


## Keynote: Tibetan Studies in Saint Petersburg: Past and Present

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ear colleagues, young and not very young!  
It has been a great honor for me to welcome the congregation of Tibetologists who came to Saint Petersburg both to share their scholarly achievements with their colleagues and to acquire fresh knowledge during the Fifth International Seminar of Young Tibetologists. Saint Petersburg<sup>1</sup> was originally founded not only to be “a window on Europe,” but with the particular purpose of becoming the capital of the Russian Empire to unite many peoples and cultures.

Today, Tibetan Studies is a special branch of Oriental Studies. You will not find Tibet on the political map of the world. However, in the same way that many great rivers flow to the oceans from the glaciers of Tibet, her spiritual accomplishments spread in all directions, crossing mountains and deserts, as well as political boundaries. For this reason, it is my opinion that when preceding the word “studies,” “Tibetan” should be understood not just in its geographical or ethnic meaning, but in its cultural and religious meaning. Tibetology is thus a world-embracing subject and is in no way limited to the hardly accessible mountainous country with “high peaks and pure earth.”

Russia is especially fortunate geographically since it is located in both Europe and Asia. Therefore, Asian languages and cultures are not something external and foreign—as they may be considered in Europe—but they are an inseparable and important part of Russian national culture. As a result, the study of Asian languages has always been seen as indispensable, and this emphasis has greatly contributed to the progress of Oriental Studies in Russia.

In relation to Tibetan Studies in Russia, it should be pointed out that:

- Tibetan Buddhism has had a long-standing place in the Russian Empire and is officially recognized in modern Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> Named “Petrograd” from 1914 to 1924 and “Leningrad” from 1924 to 1991.

- Thousands of books in the Tibetan language have been written and printed in Russia, from which services have been performed—and are still performed—in many Buddhist temples.
- Russian Buddhist citizens themselves have contributed to the development of knowledge about Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Learned Russian lamas also have become versed in Western Buddhist Studies scholarship.

Russian familiarity with Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan language thus differs from the experience of Western Europe. Being a continental power, Russia is separated from Tibet by grasslands inhabited by various Mongolian and Turkic tribes. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Russia, which at that time occupied only a part of Eastern Europe, and Tibet were both incorporated into the great Mongol Empire. However, no written evidence about possible Russian–Tibetan contacts survive from that time. When in the mid–16<sup>th</sup> century Russia started moving eastwards and reached the Pacific Ocean a century later, she again met Mongols on her new eastern borders. Peoples of Mongol stock such as the Kalmyks in Southern European Russia and the Buryat Mongols in Eastern Siberia became Russian subjects. By that time, Tibetan Buddhism had become widespread among the Mongols, with the Khoshut Mongols even ruling over Tibet. As a result of contact with the Mongols, the Russians received their first exposure to Tibetan Buddhism and, by extension, their first exposure to the Tibetan language and Tibet herself.

In the field of Tibetan Studies, the city of Saint Petersburg occupies a special place, not only for Russia, but the whole world. The city was founded in 1703 and became the capital of the vast Russian Empire in 1712. The first Tibetan texts arrived in Saint Petersburg as early as in 1719. These Tibetan pages originated from the ruined monasteries of the Dzungar Mongols located in present-day Kazakhstan.<sup>2</sup> Since that time, Tibetan books and items have been brought to Saint Petersburg in ever-increasing quantities.

In 1724, by the order of the Czar Peter I, the Saint Petersburg Academy was founded. In its early decades, the Academy was largely staffed by foreigners, especially Germans from German principedoms and the Baltic provinces of Russia. In 1732, the first work on Tibetan Studies was published in Saint Petersburg: an article entitled “*Elementa litteraturae brahmanicae, tangutanae, mungalicae*” by Gottlieb Siegfried Bayer (1694–1638).<sup>3</sup> In 1747, it was followed by “*De*

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see Zorin 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Bayer 1732.

scriptis tanguticis in Sibiria repertis commentatio” by Gerhard Müller (1705–1783).<sup>4</sup> The Tibetan language was called the “Tangut language” because at that time this name was used by the Mongols as a synonym for “Tibet.”

In 1764, the young Empress Catherine II appointed a learned lama, Bstan pa dar rgyas Zayaev (1710–1776), as the Head Lama of the Buddhists of Eastern Siberia—the Bandido Khamba Lama (Paṇḍita Mkhan po bla ma). This was a major event for the institutionalization of Tibetan Buddhism in Russia. Thus, Tibet became indirectly associated with Russia as the “lamaist clergy” steadily grew in numbers, causing anxiety to the Russian administration. Three years later, Zayaev, as the Deputy of the Buryat Mongols, participated in commission work that was specifically convened to create a new Russian legislation. He received a personal audience with the empress and submitted to her his account of Tibet where he had studied for many years.<sup>5</sup>

For two centuries, the Russian Christian Mission, which was established in Beijing in 1685, served as an important source for information about Tibet. The aim of this Mission was to serve the religious needs of the Russian soldiers and their descendants who were captured during the conflict between Russia and the Qing Empire. However, this permanent representation in Beijing was used by the Russian government as a source to collect all sorts of information about its neighbor. That is why, alongside Christian clerics (of whom many became outstanding scholars), these missions employed natural scientists, physicians, Orientalists, botanists, and others. It should be noted that in the days of the Manchu Qing Empire, its capital, Beijing, was an important center of Tibetan Buddhism with dozens of temples, thousands of lamas and workshops producing Tibetan Buddhist books and images in enormous quantities.

I will only mention two facts about this Christian Mission in relation to Tibetan Studies in Russia.

In 1844, a complete set of the Beijing edition of the *Bka' 'gyur* and the *Bstan 'gyur* was presented to the Russian Mission. The gift was reported to the Russian Emperor Nicholas I, who personally wrote in the report: “Excellent! But I do not know what sort of books they are.” In return, he ordered a collection of Russian books to be sent to China. This was the first official book exchange between Russia and China.<sup>6</sup>

A modern scholar should not forget that in the mid–19<sup>th</sup> century, it was a difficult task to bring such a heavy and bulky collection to Russia. Finally, it found its way to Saint Petersburg, and at present it

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<sup>4</sup> Müller 1747.

<sup>5</sup> Tsyrempilov 2013: 72–80.

<sup>6</sup> Uspensky 2011: 248–249.

is kept at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts. Russia was the first of the European countries to possess this excellent edition of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. It became the basis of many Russian publications on Buddhist Studies. Publications of some canonical Buddhist texts in the famous series *Bibliotheca Buddhica* are largely based on this Beijing edition. Some of its pages still bear the pencil marks of such great scholars as Theodor I. Stcherbatsky (1866–1942), Baron Alexander von Staël-Holstein (1876–1937), and others.

In 1828, the first Russian book entirely dedicated to Tibet was printed in Saint Petersburg. This was a translation from Chinese of the *Description of Tibet* (*Wei zang tu shi* 衛藏圖識) made by the famous Russian Sinologist Father Hyacinth (Bichurin; 1777–1853) who was the head of the Russian Mission in Beijing in 1808–1821. The book was immediately translated into French and published in Paris.<sup>7</sup>

The foundation of the Asiatic Museum in 1818 was a major event for the progress of Oriental Studies in Russia. Its aim was “to bring together in one place the materials which are necessary for the study of Asian peoples living abroad and in Russia: their life-styles, languages, and history.”<sup>8</sup> In 2018, we celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this outstanding institution. Although throughout the turbulent Russian history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it has changed names and affiliations, it has survived and is known today as the Institute of the Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IOM RAS). It possesses one of the world’s largest collections of Tibetan manuscripts and woodblock prints.<sup>9</sup>

Further progress in Tibetan Studies was largely the result of the untiring activity of the academician Isaac Jacob Schmidt (1779–1847), who originally came to Russia in order to propagate Christianity to Kalmyk Mongols. Consequently, he discovered that Tibetan was the language of the Buddhism confessed by them and so he learned it. The results of his efforts were impressive. He wrote a grammar of the Tibetan language, Tibetan-German and Tibetan-Russian dictionaries, and published the Tibetan text of the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* and its German translation.<sup>10</sup>

Most of you are young Tibetologists who were born in the computer age and it probably seems strange to you that it used to be difficult to

<sup>7</sup> Klaproth 1829 & 1830.

<sup>8</sup> *Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar' Brokgauza i Yefrona* 1891: 232.

<sup>9</sup> The electronic catalogue of this collection was created in 1994–2008 as a part of the Asian Classics Input Project. At present, a group of scholars is preparing a catalogue of several editions of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon and related materials kept at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts. Two volumes of this catalogue have already been published. See Zorin 2017 & 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt 1839; 1841 & 1843.

print a text in Tibetan or in any other language. Nevertheless, it took a lot of effort to create the movable Tibetan type used at the printing house of the Academy of Sciences from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Russian inventor and politician of German origin, Baron Paul Ludwig Schilling von Canstadt (1786–1837), was a passionate book-collector and was experimenting with printing Asian languages, including Tibetan. In 1830, Baron Schilling was sent to Eastern Siberia with the task of examining the current state of trade between Russia and China and also to inspect the “lamaist clergy.” Being favorably inclined towards Buddhism, Baron Schilling collected a great number of Tibetan books during his expedition, especially those copied for him by Buryat Mongol lamas. He was even presented a copy of the Sde dge edition of the *Bka' 'gyur* as a reciprocal gift for constructing prayer wheels containing a thitherto unattainable quantity of *dhāraṇī*. After his death, his Tibetan books found their way to the Asiatic Museum and laid the foundation for its Tibetan collection.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile in 1833, a Chair of Mongol Studies was established at the city of Kazan on the banks of the River Volga at the local university. Its founder was Professor Józef Kowalewski (1800/01–1878), who had the opportunity to travel to Eastern Siberia and Beijing in preparation to teach Mongolian. Needless to say, he encountered lamas and collected a large number of Tibetan books printed in Beijing and Buddhist monasteries in Siberia.<sup>12</sup>

Within a few years, a decision was made to establish the Chair of Tibetan Studies at Kazan University. For this purpose, in 1840, Kowalewski's student Vasilii P. Vasilyev (1818–1900) was sent to Beijing with the task to study the Tibetan language and to collect Tibetan materials. For ten years, Vasilyev assiduously studied the Tibetan language and collected books not only in Tibetan, but also in Mongolian, Manchu, and Chinese.

In Beijing, Vasilyev established contacts with head lamas as well as with people who had visited Tibet and Tibetan traders. He managed to get from them some books that had been printed in Tibet. He also

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<sup>11</sup> Vasilyev wrote about Baron Schilling: “Pour l’orient la Russie possédait un grand bibliomane dans la personne de feu le baron Schilling et c’est à ses efforts, sans doute, que l’académie des sciences est redevable de toutes ses principales richesses. Il n’épargnait ni dépenses ni peines pour acquérir non-seulement des livres, mais aussi d’autres objets servant à la connaissance de la vie dans l’orient” [For the Orient, Russia had a great bibliomaniac in the person of the late Baron Schilling, and the Academy of Sciences is undoubtedly indebted to his efforts for all its principal riches. He spared neither expenses nor pains to acquire not only books, but also other objects relating to life in the Orient] (Wassiliev 1856: 582–583).

<sup>12</sup> For more information about Kowalewski's stay in Beijing, see Uspensky 2009.

purchased the Snar thang edition of the *Bstan 'gyur*, now kept at the Saint Petersburg University Library.

Vasilyev was the first in Europe to discover several famous Tibetan historical works. These are Bu ston's *Chos 'byung*, 'Gos lo tsā ba's *Deb ther sngon po*, Sum pa mkhan po's *Dpag bsam ljon bzang*, Mgon po skyab's *Rgya nag chos 'byung*, Tshe 'phel gu shri's *Hor chos 'byung*, and some others. Among them was the *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* printed in 1478, which is the oldest Tibetan book in the Saint Petersburg University collection.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, when Vasilyev returned to Kazan—having accumulated a unique knowledge of the Tibetan language and bringing with him the precious materials which he had collected—the decision to establish the Chair of Tibetan Studies was withdrawn. So instead of being the founder of Tibetan Studies in Russia, Vasilyev became the founder of Russian Sinology. This came as a blow to the emerging field of Russian Tibetology. In comparison with other fields in Oriental Studies, Tibetan Studies is fragile. When the transmission lineage is lost, it is not easily restored, as Russia's example vividly demonstrates. It took more than 150 years after Vasilyev's trip to Beijing to establish the Chair of Mongolian and Tibetan Studies at Saint Petersburg University in 2008, i.e., just 12 years ago.

In 1855, the Oriental Department of Kazan University moved from Kazan to Saint Petersburg with its professors and book collections. After being moved to Saint Petersburg, the library continued to be supplied with books in Asian languages. However, the bulk of the Tibetan collection was formed by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

Vasilyev, who also moved to Saint Petersburg, soon became the Dean of the Oriental Department and submitted a project to establish the Chair of Tibetan Studies at Saint Petersburg University. However, his proposal was not supported. At the end of his long life, Vasilyev came back to Tibetan Studies and was even planning to undertake a trip to Tibet. His book *Buddhism* and his translation of Tāranātha's *History of Buddhism in India* (*Rgya gar chos 'byung*) remain classical works in Tibetan Studies. His last published book was his partial translation of the *Geography of the World* (*'Dzam gling rgyas bshad*) by Smin grol gling No mon han (1789–1839). In 2018, we celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of this outstanding scholar.<sup>14</sup>

The academician Anton Schiefner (1817–1879) greatly contributed to Tibetan Studies. In 1859, he published a Sanskrit–Tibetan–Mongolian dictionary of Buddhist terms in Saint Petersburg under the name *Buddhistische Triglotte*. The woodblocks of this dictionary were

<sup>13</sup> Wassiljew 1855: 353–363, Wassiljew 1856: 570–578, and Uspensky 2014: 154–161.

<sup>14</sup> For more information about Vasilyev's contribution to Buddhist Studies, see Kapstein 2019.

engraved at the initiative of Baron Schilling von Canstadt in Eastern Siberia. Among other things, in 1869, he published his German translation of Tāranātha's *History of Buddhism in India*. Vasilyev accused Schiefner of having poor knowledge of Tibetan and claimed that Schiefner had plagiarized his Russian translation. All Russian scholarship on this issue support Vasilyev's view. However, documents reflecting Schiefner's position were also published recently.<sup>15</sup> It seems that this kind of conflict was inevitable since the two outstanding scholars simultaneously translated one and the same Tibetan book. Their conflict is likely more a product of the psychology of the authors than the quality of their scholarship.

While 19<sup>th</sup>-century Tibet was a forbidden land for Europeans, Russian Buddhist pilgrims of the Mongol origin were able to visit there rather freely. So, the Imperial Russian Geographic Society and the Academy of Sciences decided to send Gombozhab Tsybikov (1873–1930), a Buryat graduate of Saint Petersburg University, to Central Tibet. Under the disguise of a pilgrim, he collected materials on Tibet, especially Tibetan books. His “pilgrimage” took place from 1899 to 1902. As a result, he brought back 333 volumes of Tibetan books purchased from the Zhol Par khang, the famous printing house of Lhasa.<sup>16</sup>

Tsybikov also took many photos of Tibet and described his travel in the book *A Buddhist Pilgrim to the Shrines of Tibet*.<sup>17</sup> He presented his photo of the Potala to the *National Geographic* and added to the magazine's fame and popularity. At present, the books collected by Tsybikov are kept at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, while his glass photographic plates are stored at the archives of the Russian Geographical Society—also in Saint Petersburg.<sup>18</sup> In 1899, the Oriental Institute was founded in Vladivostok, Russia's easternmost extremity. Tsybikov was teaching at that Institute for many years and published the first Russian textbook of colloquial Tibetan.

It should be noted that the (formerly Imperial) Russian Geographical Society possesses many valuable photos and travel reports. For example, it hosts a collection of photos made by a famous Russian traveler Piotr K. Kozlov (1863–1935) during the stay of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in Outer Mongolia when he fled from the British in 1904.

Another Buryat scholar, Bajar Baradiin (1878–1939), was sent to the great monastery of Amdo, Bla brang Bkra shis 'khyil, from 1906 to 1907, where he collected about 200 volumes of Tibetan books. These

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<sup>15</sup> See Walravens 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Uspensky 1996: 180–182.

<sup>17</sup> This book was first published in Petrograd in 1918. For its English translation, see Tsybikov 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Andreyev 2003: 32n52.

books are mostly the collected works of the learned lamas of Amdo. They were printed mainly in Bla brang Monastery, but several of them came from Sku 'bum Monastery.<sup>19</sup>

In 1913, the Asiatic Museum received a bundle of Tibetan scrolls from Dunhuang 敦煌, which are mostly copies of the *Heart Sutra* and the *Sutra of Infinite Life*.<sup>20</sup>

The expedition to north-western China headed by Kozlov from 1908 to 1909 unearthed the ruined town of Khara Khoto. Among the excavated items were found many book fragments in different languages and precious works of Buddhist art. At present, the Tibetan books and fragments are kept at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts and the art items are stored in the Hermitage Museum.<sup>21</sup>

Not only books, but also objects of Tibetan Buddhist art were collected by scholars and connoisseurs. The most prominent of the collectors was Prince Esper Uktomskiy (1861–1921), a close associate of the last Russian Czar Nicholas II. His collection numbered more than 2,000 pieces and was famous even outside Russia. A major part of his collection now forms the bulk of the Tibetan collection at the Hermitage Museum. Some parts of his collections are exhibited in the other museums of Saint Petersburg. For example, the Museum of the History of Religions possesses a beautiful sculpted image of Sukhāvati paradise made between 1904 and 1905 by lama-artisans of two Buryat monasteries.<sup>22</sup>

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a rapid Russian growth in the number of Buddhist monks and in the building of new monasteries. Monasteries in Eastern Siberia printed many books in the Tibetan and Mongolian languages and became major centers of Buddhist learning, art, and medicine. Many lamas from Russia who were trained in Tibet subsequently made large contributions to the development of Buddhist Studies in Russia.

Books printed or copied in Amdo, Beijing, Mongolia, and, to some extent, in Central Tibet were brought to Russia. Many of them served as originals for the printing houses of local monasteries. The total number of Tibetan books printed in Russia is unknown. However, it would not be an exaggeration to assume that there are not less than a few thousands separate works, images of deities, and paper amulets. The Buryat monasteries printed Tibetan books relating to many

<sup>19</sup> Uspensky 1996: 182–184. Baradiin's diary was published only 18 years ago. See Baradin 2002.

<sup>20</sup> For the description and the catalogue of these scrolls, see Savitskiy 1991.

<sup>21</sup> See Piotrovsky 1993 and Samosiuk 2006.

<sup>22</sup> The reproduction of this sculpted image can be viewed on the official website of the museum, [http://www.gmir.ru/virtual/virt-collection/sukhavati\\_zoom/](http://www.gmir.ru/virtual/virt-collection/sukhavati_zoom/). Accessed April 29, 2020.



subjects: canonical sutras and tantras, ritual manuals, calendars, and books for the training of lamas in accordance with monastic curriculum. Many monasteries regularly published catalogues of their printed books.

Tibetan printing flourished in Russia, especially beginning with the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eastern Siberia is rich in wood, and there soon appeared trained engravers. Russian white paper was used, and the printing quality was very high. For the most part, Tibetan books printed in Russia are much clearer and more legible than those printed in Central Tibet. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were 34 Buddhist monasteries in Eastern Siberia, of which 29 had their own printing houses (*par khang*).<sup>23</sup>

The uncontrolled printing activities of Buddhist monasteries caused anxiety in local authorities, because no books were allowed to be printed in Czarist Russia without censorship. To settle the problem, the Head Lama of Eastern Siberia, who was appointed by the Czar, had to personally confirm with his seal and signature that the printed books were not harmful. Printing flourished until the early 1930s, when the monasteries were closed, and their printing activities stopped. Despite this sad fact, a considerable part of their book production escaped destruction and was moved as “cultural relics” to Soviet museums and institutes. Books from closed monasteries now constitute the bulk of the Tibetan collection at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts here in Saint Petersburg. Many of them bear the monastic seals of their former owners.

There is a landmark in Saint Petersburg of the extreme northward spread of the Buddhist Teaching in the pre-modern times (60° N): this is the Buddhist temple in Saint Petersburg, the capital of the former Russian Empire. Its founder was the legendary Agvan Dorjiev (1853/54–1938), a learned lama from Russia, who became a confidant of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. This had great political consequences, which finally resulted in the so-called Younghusband mission of 1904. In 1908, Dorjiev, under the Dalai Lama’s request, proposed the Russian government build a Buddhist temple in the capital of Russia. Despite numerous hindrances, the temple was built within only a few years. Russian scholars gave their support for the construction of the temple. The famous painter Nicholas Roerich designed its stained-glass windows. It was consecrated in August 1915 under the name “The Source of the True Dharma of Buddha, Merciful to Everybody” (Kun la brtse mdzad thub dbang dam chos ’byung ba’i gnas).

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<sup>23</sup> See Uspensky 2010. For a long but an incomplete list of the woodblock prints in Tibetan and Mongolian produced in Eastern Siberia, see Rinchen 1959.

Dorjiev's plan to make the temple a center for a small monastery failed: the Czar allowed permanent residence to only nine lamas. Though religion was greatly oppressed after the 1917 Revolution, Dorjiev managed to secure diplomatic immunity for the temple as he himself was the Dalai Lama's Minister Plenipotentiary in the USSR.

The Buddhist temple in Saint Petersburg was closed in the late 1930s and was handed over to Buddhists only in 1990. However, it survived political oppression and enemy artillery shelling during the World War II. The temple has been restored and is now an active place of worship for the local Buddhist community.<sup>24</sup>

It should be especially noticed that contacts with educated lamas were very beneficial for Buddhist Studies in Russia. Such great Russian scholars as Theodor I. Stcherbatsky, Eugene E. Obermiller (1901–1935), and Andrei I. Vostrikov (1902–1937) worked in constant contact with Buryat lamas and often visited Buddhist monasteries in Eastern Siberia.

I am pleased to end my article optimistically. Today the Tibetan language is included in the academic curriculum of Saint Petersburg University. Museums of Saint Petersburg such as the Hermitage, the Kunstkammer, the Museum of the History of Religions, the Russian Ethnographical Museum, and others exhibit many superb works of Tibetan Buddhist art.<sup>25</sup> The huge collection of Tibetan books kept at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts is being catalogued and studied by a younger generation of Tibetologists. The marvelous Buddhist temple has been restored, and services in the Tibetan language are being performed daily. Here, in Saint Petersburg, the words of Matthew Kapstein deserve attention: "In view of the small number of qualified researchers in the field, Tibetan studies now suffer in fact from an embarrassment of riches."<sup>26</sup> This sounds like a "Tibetological remake" of Christ's words: "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matthew 9:37). Thus, Saint Petersburg is a highly valued destination for every Tibetan scholar. The fact that leading Tibetan scholars of the future have gathered here for the Fifth International Seminar of Young Tibetologists is a fortuitous sign.

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<sup>24</sup> For the most recent publications about this temple, see Andreyev 2012 & 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Several books about these Buddhist art collections have been published in the recent decade. See Elikhina 2010 & 2015; Zorin 2013; Ivanova and Dubrovin 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Kapstein 2006: 24.

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