Tibetan Woodblock Printing Culture

Origin of New Technology and the Early Tibetan Woodblock Prints

It is generally agreed that woodblock printing developed in Asia several centuries prior to its European use. Xylograph printed books have the same form as handwritten books, but the text, its frame, and possible woodcuts are printed from the same engraved wood plates by using black or red ink. This is the type of book that is commonly taken to represent Tibetan publishing (printing) culture.

The invention of printing can be directly associated with Buddhism and the need to reproduce religious texts and simple images of the Buddha. This demand greatly influenced the development of printing technology. Text reproduction began with stamping and rubbing, which led directly to block printing. This was achieved through a gradual process, when many manuscripts printed or stamped with short dhāraṇī texts or with the Buddha’s image appeared in Chinese Central Asia. At that time, rich monasteries or wealthy lay persons commissioned books for gaining spiritual merit. Craftsmen had already managed to bring woodblock art in the service of Buddhism to a very high level of artistic development; soon after, they would also perfect the techniques of carving necessary for using movable wooden type, which requires even greater precision than woodblock printing. It is significant that Tibetans never adopted movable type, even at the time when Christian missionaries,

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1 In Europe the printing of images on cloth advanced to the printing of images on paper using woodcuts in the beginning of the fifteenth century. The use of the same process to print texts of substantial length with images in xylographic books in Europe occurred only after the development of movable type in the 1450s. However, woodcut printing was usually used exclusively for illustrations rather than for printing entire books.

2 Wooden movable types were invented somewhere on the Silk Roads by Uighurs around 1300; ceramic movable type was invented in China by Pi Sheng in 1041–49. Characters engraved into wooden blocks were cut into smaller blocks with single characters; these were finished off with a small knife to ensure a uniform size. These smaller blocks were then fixed in place inside a framed wooden form. The surface of this settled text would then be inked and rubbed into paper in a process similar to that of traditional woodblock printing. Metal movable type sets were first produced by Koreans in the 1370s. The technique of movable metal types printing reached its highest point in Korea in the fifteenth century; at that time, characters were produced in copper on the order of King Sejong (1418–1450).
trying to be more effective in their missionary activity, brought metal movable
type technology into Tibet at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The
Capuchin Order, as part of its missionary activity began in 1741 in Lhasa, started
to print the polemical texts with the Tibetan mobile printing fonts with the
intention of converting Tibetan monks to Christianity. The Tibetan metal fonts
were made in Florence. Despite this introduction, this technique of duplica-
tion of text in Tibet was ignored by the Tibetans. Also in the nineteenth
century, a few sets of Tibetan movable type were cast in metal outside Tibet,
for use in a number of books printed in Tibetan. It is certain that these origi-
nated outside Tibet. In fact, books printed with movable type in the Tibetan
language are rather rare, but they do occur. Also, examples of metal type sets
are preserved.

Additionally, books printed in the Tibetan language using lithography were
noticed in Dharamsala (Figure 66). However, this technique is much more
recent than the others mentioned. Both movable type and lithography print-
ing have never been developed in Tibet by Tibetan craftsmen.

The earliest known extant printed Buddhist text originates from Korea and
has been found at the Pulguk Temple in Kyungju, which was the capital of
Tongil-Sinla.3 The text was inside a stupa sealed in 751.4 The earliest well-
defined extant blockprint was made in Japan in 764.5 The earliest extant
printed book, dated 868 by its colophon and now in the collection of the British
Library, was found in Dunhuang, China.6 But, most scholars agree that printing
technology appeared before these dates. It is definite that in the ninth century,
a variety of book types were printed. But before that advanced level had been

4 It contains text of the Dhāraṇī Sutra and is printed in Korea on domestic paper. By contrast,
the story of the dissemination of printing in an eastward direction appears to have been less
complicated, and is better documented. When Koryo king Hongjong (982–997) wanted to
introduce printing techniques from China to Korea to print Buddhist sutras, he sent his min-
isters and monks to Song dynasty emperor Taizong (976–997) and received two sets of
printed Tripitaka and two Chinese officials who were in charge of Korean publications. They
stayed in Koryo for two months in 993 and recruited forty young Korean students to study
printing techniques in China.
5 In 764 the Empress Kōken commissioned one million small wooden pagodas, each contain-
ing a small woodblock scroll printed with a Buddhist text (Hyakumanto Dhāraṇī). These
were distributed to temples around the country as thanksgiving for the suppression of the
Emi Rebellion of 764. These are the earliest examples of woodblock printing known, or docu-
mented, from Japan. See: http://www.papermuseum.jp/column/data/001.html.