Observations Made in the Study of Tibetan Xylographs

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1 Introduction: Woodblock Printing and Textual Criticism

Over several centuries, printing with wooden blocks used to be the most common method of producing a fair number of identical copies of a specific text in East and Central Asia. In Tibet, monasteries functioned as spiritual and intellectual centres, and ran print shops which enabled them to make religious texts¹ and other literature available to monks and laymen alike on a larger scale than was possible before.

The spreading of the blockprint technique in Tibet from the beginning of the 15th century onwards, however, did not supplant the transmission of texts by manuscript. The latter always remained in high regard – for Tibetans a manuscript copy was of equal value to the original.

As in all written cultures, in Tibet, too, works from the past have not been handed down to us unchanged. In the course of transcription new errors could get into the text, especially when the text was transferred from one form of writing into another.² For this reason, classical philology and theology developed the technique of textual criticism for editing text transmitted in manuscript in order to restore the lost original to the greatest possible degree.³

The methods of textual criticism have come to be applied in Tibetology, as well. Tibetan texts, however, require consideration of a particularity. In addition to the mistakes which commonly appear in manuscripts,⁴ xylographs may

* We would like to thank Susanne Kammüller who kindly rendered this paper into English.

1 For the most part, these were texts used in spiritual teaching or in rituals with larger numbers of participants.

2 The shift from cursive writing (*dbu med*) to writing in block letters (*dbu can*) and vice versa occurs commonly in copying manuscripts, only the Bon pos produced blockprints in cursive writing.

3 We rely on Maas 1958 and West 1973 for the basics of textual criticism.

4 As for instance, graphical or phonologically caused errors, inaccurately dissolved abbreviated writings (*bskung yig* and *bsdu yig*), omissions, and dittographies.

also contain mistakes caused by the new technique of printing: since wood-carvers had to cut the printing plate from a mirror image of the text, mistakes in the master copy possibly went unnoticed; characters or parts of characters chipped off while the plates were used;⁵ fissures in the wood might render parts of the text illegible etc.

A thorough recording and description of each single witness is a precondition when working with several text witnesses in textual criticism, because even outward appearances can provide valuable hints. Compared to xylographs, manuscripts tend to contain more scribal errors.⁶ For printing, texts usually were thoroughly revised and corrected. On the other hand, reproduction in large numbers by printing makes it much easier for a mistake which has slipped unnoticed into the tradition to spread widely.

The starting point for applying textual criticism is always an observed difference in the wording of the accessible text witnesses, or variant readings. The following general rule applies:

It can be proved that two witnesses (B and C) belong together as against a third (A) by showing an error common to B and C of such a nature that it is highly improbable that B and C committed it independently of each other.⁷

From this, one can deduce relationships between text witnesses; the ultimate aim is to establish a stemma which recapitulates the transmission of the text in question and thus comes close to the lost original.

2 The Technique of Printing with Woodblocks

As the basis for the production of a printing block, that is as master copy, serves a calligraphed manuscript of the text in question.⁸ It was written, in general, on light paper with the common ink made from lampblack pigments. At this stage, the text could be proofread before the next production steps. If correc-

5 *A na ro*, for example, can turn into a *'greng bu*, or a *tsha* into a *cha*.

6 This is true even for the illuminated Kanjur manuscripts from the imperial workshop in Beijing kept in Berlin and Taipei.

7 Maas 1958, 43.

8 For the following cf., e.g., Jest 1961, 83–85; Grönbold 1982, 368–377; Sobisch 2005, 112–113; Schaeffer 2009, 11.

tions in the master copy were done with particular care, they did not affect the later layout.

The completed manuscript master copy was glued face-down with starch paste to a wooden plank prepared for the purpose and kept moistened for a span of time.⁹ The moisture enabled the very fine lampblack particles¹⁰ to permeate from the script into the pores of the wooden surface. After the removal of the master copy, which was destroyed in the process, the mirror image of the writing was visible on the wood. The plank was lubricated with oil to prevent it from splintering and to make the script emerge more distinctly. The carver cut away¹¹ all parts not covered by characters or lines and, thus, produced a wooden plate with elevated script, that is a block for relief printing.

When the printing plates were finished a first print was prepared for proof reading, corrections of the blocks were possible in cutting off the flawed part of the text from the plate and – if needed – replacing it by a piece of wood of equal size with the correct characters in mirror writing.¹² Subsequent corrections of this kind are often identifiable in the printed text from slightly slanted writing or a differing size of characters.¹³ Deleted parts show as gaps in the text; when longer passages were deleted, parts of the head line remained in the form of several dots.¹⁴

The ink used for printing was usually the black one made from lampblack pigment. Books which were regarded as particularly valuable sometimes were printed in red ink, like some editions of the Kanjur. The first volume of the Tanjur, the *bstod tshogs*, too, was printed in red, the pigment was vermilion, i.e. cinnabar, a rare, costly mineral. Printing in red was only possible with a new printing plate, because once lampblack ink was applied, the plate could only be used for prints in black colour.

For printing, the colour was applied to the plate with a brush or pad. Then the paper was placed on top, as far as possible without creases, and carefully

9 We owe this information to the kindness of Geshey Pema Tsering.

10 The soot particles of lampblack are much finer than those produced by grinding other materials used for making colours, for example charcoal or cinnabar.

11 Concerning the tools used for carving the plates, cf. Jest 1961, 83–85.

12 Alexander von Staël-Holstein wrote about this procedure as early as 1934; the article was printed, but remained unpublished until Jonathan A. Silk edited it from the only surviving copy in 1999, see Staël-Holstein 1934 and Silk 1999.

13 Examples are discussed in Eimer 1980, 198–207, and Eimer 1988a, 50–52 [repr. in Eimer 1992, 146–148]. If an insertion covered more than one line, the respective plate had to be made completely anew to prevent the inserted piece of wood from bursting the entire block, cf. Eimer 1986, 6.

14 Cf. for instance, Eimer 1980, 198–199.

pressed to the block with a hand roll or a clean pad. Simple, light paper was sufficient for block printing – an advantage when transporting the completed books. The paper for manuscripts – which in Tibet were written with a bamboo pen and not, as in China, with a brush – was heavier, because it had to be ink-proof. To make it so, starch was added to the fibre pulp; the paper thus produced could later be glazed, too, which required the use of additional glue.

3 Slight Differences between Woodprints Covering the Same Text

The Sven Hedin Stiftelse / Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm houses a most interesting collection of Tibetan xylographs and manuscripts mainly brought together in the thirties of the 20th century.¹⁵ Especially remarkable are about 500 small-size ritual texts, handwritten as well as printed.¹⁶ They used to be the property of some wandering lamas (Badarči) and bear evidence of the Tibetan rituals particularly popular and common in Inner Mongolia in their time.¹⁷ Among these booklets, measuring about 30 cm in breadth or less, there are a number of Tibetan prints which were apparently prepared in China or the Sino-Tibetan borderlands.¹⁸ In addition, the Stockholm collection holds a variety of texts in bigger formats as they were used in monasteries; many of these are prints with Chinese sigla.

Let us now take a look at a prayer with the title *'Phags pa bDe ba can smon lam*; in fig. 19.1 we see three examples of the right-hand section of leaf 4 *recto* (Chinese 198) from fascicle 'a (23) of a *chos spyod* collection in small format¹⁹ dated by the colophon of the *dkar chag* to the year 1730.²⁰ The text is available in several copies which, at first sight, appear to be doublets, that is to say printed from the same set of blocks. However, this is not true: three copies of

15 The complete fund of Tibetan texts is listed by Eimer 1972–78; the individual items are marked as 'H.' in combination with a following number and (with exceptions) another capital letter. Reference to texts in this list is given by the respective marks.

16 They were kept under the rubric 'Lamaistiska Små-skrifter'.

17 For the most part, the popular texts are preserved in manuscript, e.g., the *The'u rang mdo ma*, a ritual text for the expulsion of evil spirits incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism, cf. Eimer und Tsering 1973.

18 Heissig 1954 calls xylographs with Chinese marginal entries 'Pekingese xylographs' ('Pekinger Blockdrucke'). But, as a matter of fact, blockprints prepared by other print shops in the Sino-Tibetan region have Chinese marginals as well, e.g., the 'Jang Sa tham / Lithang Kanjur.

19 Listed by Eimer 1990a, 174–182.

20 The date is given in the *dkar chag*, fol. 3a1: *ta'i ching yung cen rgyal po lo dgu zla ba brgyad*.

FIGURE 19.1 'Phags pa bDe ba can smon lam. Top: H.6035.O / first copy, middle: H.6035.O / second copy, below: H.6035.P (cf. Eimer 1970, 431, repr. in Eimer 1992, 193).

the prayer text differ from each other in relation to the layout of the Chinese characters in the marginals at the right-hand side: above the fascicle number is given, thereunder the short title of the text is written, *de yi wen jing*, and below follows the number of the folio. In their form the letters of the Tibetan text, too, slightly differ. This means that we are dealing with copies taken from three different sets of blocks which closely resemble each other. One possible explanation of this lies in the fact that the blockprint technique made it relatively simple to reprint text anastatically.

A new set of printing plates was usually prepared when the number of prints to be taken from the first set was insufficient,²¹ or when another monastery, for example, wanted to print the same book. In this case a new set could be produced after the model of the older one by taking a black print of the book in question – ideally each single page on a separate sheet – as the master copy. This was possible because the ink used for printing was made with lampblack pigment, too. This way, it was unnecessary to have a new master copy written and corrected. The new printing plates could be produced after the same method as the older ones; apart from minor differences they followed their model.

An example may illustrate how the process of producing a new printing plate could bring about mistakes, especially when the plates were taken from a printed master copy with blurred parts (presented in fig. 19.2). In one copy of the *Thabs mkhas thugs rjes* [*ma*], i.e. in fascicle *nga* (4) of the *chos spyod* collection mentioned above, at the beginning of the last line of fol. 3 *recto* (Chinese 41), the first syllable of the phrase *srid pa gsum*, ‘the three worlds’, is substituted by a clearly legible syllable *lrid*, which does not make any sense at all.

It can be assumed that the corner of the leaf in question was not properly pressed to the printing block when the print was taken. A prior owner of the book marked the mistake and tried to correct it in the lower margin, but instead of *srid* the correction reads *sir* or *sid*.²² The minor differences in size showing in the margin around the script could be caused by slight warps in the paper when it was printed.

There is another mistake in the marginal entry of the same leaf: *gsun* instead of the leaf number *gsum*, ‘three’. It is not possible to determine at which stage in the process of producing the print it has occurred. But, we have to take into

21 The number of prints that could be taken from one set of blocks probably depended on the quality of the wood used and the manner of storing the blocks.

22 It could well be that originally *srid* was written in the margin and that the subscript *-r-* was broken off from the margin.

FIGURE 19.2 Thabs mkhas thugs rjes [ma]. *Top: H.6035.C / 3rd copy, bottom: H.6035.C / 6th copy (cf. Eimer 1970, 430, repr. in Eimer 1992, 193).*

account that the final vertical line of the numeral, i.e. of the letter *m*, was parallel to the veining of the wood.

In preparing wooden blocks relying on earlier prints intentional alterations can be made. They pertain, in general, to the marginal entries and / or additional dividing rules. In any case in prints from copied plates of this type, the individual text lines contain the same letters in identical distribution as the corresponding lines in the master copy.

In four copies of the *Pañcarakṣā* collection known to us we find some significant changes as to the Chinese distinguishing characters. These *Gzungs chen sde lnga*,²³ the 'Five great *dhāraṇīs*', served as a deterrent from all kinds of evil and were widely spread, especially in Nepal. The left-hand section of leaf 43 *recto* from fascicle *ka* (1) with the marginal entry (shown in fig. 19.3) serves as an example of the differences between these four issues.

The Stockholm collection preserves two prints (H.1191 and H.3503) presented in the upper line. They differ only in script ductus, meaning that they are identical in print space, they have in the left-hand side marginals between the Tibetan and the Chinese foliation the Chinese character *ren*, 'humanity, perfect virtue, benevolence, charity'. Besides these two books, there is a third *Pañcarakṣā* print kept in Stockholm (H.6009), fig. 19.3 bottom right. Therein the Chinese character between the Tibetan and the Chinese folio numbers is substituted by *jīn* 'gold'. In addition we find the character *ban*, 'group', at the top of the marginal entry. A comparable item is held by the Berlin State Library (Hs. or. 1150). In comparison to H.1191 and H.3503 above, the Berlin print does not contain a Chinese character between the Tibetan and the Chinese folio numbers. Instead of the character *ban*, 'group', in H.6009 we find the character *wan*, 'ten thousand', inserted before the beginning of the Tibetan marginal entry. We understand the characters *ban* and *wan* as phonetical representations of *pan*, the first syllable of the Sanskrit title *Pañcarakṣā*.

Among the books of the Stockholm collection are two copies of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-Sūtra* / '*Phags pa gSer 'od dam pa mdo sde'i dbang po rgyal po*, the 'Sūtra of Golden Light', a text that is highly estimated in Tibetan belief and ritual. In the older copy (H.1192, to be recognized from its paper and traces of usage) at the left-hand side, the marginals of leaf 4 *recto* show the Chinese character *jīn*, 'gold' as distinguishing mark at the top left-hand corner. In the younger copy given at the right-hand side of fig. 19.4, we find the character *lǐ* 'mile' in mirror writing, it was inserted only after the removal of the master copy and most probably written directly on the block before carving started.

23 For this collection see Skilling 1992, 138–144. Another Tibetan title is *gZungs grwa lnga*.

FIGURE 19.3 gZungs chen sde lnga / Pañcarakṣā (fascicle ka). Top left: H.191, top right: H. 3503, bottom left: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Hs. or. 1150, bottom right: H.6009 (cf. Eimer 1970, 434, repr. in Eimer 1992, 196, and Eimer 1992, 202).

FIGURE 19.4 'Phags pa gSer 'od dam pa mdo sde'i dbang po rgyal po / Suvarṇaprabhāsa-Sūtra, left: H.192, right: H.3502 (cf. Eimer 1970, 436, repr. in Eimer 1992, 198).

Chinese characters like these were meant to help the Chinese printers who did not always have a good command of the Tibetan language to distinguish the individual issues when they sorted copies or arranged printing plates in the storage.

So far, mainly Sino-Tibetan xylographs have been discussed. However, the observations made also apply to prints from Central Tibet. An example is the print in Stockholm (H.6008), *Chos kyi rgyal po Nor bu bzang po'i rNam thar phyogs bsgrigs byas pa thos chung yid kyi dga' ston*. The counter-part, which differs slightly in terms of characteristics of the script, but apart from that is almost identical, is owned by Loden Sherab Dagyab Rinpoche, Berlin, formerly Bonn.

There are two xylographs of Mi la ras pa's *mGur 'bum* which match in terms of page numbers and format and in which the individual text lines contain the same letters in identical distribution as the corresponding lines in the other copy.²⁴ The form of the script hardly differs between the two, but the colophons

24 Cf. Eimer and Tsering 1990, 66–68 (sigla D and D^{bis}).

are different, indicating bKra shis lhun po and Myang bstod sKyid sbug, respectively, as place of printing. It is currently not possible to determine if one of these prints served as an exemplar for the master copy of the other one, or if the printing plates were transferred from one monastery to another,²⁵ in which case only the printing plate with the colophon would have been newly carved.

4 Early Editions of the Tibetan Kanjur Issued in Beijing

The books cited above as examples were printed in bigger numbers because they were in broad demand. We can assume that they were stocked in print shops and not printed only by order. The opposite is true for the Tibetan Kanjur printed in Beijing, the first edition of which was prepared in red colour during the reign of the Yongle Emperor in 1410.²⁶ It appears that it was printed only a few times²⁷ by special order of the emperor, who donated it to chosen monasteries, high-ranking clerics or nobles as a special token of his favour. At about the same time when the first two copies of the Yongle Kanjur came to Tibet, that is at the beginning of the 15th century,²⁸ the first traceable xylographs of extensive texts were produced in Tibet herself.²⁹

The Kanjur printed from the plates of the first edition, but this time in black ink, in the reign of the Wanli Emperor in 1606 probably had only a small number of copies, too. So far, the number of specimens available for our observations on the early Kanjur prints from Beijing has been very small. The rediscovery of the great collection of Tibetan manuscripts and xylographs brought from Beijing to Berlin by Eugen Pander now kept in the Jagiellonian Library, Krakow,³⁰ makes further investigations possible.

Among the 38 Kanjur volumes preserved in Krakow, there is one with a quite different layout, it is printed in red ink, so it cannot belong to the Wanli Kanjur.³¹ Of the remaining 37 volumes printed in black ink nine differ from the

25 The printing plates for the Narthang Kanjur, e.g., had been prepared in Shel dkar rdzong, those for the Lithang Kanjur in 'Jang Sa tham.

26 For a survey of the Beijing editions see Silk 1996, and Eimer 2007.

27 Cf. Silk 1996, 189–190.

28 In the year 1414 the head of the Lha khang branch of the Sa skya pa and in 1416 the founder of Sera Monastery were presented with copies, cf. Silk 1996, 156–157.

29 Cf. Diemberger 2012, 23; Jackson 1989, 2–7, and Jackson 1990.

30 Cf. Helman-Ważny 2009; Helman-Ważny 2010, and Mejor 2010.

31 The frames around the text show that it is to be dated to a time in or after 1684–92, see below.

28 others by their paper.³² On the leaves of these nine volumes, after printing lines in red ink were drawn around the entire text space as a margin.³³ These volumes are to be seen as a fragment of a second copy of the Wanli Kanjur; they were printed from those plates that were inked black in 1606, but the printing was surely done at a different time. It is possible that these nine preserved volumes belonged to a separately produced print of the *Śatasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* section which enjoyed great popularity.³⁴

The early prints from Beijing follow the tradition of handwritten books by limiting the text space only by a printed vertical line to the left and to the right, thus separating the Tibetan marginals which usually occur only on the left-hand side of *recto* pages from the text (see fig. 19.5, top).³⁵ Chinese marginals, which appear on the right-hand side of *recto* and *verso* pages, are set apart in the same manner.

Surprisingly, in Beijing work on a new set of printing blocks for a Kanjur based on the old ones began already in 1684, not even 80 years after the print in black.³⁶ For this anastatic new cut, double rulings were drawn around the text in the master copy. On the printing plates these lines – a technical novelty – form an uninterrupted ridge which not only makes sure that the front and back are set in the printing process at the same height,³⁷ but also protects the characters in the first and last lines against excessive wear or damage (see fig. 19.5, bottom).

In addition, in preparing the blocks for the 1684/92 edition of the Beijing Kanjur the entire text of the master copy was retraced with ink. In doing so, the Tibetan ductus was largely lost. Particularly noticeable are the long drawn-out letter downstrokes; they are a characteristic of the typical Sino-Tibetan script to be found also in other prints that were prepared in Beijing from the 17th century onwards.

32 Mejor 2010, 91, regards these volumes as a “not identified edition(s), different from Wanli”. Helman-Ważny 2010, 24–25, comments: “This unidentified edition, however, is related to the Wanli Kanjur set and I cannot reject the possibility that these volumes may belong to the Wanli edition.”

33 Pictured in Helman-Ważny 2010, 76–77 (fig. 57–59).

34 According to Mejor 2010, 91–92, volumes *ka* (1), *kha* (2), *ga* (3), *ca* (5), *cha* (6), *da* (11), *na* (12), *pa* (13) and *pha* (14) are extant.

35 The early prints from Tibet show this layout as well, cf. Diemberger 2012, 23 (specimen of a print from 1407). A further example is the well-known *Deb ther sngon po* printed in 1481 (reprinted in Lokesh Chandra 1976).

36 Cf. Imaeda 1977, 27 and 32, Eimer 1980, 196–198, and Eimer 2007, 46.

37 Cf. Grönbold 1982, 377.

FIGURE 19.5 *Beijing Kanjur*, left-hand section of leaf 45 recto. Top: 1606 Wanli edition, volume [rgyud] ca (5), our thanks go to Prof. Dr. Marek Mejor for providing us with the copy (when the picture was taken, the page was in an uneven position), bottom: 1717/20 Kangxi edition, volume rgyud, ca (5) [TT Vol. 3, 136].

At this stage first corrections in the text could be made as well. Further alterations appear in the Tibetan marginals on the *recto*: One inserted the short title of the Kanjur section in question and replaced the section-wise volume count by a consecutive numbering of all volumes.³⁸ Tibetan marginals were inserted on the *verso* of leaves, marks for the *recto* (*gong*) and *verso* (*og*) were added in counting the folios. The Chinese marginals remained unaltered.

In the years to follow, the set of printing plates prepared 1684–92 was the basis for a number of further Kanjur prints. In these, the text on the printing plates was altered in some places as witnessed by manifold irregularities in the

38 On the volume numbering cf. Imaeda 1977, 32, and Silk 1996, 181–185 (list).

type face.³⁹ It could be demonstrated that the 'Jang Sa tham / Lithang Kanjur and the Mongolian Kanjur printed at the same time were both drawn upon for the redaction of 1717/20, resulting in corrections at several places in the text.⁴⁰

The starting point of our considerations was the aim of textual criticism to restore as closely as possible the original wording of texts transmitted in manuscripts and xylographs. In a collection as extensive as the Kanjur, the transmission can differ from text to text. The recently rediscovered volumes of the Wanli edition moreover provide access to the first Kanjur ever printed. With them, further investigation may verify the assumption drawn from text critical research on individual texts that the manuscript underlying the Yongle print of 1410 had already been altered by transmission.

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39 For examples cf. Staël-Holstein 1934, and Eimer 1970.

40 Cf. Eimer 1980, 205 (fig. 7), 206 and 209, and Eimer 1988a, 50–51.

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