TSHA TSHA INSCRIPTIONS: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

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Tsha tshas (also called sātstshas) are clay impressions produced from a mould depicting, in relief or moulded in the round, miniature stūpas, deities, historical figures and inscriptions. These stamped images that vary in size (approximately 2 to 40 cm) are either sun-dried or baked and can sometimes be painted. In the Tibetan world, these clay impressions are part of the daily environment of the people, both monks and laymen, who manufacture them in large numbers for religious purposes associated with the accumulation of merit (puṇyasyambhāra). These images are then placed at the heart of shrines, inside stūpas or special edifices built to house them (tsha khang, khang bu brtsegs pa), inside portable shrines (ga’u), or deposited in large quantities around sacred sites, in holy caves, inside rock cavities or on the ledges of stūpas.

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2 For the production of a plaque-shaped tsha tsha, a lump of clay is held in one hand or placed on a flat surface while a mould previously coated with oily substance is pressed onto it.

3 In the case of a miniature stūpa moulded in the round, a lump of clay modelled into a pear shape is introduced into a bell-shaped mould whose cylindrical handle is pointing down. The handle is then struck on a hard surface so that the imprint of the stūpa is clearly reproduced on the clay. If the mould is made in two parts (front and back), the clay is simply inserted and pressed between the two parts.

4 Although the making of tsha tshas is also a practice that has been adopted by the Bon tradition, in the absence of sufficiently numerous, accurate and available data, we will only deal with Buddhist specimens in this article.
The practice of making *tsha tshas* is of Indian origin and numerous equivalents in the shape of plaques and miniature *stūpas* moulded in the round dating from the 7th to 11th centuries have been uncovered in abundance on different Buddhist sites such as Bodhgayā,\(^5\) Sārnāth,\(^6\) Nālandā\(^7\) and Ratnagiri.\(^8\) With the spread of the Buddhist doctrine, this practice has been disseminated to other parts of Asia\(^9\) where it has undergone more or less important developments, as evidenced by the numerous archaeological discoveries. Although the oldest *tsha tshas* produced in Tibet to have survived date from the 10th to 11th centuries,\(^10\) this practice was already known to Tibetans as far back as the 8th to 9th centuries.\(^11\) It has continued to the present day to integrate local iconographic, stylistic and epigraphic influences as well as important ritual and textual developments, demonstrating the breadth and diversity of their uses. Therefore the *tsha tshas* constitute not only an extremely rich and sometimes unique iconographic documentation, but also untapped epigraphic material.

As Braham Norwick explained during the first IATS sessions in 1979, then in 1982, interest in the study of inscriptions on *tsha tshas* goes back to the 18th century.\(^12\) Indeed, in 1730 the publication in Europe of an image of a *tsha tsha*\(^13\) from Mongolia with an inscription on the back was the subject of several impassioned articles at that time, particularly in France, about how to decipher the inscrip-

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\(^{6}\) Sykes 1856; Sahni 1914: 307-13.


\(^{9}\) See Taddei 1970 and references there; Stein 1921; Luce 1969-1970; Ali & Khan 1997-1998; Skilling 2008b.

\(^{10}\) Generally speaking, the Tibetan tradition considers the master Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna Atiśa (982-1054) as the initiator of the *tsha tshas*’ practice in Tibet along with the *pandita* Smṛtiḥñānakīrti (10th to 11th centuries).

\(^{11}\) Several Tibetan manuscripts related to *tsha tshas* or their Chinese equivalents and uncovered in the early 20th century in the famous Dunhuang cave (Gansu) attest to the fact that this practice was already known to Tibetans during the imperial period. The ’Phang thang ma catalogue also mentions the existence of an early text concerning a ritual of imprinting *tsha tshas*. Although these documents confirm the production of *tsha tshas* during the imperial period, to my knowledge, no specimen from this era has ever been documented. The actual production of *tsha tshas* expanded from the 10th to 11th centuries onwards, during the phyi dar, and continued to evolve over the following centuries through to the present day.

\(^{12}\) Norwick 1985 and 2003.

\(^{13}\) Cf. Strahlenberg 1730: tab. V, c. For a detailed study of this *tsha tsha*, see Norwick 1985.