Agnieszka Helman-Ważny


Agnieszka Helman-Ważny’s *The archaeology of Tibetan books* offers the most comprehensive multi-disciplinary overview to date of the physical aspects of Tibetan books. The bulk of the volume is dedicated to the analysis and description of the paper, ink, binding, dimensions, and formats of specific manuscripts and prints personally inspected by Helman-Ważny in libraries and archives around the world. The book is at once technically detailed and stylistically accessible, covering a wide range of topics threaded together by a common focus on the physical aspects of Tibetan books. Aside from György Kara’s *Books of the Mongolian nomads* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 2005), there is really nothing else like it published as a monograph. The book’s seven chapters include a survey of scientific and historical methods of studying the physical book (chapter 2); an overview of the craft of making Tibetan books (ch. 3); illuminated books and those made with precious substances such as gold ink and indigo paper (ch. 4); the technology and social contexts of woodblock printing (ch. 5); Tibetan paper (ch. 6); and finally the conservation of Tibetan books (ch. 7).

Helman-Wany uses the term ‘archaeology’ idiosyncratically by intention: ‘The term “archeology of the book” is used here in the context of studying the physical make-up and production of a given volume. It comprises analyses of the structures of books and an interpretation of technological aspects’ (p. 2). Chapter 1 serves to outline the goals and pragmatic limitations of such a project. Helman-Ważny focuses primarily on Tibetan canonical literature as opposed to works of Tibetan authorship, and she presents research on a selection of prints and manuscripts from ten primary collections in Europe, North America, and Asia. Several of these collections contain tens of thousands of unique items, making selectivity a necessity. ‘I established the following guidelines in my selection of books for research: search for collections brought from Central Asia and study their history and provenance; select Tibetan books with particular textual content (canonical texts); and, finally, search for books with technological or material significance’ (p. 6).

Chapter 2, on methods, provides a helpful survey of the problems and approaches that constitute this ‘archeology’. Numerous fields are mentioned: library science, bibliography, bibliography, codicology, paleography, material science, statistics, art history, the history of crafts, archeometry, and archeology. These disciplines are synthesized and adapted for several purposes. First, Helman-Ważny sets out to understand and describe the techniques of book
production, including the production of paper, ink, bindings, covers, and various types of finishing techniques applied to whole volumes such as the painting or dying of the edges of pages. One of Helman-Ważny’s passions is paper production; she therefore spends considerable time presenting the results of her painstaking analyses of the plant materials used in papermaking. Second, she focuses on book design, paying particular attention to page-layout, binding style, and their interrelationships. Finally, she is interested in the history of both book form, book production, and to a lesser extent the social history of books. Materials science, history, and descriptive bibliography might therefore be said to be the three driving disciplines of the book.

Chapter 3 moves from methodological considerations to the topic of Tibetan books proper, presenting the basic terminology for ‘book’ in Tibetan history, a quick survey of the uses of books in religious settings, and finally an illustrated guide to several distinct types of book formats, including the ‘pothi’ or loose-leaf volume, the concertina or folded book, and finally several varieties of stitched books. Chapters 4 through 6 form the heart of the book, each taking up a particular issue: illuminated manuscripts (4); woodblock prints (5), and paper (6). Throughout each of these chapters Helman-Ważny balances detailed description of particular books and manuscripts from her source collections with descriptions of production processes and historical overviews of the development of certain formal features and technologies.

Chapter 7, ‘Conservation’, offers an overview of the problems and potential solutions, as well as a sort of call to action on the part of collection curators around the world. A useful and interesting survey of the types of damage to be found in Tibetan books is included. Appendices offer a wealth of data on the physical features of books that both supports the preceding chapters and offers raw material for future research. These include three lists of books from archival collections at the British Library, the Berlin State Library, and the Library of Congress (Appendices 1, 4, and 5 respectively). As a group these appendices implicitly reaffirm the need to analyze physical items in archival collections. An impressive number of color images are included throughout the book. These are invaluable for understanding the numerous descriptions of the physical features of books, as well as for gaining a practical sense of the processes of production so thoroughly described in the text.

The archaeology of Tibetan books is unique, useful and enjoyable to read. Helman-Ważny’s writing style and method of presentation make the technical aspects of her research and her analyses engaging and approachable for the reader who is interested in Tibetan books yet who may not have the wealth of conservation science that she brings to the subject. The book will likely be most useful as a reference work for historians within Tibetan studies,