CHAPTER 15

Works and Networks of mkhas pa Dri med. On the Illustrations of 16th Century Tibetan Printed Books

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The illustrations of Tibetan printed books are a strikingly understudied issue, considered the wealth of data available to scrutiny. Indeed, while other material aspects of Tibetan books, such as wooden covers or manuscript illuminations, have received some attention, only few contributions address specifically the images in blockprinted texts. Moreover, Tibetan book illuminations have been usually studied in terms of their stylistic or iconographic features, while historians, specialists of textual studies, and even researchers particularly concerned with the history of the Tibetan book have so far mostly neglected the topic, to the extent that detailed and learned catalogues of Tibetan texts don’t even mention the illustrations. However, the illustrations constitute an integral part of the book, considered both as a material object and as an intellectual product.¹

In order to approach this issue, I have chosen to present a case study on a Tibetan master artist active during the first half of the 16th century in the Western Tibetan kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang. mkhas pa Dri med is known especially for impressive illustrations of blockprinted books, in that distinctive style that readily allows to recognize volumes produced at the time in the area.² He was among the foremost artists of his time, as may be deduced from the prestigious commissions received from the royal family, and his career in book illustration may be now well documented during the 1520s, 30s, and 40s. Unfortunately, however, no other extant work, such as scroll painting, mural or sculpture, may be attributed to him and is available for study. Therefore, aspects of his craftsmanship – such as the use of colour – and the full scope of his artistic output, may not be evaluated. Also the crucial issue of the relation-

¹ For previous studies treating the illustrations of Tibetan blockprinted texts, see Karmay 1975; Imaeda 1977; Jackson 1996: 122–31, 301–14, 375–7; De Rossi Filibeck 2002. For a catalogue that treats with particular attention the illustrations, see Everding 2015.
ship between book illustration and cognate arts – painting *in primis*, but also scribing, engraving, goldsmithry or inlay – may not be explored.

A recent Tibetan cultural history of Mang yul Gung thang mentions the first half of the 16th century as an extraordinary time for the flourishing of the arts in the kingdom, and in particular as the golden age of blockprinting, and states:³

In each region the pictorial arts spread in different ways. Because of this, also the art of illustrating the wooden book covers developed in different ways. *mKhas pa* Dri med from Gung thang, and the other figurative artists [working] in the craft of carving the printing blocks [that developed] in the sKyid grong district, displayed a wonderful art of book illustration, [with] a variety of appearances and postures of images of the Buddhas [inserted] on the left and right side of the books[‘folios]. Following the emergence of this tradition, gradually everywhere in Tibet it was widely famed how [the skill of] carving book illustrations had spread in the district of sKyid grong, and how [in that region] there were many different printing skills. Many works bearing woodcut illustrations in black and white of such high value are still preserved in the district of sKyid grong to the present day, as it is elucidated in many related reference materials.⁴

Therefore, the production of *mkhas pa* Dri med seems as a privileged point of departure to explore the flourishing of printing skills in Mang yul Gung thang, the different aspects of the trade, the composition of the printing workshops, and the specific issue of book illustrations.

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³ *Mang yul gung thang gi ri gnas lo rgyus*, by Gung thang bstan ‘dzin nor bu, Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 2012, pp. 199–203, 518–21. The author quotes in particular the colophon of Klong chen rab ’byams pa’s *Theg mchog mdzod*, realized in 1533 and illustrated by *mkhas pa* Dri med, on which see below.

⁴ *Mang yul Gung thang gi ri gnas lo rgyus*, pp. 520–1 (cf. also pp. 201–2): yul lung so sor ri mo’i dar khyab mi ’dra ba’i dbang gis gsung rab gleysh shing gi ri mo’i sgyu rtsal yang mi ’dra ba thon yod pa red/ gung thang gi mKhas pa dri med la sogs pa’i ri mo’i sgyu rtsal mkhas pa tshos skyid grong kuhl gyi par shing yig brkos kyi lag rtsal nang pod kyi gyas gyon du sangs rgyas kyi sku brnyan bzhugs stangs dang rnam ’gyur mi ’dra ba sna tshogs bar ’jug[=bcug] gi ri mo’i sgyu rtsal phun sum tshogs pa bkod srol byung ba de nas rim bzin bod kyi sa phyogs gang sar skyid grong kuhl du dar ba’i bar ’jug[=bcug] gi ri mo’i brkos dkrol dang/ par ’debs kyi lag rtsal mi ’dra ba mang po zhiig yod pa khyab par grags/ de lta bu’i rin thang che ba’i dkar nag gnyis ’brel gyi par shing ri mo’i brtsams bya mang po zhiig dus da lta’i bar du’ang skyid grong kuhl du nyar tshags byas yod ces ’brel yod kyi dpyad gzhii yiig cha mang po’i nang gsal.