Coffee break Conference

From Manuscript to Xylograph: in the Search of Stylistic Models for the Identification of Tibetan Xylographs

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Summary

The paper I intend to present is not the end result of a research but the starting idea of a project I would like to carry on. I will confine myself to present this idea, after having provided some information on xylographs and having illustrated the current state of study in this field. Finally, I will tell about the method I would like to apply.

The xylographic technique originated in China during the Tang dynasty (618-907) but Tibetan people started to use it widely only after the 14th century. Important printing projects were undertaken starting from the 15th century which was a flourishing period for arts and culture throughout Tibet. The fall of the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368) in the middle of the 14th century had enabled some noble families to grow up locally. Those families became the patrons of the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism and of the emerging artists. They initiated the building of monasteries, temples, chapels, stūpas, and so on, and also sponsored the printing of the xylographs of the most relevant religious works.

At the time of its introduction, the xylographic technique offered great advantages for several reasons. The texts had remained in manuscript form until that time. Thanks to this new technique Tibetan people were finally able to make as many copies of a text as they wanted, thereby assuring a wide distribution of the works all over the country, and reducing the risk of their loss. Tibetan people consider printings the most reliable and authoritative editions of a work. Before printing a text, they indeed edited and proofread it many times. Furthermore, the abbot of the monastery had to approve it. The promoters of the various projects had numerous aims. They wanted not only to preserve and to spread Buddha’s teachings – meritorious deeds according to the Buddhist tradition – but also to increase the prestige of a certain lineage through the printing of the works of that order’s renowned masters.

To these days we do not have an accurate picture of the printing projects undertaken in the various areas of Tibet since the introduction of the xylographic technique in the country. One of the reasons that can explain the state of study in this field is the fact that most of the works printed at that time have not survived to the present day in their original editions. One of the possibilities of studying the history of xylographs in Tibet is identifying the different schools on the basis of stylistic criteria of the extant printings. The schools could be identified thanks to the religious figures, to the communities or else to the sponsors whom the artists are associated with. A project based on this criterion has been undertaken a few days ago. The scholars involved in the project are examining the extant xylographs printed in the Mang yul Gung thang area (south-western Tibet) from the 15th century onwards. This project is a relevant starting point for Tibetological studies. In order to progress in this field, it is necessary to do further research. My idea is to study the stylistic typologies and editions of the original xylographs kept at the Tucci Tibetan Fund of the IsIAO Library in Rome. The fund is a mine of information. During his several expeditions to Tibet, the famous scholar and explorer Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984) selected all the works representing the knowledge of that country. The aim of my project is trying to provide some stylistic models to identify the xylographs of the different printeries. Thanks to the heterogeneity and to the amount of works kept in the Tucci Tibetan Fund, it is possible to trace a detailed – although incomplete – map of the printeries present in the country as well as the printing projects, the historical periods in which these were undertaken, the political situation in the different areas, the sponsored schools, the works considered as most authoritative at a given time, in addition to the historical, political and religious changes over the centuries.
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