

Early Book Production and Printing in Bhutan*

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1 Introduction

This paper presents an account of early book production and printing in Bhutan. Though nobody has done research yet, many written histories and biographies of eminent teachers suggest that mass book production has been done in Bhutan since 14th century. Many treasure discoverers such as Gu ru Chos dbang, rDo rje Gling pa and Padma gling pa were popular and thus their treasure teachings have been produced in various places in Bhutan.

From the 16th century, many *bKa' gyur* and other canonical corpuses have been produced across the country. This is confirmed by the digital library of the Shejun Agency¹ that contains books from 37 monasteries and private libraries in Bhutan. The collection contains tens of thousands of miscellaneous titles and some 28 canonical corpuses including eight *bKa' gyurs*, seven '*Bums*, six *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*, three *dGongs 'dus*, and two *bKa' brgyad* collections of manuscripts. According to the evidence we have, most of them were produced between the 16th and 18th centuries although in some cases it is not known when they were created.

By the 17th century, the tradition of carving woodblocks was practised widely in the country and every major temple had started to carve woodblocks to meet its own needs. One good example for this is the collection of *dhāraṇī*. There were four woodblocks for *dhāraṇī* collections in Bhutan. Most of the temples carved woodblocks of the *Diamond Sutra* as Bhutanese used it to

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1 This is an Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research, founded by Dr Karma Phuntsho. I am very privileged to have had the opportunity to work for such an organization under a great scholar like him.

learn how to read. Some of the temples had also carved blocks for alphabets. Woodblocks for prayer flags and images are also common in Bhutan. Almost every village temple has them.

The traditions of printing and book production in Bhutan are generally associated with Buddhism and not so much with the archaic animistic beliefs and practices Bhutanese call Bon. Therefore, firstly, this paper presents a brief history of Buddhism in Bhutan, and then the history of book production, followed by a history of printing based on the books that were printed from the earliest woodblocks in Bhutan. These books are from the collection of digital books created by Shejun Agency from the temple archives in Bhutan, with the support of the Endangered Archive Programme of the British Library and UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council through Cambridge University.

2 Buddhism in Bhutan

According to Bhutanese historians, Buddhism was introduced in Bhutan by the Tibetan emperor Srong btsan sGam po in the 7th century. The emperor built Byams pa lHa khang in Bumthang and sKyer chu lHa khang in Paro as border and frontier taming temples while he was building Ra sa 'Phrul snang or the Jo khang temple in Lhasa. With the building of these temples, the belief in the Triple Gem, which is the principle tenet of Buddhism, was introduced in the country.²

According to Bhutanese tradition, in the 8th century, Padmasambhava visited Bumthang before he visited Tibet upon invitation of King Sindhu of Bumthang lCags mkhar. Padmasambhava gave 'refuge vows' and empowerments to the king and his subjects, making them followers of Buddhism.³ Later, Padmasambhava visited Bhutan from Tibet several times. He is said to have visited the entire country without leaving untouched any piece of land, not even the size of the imprint of a horse's hoof. He hid treasures in the earth, boulders, lakes and cliffs. Thus Padmasambhava blessed and converted the country into a hidden land.⁴ Padmasambhava also founded many meditation centres in

2 dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, 144; Padma Tshe dbang 1994, 23; Phun tshogs dBang 'dus 2007, 59; dGe 'dun Rin chen 2008, 90; and Slob dpon gNag mdog 1986, 59. For detailed discussion, see Karma Phuntsho 2013, 77–84.

3 Dri med Gling pa n.d.; dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, p. 140–143; and dGe 'dun Rin chen 2008, 91. For a discussion on Dri med Gling pa's identity, see Karma Phuntsho 2013, 91–101.

4 dGe 'dun Rin chen 2004, 148–151; dGe 'dun Rin chen 2008, 92; and Slob dpon gNag mdog 1986, 59.