

than the common admiration of Buddha Sakyamuni as the historical founder of the religion. De Torres also described the characteristics of the two branches of the Zen tradition (Soto and Rinzai).

In his letters, Fernandez wrote about the Buddhist belief in reincarnation: "They say that their souls, once the body has died, go into another body and so live and die in a continual cycle"⁴⁷. In his protocols he mainly recorded the teachings of Zen Buddhists, who believe that Emptiness is an absolute being and an all-including entity. All beings are one because they have the same Buddha-Nature: "In birth and death as well as in their souls all humans and animals are equal"⁴⁸. Fernandez described the most important rules of Zen, as they are still taught today, and also wrote that Zen refuses to take part in metaphysical speculations or to address the question of life after death.

In summary, the Jesuits brought many of Buddhism's principal ideas to Europe. Yet some important ideas were missing, such as: the Four Noble Truths, which are the foundation of Buddhism; the "Noble Eightfold Path"; or the law of Karma, the rule of moral cause and effect which is most important to the teaching of reincarnation. The reports about Buddha's life were based on popular tales, not on historical facts. In fact, the legend of little Buddha's baptism is still part of popular belief in Japan. Francis Xavier first described the "Five Silas," which are ethical rules, wrongly. The ideal of a Bodhisattva was not mentioned at all. In Buddhism a Bodhisattva is either a real person or a transcendent being who helps people on their way to enlightenment. In the historical evolution of Buddhism they gradually became adored divine helpers who were worshiped. Anjirō compared them to Christian saints, e.g. he described one of the most important Bodhisattvas, who in Japan is known as Kannon and is often portrayed as a female - sometimes even with a child in her arms. The association with the Virgin Mary was an easy one for the Jesuits to make. The fact that they were unable to gather any information about the historical lives of these "saints" makes clear that they had no idea about the difference between real persons and transcendent beings.

After an in-depth examination it can be said that a good deal of detailed information about Buddhism is enclosed in these letters. Francis Xavier, as a graduate of the university of Paris, tried his best to gather exact and detailed information using scientific methods and also to share this information. For European readers these letters represented an exponential increase, both in quantity as well as in quality, compared to medieval trave-

⁴⁷ Letter of Juan Fernandez to Xavier of October 20, 1551. Schurhammer, *Disputationen*, p. 50.

⁴⁸ Schurhammer, *Disputationen*, p. 67.

logues, in which only fragmented and half-mythical descriptions had been presented. Contextually, these letters are of very high value in terms of transfer of information.

Nevertheless, the value of this information was limited in the respect that a European audience was not able to gain an objective picture of a foreign religion. Besides the reasons based in the Jesuit view itself, it was also a matter of fact that no unified view of Buddhism in Japan could be presented, due to the variations in the teachings of nine different schools. Second, the Jesuits had no access to the profound philosophical teachings of Buddhism, which were only available to the highly educated clergy. Their research was based mainly on the piety of common Japanese people. Third, at that time Buddhism had many close ties to native Shintoism so that different religious teachings were often confused in an illogical manner⁴⁹. In conclusion, one can say that the Jesuits achieved good results, in light of the difficult circumstances, in gaining a neutral and accurate view of the foreign religion. Nevertheless, their motivation was not as purely unselfish as may appear at the first look. They very clearly selected what to write to Europe, according to the purposes of their letters.

6. The aim and purpose of the Jesuit letters

The letters of the Jesuit missionaries aimed at several objectives, which influenced the way these letters were written as well as their content. The primary objective was to educate the general of the order in Rome and the brothers in Italy, Portugal, Spain and other European countries about the progress of their mission as well as their condition. Regular correspondence was mandatory and established in the laws of the Society of Jesus. The members were to be reminded of the objective of the Society, to encourage each other in their efforts to convert and perform missionary work as well as to strengthen solidarity within the community. It was a way to strengthen the “unity of hearts”⁵⁰. Due to this reason the Jesuits wrote their letters in Spanish, Portuguese or Italian, but not in Latin. The authors knew that the letters would be copied and distributed to the other houses of the order in Europe and read to the community during meals. They were to be a source of information as well as of enlightenment for the community. Following strict censorship the letters were published in order to increase the popularity of the

49 This discrepancy between Shinto and Buddhist views is shown e.g. in the theological conversations between Xavier and the Zen Priest Ninshitsu about the existence of an immortal soul.

50 John W. O'Malley, *Die ersten Jesuiten* (Würzburg 1995), p. 81.

order in public, comparable to modern public relations work. The European readership was very interested in news from foreign and exotic countries. Francis Xavier was conscious of the fact that their letters could create a positive impression about the Jesuits and their activities. He gave the following order to João da Beira, a missionary on the Molucca Islands:

“In your report you have to exclude what could be offensive to others because of unpopular comments and the image must be of a certain religious serenity, so that it can be published immediately when it arrives in Europe and can be told to externals as well. Such news from far countries is very much appreciated and read with great interest in Spain, Italy and other countries. So we have to take great care in writing these letters, and that they please anyone, because they will be read not only by friends, but they will also find their way to the hands of displeased persons or even enemies. We have to keep our eye on the objective of these letters, they should encourage the praise of God and the Holy Church, but none should find a reason to be offended or to unrightfully interpret them... In Ternate will be... our Alphons. You should order that he receive true and accurate, although not organised reports from all our stations on the Molucca Islands. In these reports it should be written about the labour of our men, the sufferings and the successes; the persecution they have to stand, and who is the source of these persecutions, if they make it through them with the help of God; furthermore of the character and the mood of the people and the hope they bring for the future. Out of these reports he - because he is a talented and wise man - should create letters in their names which can be sent to Europe and India with profit.”⁵¹

But with these letters Francis Xavier aimed at further goals as well. In describing the foreign and especially the Japanese culture in as colourful and valuable terms as possible, the mission in Japan was to be brought into public light and to gain much support. More specifically, kings, dukes and rich traders were to be engaged as wealthy sponsors, as the whole mission in Asia suffered a permanent lack of money. Also, young and well-educated men were to be won for the idea of the mission and recruited for the order⁵². Xavier's main

⁵¹ From the letter of Francis Xavier to João da Beira, dated the 20.6.1549 from Malacca. Haas, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, p. 75.

⁵² O'Malley, *Jesuiten*, p. 82.

interest was in extending the mission in Asia and especially in Japan. He therefore tried to focus the attention of the mayors of the order to this country by glorifying the Japanese culture and by talking of the mission's high potential:

“I inform you about Japan with that which has come to our knowledge. Most of all, the people with whom we have had contact are the best we have discovered up to now. It appears to me that among all those pagan lands there will be none exceeding Japan. The Japanese are people with very good manners and are naturally good and not of evil thoughts... I let you know one thing, so that you can thank God many times, that this Island of Japan is very willing to let our beliefs be spread over it... I give you this detailed report so that you all thank God that we find countries in which your sacred desires can act and will be satisfied⁵³.”

He was also driven by these motivations when he wrote to king João III of Portugal, the political and financial mayor of the mission in Asia. Francis Xavier kept him informed about the (successful) development of the mission. On the other hand, he also told him about the needs and problems of the missionaries and requested his help several times, either financially or concerning officials in Portuguese-East India, who were neglecting their duties⁵⁴.

In his letters to the king Francis Xavier used a different style of expression than in his letters to the beloved General of the Order or to Simão Rodrigues, the leader of the mission college in Coimbra. From the latter, Xavier hoped to gain some well-educated young missionaries who were prepared for the difficult situation in the East. For this reason Xavier gave precise orders as to which qualifications and abilities the missionaries should have. To help with this training he described Buddhism as precisely as possible so that coming missionaries would be prepared for their “enemies” and already know the theological arguments with which to refute them.

All of these objectives have to be known in order to understand the selection of content and the style of expression in which the Jesuits described Japanese Buddhism.

⁵³ Letter of Xavier dated November 5, 1549 from Kagoshima. Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 3, p. 85 f.

⁵⁴ See the letter from Xavier to king João III of January 20, 1548; Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver*, vol. 2, subvol. 2, p. 138

7. The publishing of the Jesuits' letters in Europe

Before 1550 the exploration of the Japanese islands by the Portuguese was mentioned nearly nowhere because of their policy of discretion. This changed after the publishing of the Jesuit letters. The letters from overseas were published systematically by the order shortly after their arrival and they were disseminated throughout most of Europe. Japan quickly came into the centre of public interest. The Jesuits in Asia sent their so-called "Indian letters" once a year with the Indian fleet to Lisbon where they were forwarded to the mission college in Coimbra. There, they were copied and sent to Rome. In the headquarters of the order in Rome the letters were edited, copied, translated and sent to the houses of the order in Spain, France and other European countries - usually in a shortened version. "Here they went from college to college, were read in the refectories during the meals, were copied totally or partly and distributed."⁵⁵ For example, three letters of Francis Xavier from India in German and French translations could be found as early as 1545 in Augsburg and Paris⁵⁶. To save the work of copying, the Jesuits in Rome started to print the "Indian letters" in 1552. The report of Anjirô about Japan was first printed in Rome in July 1552 in the *Avisi particolari dell' Indie di Portogallo*⁵⁷. The French orientalist and philosopher Guillaume Postel utilized this information in his book *Des merveilles du monde*⁵⁸ which was published in 1552 or 1553. The report on Japan was also printed in a short version in the famous Italian edition of travel literature called *Delle navigazioni e viaggi* by the Venetian geographer Giovanni Battista Ramusio⁵⁹ in the second edition of the first volume (devoted mostly to Africa), published in 1554 in Venice.⁶⁰ The letters of Francis Xavier and his colleagues were used as a source by the Portuguese historian Manuel da Costa for his work *Historia das missiones do Oriente até o anno de 1568*. This book was translated by the Jesuit Giovanni Pietro Maffei into Latin and published in Dillingen in 1571 with the title *Rerum a Societate Jesu in Oriente gestarum commentarius*⁶¹. Maffei added some of the Indian letters to his work: Anjirô's report, Xavier's letter dated

⁵⁵ Georg Schurhammer SJ, *Die zeitgenössischen Quellen zur Geschichte Portugiesisch-Asiens und seiner Nachbarländer zur Zeit des Hl. Franz Xaver (1538-1552)* (= Bibliotheca Instituti Historici S.J. vol. 20; Rome/Lisbon 1962) (= *Gesammelte Studien I*), S. XXXIV.

⁵⁶ Lach, *Asia*, vol. 1, book 1, p. 316.

⁵⁷ Bernard-Maitre, *Postel*, p. 85, footnote 8.

⁵⁸ Lach, *Asia*, vol. 1, book 2, p. 660.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ The third book with descriptions of Asia was published in 1556. Lach, *Asia*, vol. 1, book 1, p. 204

⁶¹ Bernhardus Varenius, *Descriptio Regni Japoniae. Beschreibung des japanischen Reiches* (Amsterdam 1649). Ins Deutsche übertragen von Ernst-Christian Volkmann. Unter Mitarbeit von Lydia Brüll hg. und kommentiert von Martin Schwind, Horst Hammitzsch (Darmstadt 1974), p. 200.

June 22, 1549 from Malacca, his “Great Letter” of November 5, 1549 from Kagoshima, the letters of Cosme de Torres and Juan Fernandez of 1551 from Yamaguchi, and two letters that Xavier wrote after his return to Cochín dated January 29, 1552. The “Great Letter” from Kagoshima, which contained the first detailed descriptions of Japan from a missionary man, was widely disseminated in hand-written and printed editions. It was published for the first time, together with three other letters, in Coimbra under the title: *Copia de unas cartas del padre mestre Francisco, y del padre M. Gaspar, y otros padres de la compañía de Jesu, que escriuieron de la India a los hermanos del Colegio de Jesus, de Coimbra. Tresladadas de Portugues en Castellano. Recebidas el año de M.D.LI.*⁶² In Rome it was part of the collection of letters known as *Avisi Particolari delle Indie di Portugallo Ricevuti in questi doi anni del 1551 et 1552 da li Reuerendi Padri de la compagnia de Iesu ... In Roma per Valerio Dorico et Luigi Fratelli Bressani Alle spese de M. Batista di Rosi Genouese 1552*⁶³ In Europe there appeared some complete editions of the “Indian Letters,” although the original letters were badly translated and drastically shortened⁶⁴. In parallel, some collections had been published since 1555 in Spain and Portugal. Best known are the collections: *Cartas que os Padres e Irmaõs da companhia de Iesus, que andão nos Reynos de Iapão escreuerão aos da mesma Companhia da India, e Europa, desde anno de 1549 ate o de 66*⁶⁵ published in Coimbra in 1570; the *Cartas que los Padres y Hermanos de la Compania de Iesus, que andan en los Reynos de Iapon escivieron a los de la misma Compania, desde el año de mil y quinientos y quarenta y neuve, hasta el de mil y quinientos y setenta y uno ...*⁶⁶ (Alcalá, 1575); as well as the *Cartas que os Padres e Irmãos da Companhia de Iesus escreuerão dos Reynos de Iapão e China aos da mesma Companhia da India e Europa, desde anno de 1549 até o de 1580. ...*⁶⁷ (Evora, 1598). The Iberian collections were a more exact reproduction of the original letters. To conclude this listing it has to be said that the Jesuit letters from Japan reached a wide public in Europe and that their content was brought to public attention through the efforts of the order. No other country was described as often in 16th century Europe than was Japan⁶⁸. Accordingly, information about Japanese Buddhism experienced

62 Georg Schurhammer, „Der „Große Brief“ des Heiligen Franz Xaver“, in *Xaveriana*, hg. unter Mitwirkung von Laszlo Szilas S.J. (= Bibliotheca Instituti Historici S.J. Vol. 22; Rome/Lisbon 1964) (= *Gesammelte Studien III*), p. 619.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 620.

64 Lach, *Asia*, vol. 1, book 2, p. 675.

65 *Ibid.*, footnote 134.

66 *Ibid.*, footnote 135.

67 Lach, *Asia*, vol. 1, book 2, p. 676, footnote 136.

68 Lach, *Asia*, vol. 3, book 4, p. 1829.

a wide reception throughout Europe - long before the beginning of the European reception of Buddhism as thought up to now.

Conclusion

Extensive information about the culture of Japan as well as about Japanese Buddhism was brought to Europe through the letters of Francis Xavier and his companions. The missionaries were very interested in drawing a precise picture of this “opposing” religion, in order to prepare upcoming missionaries for rhetorical confrontations, but also to recruit personnel and secure funding for an interesting and “valuable” target of the mission. The Japanese letters from 1547 to 1552 were examined. They contain detailed descriptions of the various Buddhist schools and information about the religious practises of the monks in the monasteries as well as those of laypeople. Furthermore, they contain descriptions of important teachings of Buddhism, such as the idea of reincarnation, the five Silas as the principal ethical rules of action, and basic information about the life of the historical Buddha. The teachings of Zen Buddhism and of the Pure-Land school were also covered. As far as the transfer of information about Buddhism is concerned, we face a considerable increase both in quality as well as quantity compared to medieval travel reports. Nevertheless, there was not enough information to make it possible for the reader to gain a complete and actual picture of this Asian world religion. Through the Jesuit press, the letters were disseminated throughout Europe and made accessible to a broad readership. We can therefore take it as a fact, that information about Buddhism was known to a wide audience. As an example we can take the theological-philosophical tract *Des merveilles du monde* by the French orientalist Guillaume Postel, who studied the descriptions of the Japanese religion intensively. With the voluntary isolation of Japan after 1639 this transfer of information came to an end and was not revived until much later.

Abstract

In all essays about the history of Buddhism reception in Europe, the first transmission of informations about Buddhism is said to be at the beginning of the 19th century. No research mentions the Jesuits' letters from Japan which had been the first source about Japanese Buddhism in Europe. I examined the letters that the jesuitic missionaries wrote about Japan between 1547 and 1552 and how detailed and useful these informations about Buddhism were. I also tried to find out how far these informations were spread in Europe in the second half of the 16th century.

From 1549 to 1551 Francis Xavier travelled with some companions throughout Japan. During this period he and his companions wrote several letters to their brothers in India and Europe and described detailed and carefully all about the Japanese culture and religion they had seen and heard. They made some big mistakes in understanding the foreign religious instructions because these were totally different to the Christian ones. They failed by incorrect translations of Japanese words into Portuguese or Spanish terms. But nevertheless the Jesuits got a lot of informations about Buddhism. All these letters were sent to Europe and immediately copied by the Order of the Jesuits and printed and published to inform about the activities and the success of the Jesuit Order in Asia.

The result of my research is that the Jesuits' letters were an excellent source for the transfer of knowledge about Buddhism in Europe, qualitatively and quantitatively much more better than the medieval travel descriptions about Asia.

Resumo

Em todos os estudos acerca da história da recepção do Budismo na Europa afirma-se que a primeira transmissão de informação teve lugar no início do século XIX. Nenhuma pesquisa menciona as cartas Jesuítas do Japão como a primeira fonte de conhecimento do Budismo Japonês na Europa. Examinei as cartas que os missionários jesuítas escreveram sobre o Japão entre 1547 e 1552 e como eram detalhadas e úteis estas informações acerca do Budismo. Tentei, igualmente, saber até que ponto estas informações eram conhecidas na Europa na segunda metade do século XVI.

Francisco Xavier, entre 1549 e 1551, viajou com alguns companheiros pelo Japão. Neste período ambos escreveram várias cartas para os seus irmãos na Índia e Europa, descrevendo detalhada e cuidadosamente tudo o que viram e ouviram acerca da cultura e religião japonesas. Cometeram grandes erros no modo como entendiam os ensinamentos desta religião estrangeira, tão diferentes dos cristãos, fazendo traduções incorrectas do Japonês para o Português ou Castelhano. Não obstante, os Jesuítas conseguiram reunir um elevado número de informações acerca do Budismo. Todas estas cartas foram enviadas para a Europa e imediatamente copiadas pela Companhia de Jesus, sendo impressas e publicadas de modo a informarem sobre as actividades e sucesso dos Jesuítas na Ásia.

O resultado da minha pesquisa conclui que as cartas dos Jesuítas eram uma excelente fonte para a transmissão de conhecimento do Budismo na Europa, sendo qualitativa e quantitativamente superiores às descrições da Ásia dos livros de viagem medievais.