Chapter 4

Indigo, Gold, and Human Blood: Tibetan Illuminated Manuscripts

Manuscripts versus Prints

Tibet produced manuscripts even in the golden age of xylograph printing during the eighteenth century. The coexistence of manuscripts and prints in Tibet until the twenty-first century is significant within Tibetan culture and cannot be easily explained without a thorough study of Tibetan books in the wider social and cultural context. Cheaper and widely disseminated, the value of printed books cannot be easily compared to the value of works distributed in manuscripts, as is often done with European Medieval manuscripts and their later printed copies. Further analysis of the relationship between a book’s form and its utility not only contributes to better understanding of the legal and social roles that manuscripts play in Tibet but also helps explain the survival of Tibetan manuscript culture after the invention of the printing press. Devotional and religious purposes, such as the accumulation of spiritual merit during book production, highly influenced the form and quality of work. The effort put into a book’s creation, however, as well as the type and quality of its materials, often distinguishes manuscripts from prints. Ornate and unique written books were not intended for mass dissemination but rather as offerings, or they were produced as a means of accumulating spiritual merit.

Religious and political leaders often sponsored copying of texts by hand, because it was regarded as highly meritorious—even more than by the process of printing. Most manuscripts are believed to contain the Word of the Buddha and are revered and cherished by all Tibetan Buddhist traditions for possessing great sanctity (rtsa chen po). The attitudes and skills of scribes as well as the availability of materials relegate manuscripts to the category of cheap, simple books written by unprofessional scribes for their own purposes, or distinguish them among precious collections of books. The production of handwritten editions of Kanjur and Tenjur or other significant texts was a costly and laborious process during which an equally great expenditure of funds and resources was needed for each and every copy.

Precious materials, the usually large format, the quality of calligraphy, the lavish decorations, and the complex construction of leaves all distinguish these deluxe editions from simple copies. The use of precious stones, gold and
silver, and other rare minerals applied with special preparation techniques—especially if more than one copy is considered—make them more expensive than xylograph prints. One comparable example of a deluxe manuscript edition is the copy of the Tibetan Selkar (*sel dkar*) Kanjur, the so-called ‘London’ Kanjur from the place preserving it. Sometimes, however, when only one simple copy without vast decorations and precious materials was intended, manuscripts could be produced more quickly and cheaply than large projects of woodblock-printed editions. However, rarely also printing in a small scale could imitate the aesthetic of golden manuscripts written in gold on indigo paper, a technique which distinguishes Tibetan manuscript culture (Figure 33). In both manuscript and printed copies usually enormous effort input into book production distinguished Tibetan book culture—especially, the fact that woodblock-printed editions could also be lavishly decorated and painted with precious materials after text was executed. In this sense, the culture of manuscripts and printed book production in Tibet could represent similar attitudes and fulfil needs in much the same way by creating an opportunity to gain spiritual merit. However, the values of the two types of books cannot be measured with the same yardstick. We cannot simply oppose the craft of manuscript production to mass printing culture, as is sometimes done in Europe. Nor can we say that in Tibet printing was simply a more efficient means than handwriting or calligraphy for disseminating information.

**Patronage and Ownership**

What is evident from cumulative and developing studies of various examples of Tibetan decorated manuscripts is that the most important facilitating factor in Tibetan religious books’ production was the contribution of patrons, who provided resources for artists and often decided on the particular form and quality of a book. This is why there always has been a close link between patronage and the aesthetics of book production.

Most extensively ornamented books were either volumes of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon sponsored by wealthy people, or *Prajñāparāmitā* manuscripts in various versions, the eight thousand and hundred thousand verses. Apart from being a canonical text, the production of this sūtra was often part of elaborate post-mortem rituals associated with amassing great merit on behalf of a teacher/lineage master and the deceased as well.

One important factor that might have contributed to the distinctive way these Tibetan *Prajñāparāmitā* manuscripts were decorated is that their production was largely a means for accumulation of merit by their Tibetan donors.