CHAPTER 18

Revolutions of the Dharma Wheel: Uses of Tibetan Printing in the Eighteenth Century

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1 Introduction

As there are not, to my knowledge, any established periodizations of the history of Tibetan printing, I would like to begin by briefly sketching out some of the critical eras in the development of printing technology for use in Tibetan-language publishing. The study of Tibetan printing history has, for good reasons, focused on developments in central and western Tibet (dBus gTsang and mNga’ ris) during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In this key period, printing became an established craft on the Tibetan plateau. But this was not the only important era of Tibetan printing. The history of Tibetan printing can, in very general terms, be divided into four main periods: (1) Tibetan-language publishing under the sponsorship of non-Tibetan central Asians such as the Tanguts and the Mongols (12th–14th centuries); (2) the rise of central and western Tibetan printing (15th–16th centuries); (3) the continued spread of printing, including into eastern Tibet and Mongolia, and the publication of canons (18th–19th centuries); and (4) the adoption of non-woodblock printing technologies (20th century). We could add to these key periods of intensive growth in Tibetan printing several other significant milestones, such as the simultaneous publication and suppression of literature by the dGa’ ldan pho brang government beginning in the latter half of seventeenth century or the first xylograph editions of the bKa’ ’gyur – produced by the Ming dynasty (15th c.) and the kingdom of ’Jang Sa tham (16th c.), both non-Tibetan polities.

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This general outline of Tibetan printing history is offered as an initial attempt at periodization and of course may require revision as more evidence comes to light. Regardless, the development of such frameworks can help us think through the larger trajectory of Tibetan printing and place individual printing projects or eras into a broader context. In this paper, I will be concerned mainly with developments in the third period suggested above – the spread of printing especially during the eighteenth century – while at the same time noting some continuities and differences between the earlier fifteenth and sixteenth-century publishing environment and that of the eighteenth-century. In order to do so, I will first look at several examples of well-known works or collections that were the subject of early Tibetan printing projects and trace these works’ subsequent printing histories.

The political landscape of the eighteenth century was one in which several polities grew rapidly, consolidated their power, and built their institutional bases. These polities included the Qing dynasty, the dGa’ ldan pho brang government in central Tibet, Bhutan under the Zhabs drung and their regents, and the kingdoms of Co ne and sDe dge in eastern Tibet. In addition, the eighteenth century saw the development of a host of mega-monasteries, especially within the dGe lugs pa school. These large monasteries housed thousands of monks and became substantial landowners with significant political clout of their own. Most of these new centres of power, polities and monasteries, became major publishers of woodblock editions of Tibetan texts. In the latter part of the paper, I will explore the development of several of these new printing centres with an eye toward how the texts produced at these centres may have been regarded and used. The amount of texts from eighteenth-century publishers that survive or are recorded in Tibetan sources provide us with an opportunity to speculate about some of the more specific uses of printing and printed books during that century.

2 Early and Later Publications of Important Collections

We don’t know the full extent of printing in fifteenth-century Tibet, but from currently available evidence it seems that in terms of larger projects there was a focus on the collected works (or a selection of works) by the luminaries of particular schools and traditions. An example of this is the printing of works composed by Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419), which began not long after his death (Jackson 1983, 6; Jackson 1989, 5). These were published in dBus, near the centres of the emerging dGe lugs pa school around Lhasa and dGa’ ldan monastery. They were produced with the support of Grags pa rgyal