



The European Association of Chinese Studies (EACS) and its history: **EACS Scholars in Memoriam - Erik Zürcher**

On Thursday 7 February 2008, the first day of the Chinese New Year, Emeritus Professor Erik Zürcher passed away. He had been in frail health for some time, and his eyes were giving him trouble. He remained fully clear of mind until the end, as testified by his publication in 2007 of a major monograph containing translations of conversations between Jesuit Guilio Aleni and local Chinese literati. This constitutes a unique study of international religious contact, for once not focusing on polemics conducted from elite perspectives but on debate between a missionary and what Zürcher liked to call the local schoolmasters.

A student at Leiden University from 1947, Erik Zürcher produced a brilliant PhD dissertation in 1959, which quickly became a classic in the study of Chinese Buddhism, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*. The first edition is still graced by his beautiful Chinese handwriting (he was also known for his masterful drawings). *The Buddhist Conquest* was reprinted in 1972 and again in 2007, indicating the importance of this work. Personally, I have always felt that his dissertation must have been both a joy (for it set him off on a successful career) and a burden (for it was a hard act to follow). Be that as it may, he wrote a flow of serious articles from the 1970s onward - on such topics as early Chinese vernacular, Buddhist messianism and the early Jesuit mission - of which the significance is undiminished today. Somewhere hidden in a drawer there must be several typescript chapters of his grammar of the Chinese in Kumarajiva's translations of Buddhist texts. A common element in his research on Buddhism, Christianity and Chinese communism was the encounter of Chinese culture and foreign thought and worldviews. Characteristically, while he produced a course syllabus containing a detailed analytical model for this material, he never published this in English. He often preferred staying close to the sources rather than designing abstract vistas.

In addition to his scholarly work, Zürcher was also a builder of institutions, at a time when there was much room for personal initiative without red tape or formats imposed from above. As early as 1931, Zürcher's teacher, Professor JLL Duyvendak, had founded the Sinological Institute; after Professor Hulsewe retired in 1974, Zürcher became the Institute's director, even though the directorship was later deemed *ad interim*, because the Institute's formal status had somehow evaporated between institutional-organizational lines. However, since "the Sinological Institute" is how Chinese Studies at Leiden University was known internationally, we have continued to use this name at home and abroad - and with some justification, for the Institute comprises a Department of Chinese Studies *and* an outstanding Sinological Library.

Having first been appointed Reader, in 1961 Erik Zürcher took up duty as full professor of Far-Eastern History, with special attention to Chinese-Western contacts in the broad sense. This was doubtless a purposefully vague designation: in the Chinese tradition, the West includes India, the breeding ground of Buddhism, and not just faraway Europe. In 1969, after several years of successful lobbying, Zürcher

founded the Documentation Center for Contemporary China (with a dedicated budget), facilitating the study of present-day China and communism by others. In Europe, this made Leiden one of the Universities that took modern China seriously early on. In itself this made sense, since Chinese Studies in the Netherlands had consistently been linked with practical concerns in the areas of colonial rule, international relations and trade - but it was typical of Zürcher that he managed to put the study of modern China on an institutional footing. From 1976 to 1992, he was co-editor of *T'oung Pao*, the oldest still extant sinological journal today. He enjoyed ample academic recognition, visible in honors such as membership of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (from 1975) and election to Correspondant étranger de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres (from 1985).

From the 1970s, while taking part in work on European Expansion elsewhere in the Faculty of Arts, Zürcher taught and served in various administrative functions in the Department of Chinese Studies. Additionally, throughout the years he sat on countless committees inside the University and elsewhere, including international scholarly organizations and institutions such as Unesco. This included a two year period as president of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS), from 1990 to 1992. In 1978, following a request from Chinese Studies' students, he began preparing slide series for classroom use, an initiative which quickly grew into a prestigious project for visual education (co)funded by the Taiwan Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, for which, together with colleagues, he systematically collected images for the production of thematic slide series. The project moved on into computerization early on, but following the increasingly strict enforcement of copyright rules and the advent of the Internet, what had been a head start now turned into an administrative backlog that made it difficult to continue and expand. Meanwhile, many cohorts of students had enjoyed and learned from this "visualization of Chinese history". Zürcher's interest in matters visual, closely interwoven with the archaeology, art and material culture of China, was also manifest in his initiative toward the establishment of the Hulsewe-Wazniewski Foundation, which has advanced teaching and research in these areas at Leiden University since 1997.

As in his research, so in his teaching Zürcher excelled at clear, well-formulated exposition. Unfortunately, he had no senior students in his own, original field of early Buddhism, but he trained many in the study of Christianity in China in the 17th century. Especially his 1980s seminars truly helped shape some of his students at the time, including Nicolas Standaert, now professor of Chinese at the Catholic University of Leuven and the undersigned. Still, personal attention was not the most important thing, for Zürcher was used to maintaining a certain distance from us as students, and later as PhD candidates and colleagues. While this could at times be frustrating, it was more than made good by the sheer space he gave us to develop - and this was not just *laissez-faire* but also bespoke a fundamental conception of and attitude to knowledge. During seminar sessions, he would, for instance, emphasize that he himself had needed years to master particular types of language such as those employed in Buddhist and Taoist texts. At the same time, frequent instances of irony in his comments on our readings created room for new interpretations. His astonishing command of various types of premodern Chinese (and English, and Dutch, and many other tongues) made what he said highly motivating for me and many others.

Erik Zürcher combined phenomenal erudition with an exceptionally critical mind and something one might simply call intellectual style - and with a keen sense of humor. He was a great sinologist, who made invaluable contributions to scholarship and inspired many students and colleagues.

Barend ter Haar, February 12, 2008