

Derge: the heaven of the Tibetan Book

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Abstract: This Derge Parkhang – a three-storey printing house built in 1729, where the main Buddhist texts and the great landmarks of Tibetan literature were xylographed – is still active and houses an important cultural collection of Tibetan treasures.

Keywords: Printing house. Xylography. Tibet. Buddhism.

Before joining the pilgrims in the impressive Potala Palace, the Jokhang Temple and the Barkhor kora (street) in the holy city of Lhasa, visitors are recommended to enter the Tibetan Autonomous Government of Ganzi, in the territory of the People's Republic of China in the Sichuan province, where the city of Derge – one of the three ancient centers of Tibetan culture – is located. There they can admire Derge Parkhang, a three-storey printing house built in 1729, where the main Buddhist texts and the great landmarks of Tibetan literature were xylographed.

For centuries, people in Central Asia have sung and acted out the deeds of the great King Gesar of Ling, one of the four ancient main sovereigns of Shambhala. He represents the quintessence of Tibetan warrior tradition and was born as a Buddhist warrior king to challenge the enemies of dharma. His teachings were spread over the regions inhabited by Tibetan, Mongolian, Tu, Naxi and Uyghurs ethnic groups. The Epic of King Gesar is the longest oral epic poem in the world and it is still being recited, expanded and spread. The inhabitants of Derge proudly claim that the great monarch was originally from the area.

From the 18th century on, Derge, a city located in the eastern region of the Tibetan plateau, gained a privileged position in Tibet's cultural scene after twelfth sovereign Chokyi Tenpa

Tsering (1678-1739) founded Derge Parkhang and ordered the compilation, edition and printing of the complete collection of the hundreds of volumes of Buddhist canon to serve as a reference for future generations. To accomplish that, he erected a building dedicated exclusively to editing the scriptures. He then summoned Tibet's best wood carvers, who were experts in the art of traditional printing.¹

The Chinese were the first to print images or signs on paper, using xylograph as their technique, but there is no documentary or archaeological record of how Eastern xylographic technique begun. It was possibly an adaptation of the decorative textile printing process for fabrics used as clothing. It is believed that in the 2nd century, as a result of disputes between scholars about the authenticity of ancient texts, the need arises to reproduce texts of cultural importance to be spread, and a decision was made to print them and replace the decorative, geometric, vegetable or zoomorphic material used for clothing by Buddha's texts. The technique used was xylographic block printing, which consisted of carving the text or image to be printed on a wood block and cover it with ink and then stamp it on paper, leaving the characters in black. It is assumed that this form of printmaking originated in Tibet and extended along the silk route through China, Korea, India, Japan and later into the Islamic empire.

Numerous researchers have argued for years that the first known dated xylographic book, also called block book, was printed in China by Wang Chieh on May 11, 868 according to our calendar. It is known as Diamond Sutra – Prajna paramita Sutra – and it has seven sheets united as a roll, found between the Dunhuang manuscripts in the early 20th century.

However, image printing was established, at least in literary terms, in AD 692, in *Nanchai ch'ikuei neifach'uan* – Chinese pilgrim Yijing's account of his travel to Southeast Asian, which mentions the existence of the book. We know of no other text confirming the making of xylographic books before the 8th century, but the edition of texts by xylographic methods is certain.²

Between 712 and 756 the Chinese emperors of the Tang dynasty ordered the making of copies of the classics of

1. See Rémi Bénéli, 2009.

2. Byeong-Seon Park Minje. *Historia de la imprenta Coreana*. Barcelona: UAB, 2006.

Confucianism with their respective commentaries using the technique of reproduction of inscriptions by wooden matrices. It is also known that in the 8th century xylographed texts were distributed in the markets of the capital Chang'an, such as almanacs and agriculture and medicine works.

In Japan, during the Nara period, Empress Shotoku (718-770) ordered that a million copies of Buddhist scriptures – the Hyakumanto Darani – be printed with the intention of placating the Buddhist clergy's quarrels. It is considered the first Japanese text printed and it is known that in 764 she ordered its donation to several temples. They are small, roll-shaped free editions with four Buddhist dharani sutras.

It is also known that the Dharani Sutra of Korea emerged before the year 751. That is possibly the oldest known printed book made with plates printed on wood; it was discovered in 1966 on the second level of the Seogka stupa while repair work was being carried out in the Korean temple of Bulguksa. It is a roll consisting of twelve sheets of paper made with dak tree fibers³.

These data should serve to introduce the xylographic book in the context of Derge Parkhang and thus highlight how this magnificent printing house, still active today, keeps an important cultural collection of Tibetan treasures, whose highlights include over 270,000 xylographed plates, some of them very old, which convey the teachings of the most revered Buddhist masters. Its magnificent scripture editions make the city of Derge not only one of the three major cultural centers in China's Tibetan regions but also an unmatched and unique jewel among the world's cultural treasures in terms of collection.

Derge Parkhang is located in the city center and is built according to the basic model of traditional Tibetan architecture. Its structure is composed of a colossal central rectangular house of solid cubic aspect with three floors and complex courtyards where a temple is integrated as well as the lodgings of carvers and printers. The walls are made of adobe brick or red tamped clay. The building's beams, columns, pillars, doors, balconies and windows are carved and painted in bright colors.

Rare and curious editions desired by the most exquisite bibliophiles come together in Derge Parkhang. Its vast collection consists of books, documents, editions of paintings in the

form of thangkas, mandalas and Tibetan prayer flags with xylographed or painted themes. But Derge Parkhang's most representative work is undoubtedly the xylographic compilation of the Tibetan Buddhism's canon, preserving some very old originals of incalculable value (Figure 1).

The canon is a collection of translations of sacred texts recognized by several branches of Tibetan Buddhism originating in India.

The Tibetans did not have a formally ordered canon so they devised a scheme dividing the texts into two broad categories: Kanjur – a 108-volume collection containing the word of the Buddha Shakyamuni – and Tanjur – a collection of commentaries on Buddha's teachings composed of 213 volumes according to some sources or 224 according to others, since figures may change depending on the edition.



Figure 1. Storing tablets. Photo: Marta Aguilar Moreno

The Kanjur edition was completed in the days of King Chokyi Tenpa Tsering, using 33,707 wooden blocks. During the first ten years of his time as king, 100,000 xylographed plates were made. After his death, he was succeeded by his eldest son Silang Gonpo, and a year later his second son Phuntsok Tenpa took charge of the carving and completion of the Tanju edition, for which 64,200 wooden blocks were used. In that period the Mani was also published, selecting the genealogy of Kings and Tibetan masters from all Buddhist schools.

The images of the Tibetan Buddhism canon are made up of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Tantric deities, Arhats or apostles, Dharma protectors, leading figures in the history of India and Tibet, as well as Buddhist philosopher monks and masters. It shows us Buddhism's broad iconographic horizon⁴.

4. See Dege Parkhang Sutra-Printing House [accessed in June 2016]: Available at <http://www.degeparkhang.org/>.

3. White mulberry paper.

After finishing the Buddhist canon in 1744, the Derge printing press started to be used to reproduce most of Tibetan Literature works. Important works on Tibetan medicine by wise and learned monks are also published there.

THE XYLOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUE AT DERGE PARKHANG

Xylography is the technique used for book printing based on direct carving on a wood piece cut to the fiber, known in Tibetan as *parshing*. All materials used are obtained from the region of Derge and are totally handmade.

The wood blocks use mainly Chinese birch with knotless red bark produced in Derge as well as in the Baiyu and Jiangda counties. The wood is cut along the fiber, producing tablets of three sizes; the largest ones are 60-70 x 11-18 cm, an intermediate size is 40-50 x 7-10 and the smallest one if about 30 x 5-6 cm. Cut wooden blocks are straightened and checked by an expert to see if the cut is correct before carving begins. To edit books, texts are carved on both sides of the tablet, with two pages in each block. The text is carved as vertical strips according to the direction of reading. Blocks are written on strictly under the 40 norms of Tibetan calligraphy laid by Chionpo Yuchyi and Rongpowa, Derge's two famous Tibetan calligraphers, and are based on the size of the blocks. Before printing, the blocks go through twelve proofreaders that check if the norms have been well applied. The Tibetan artisans who carry out the printing of matrices undergo several years of learning and training until they are authorized to carve scriptures.⁵

The main tools for carving wooden blocks are Japanese-type knives handled with authentic precision after an initial drawing. The knife consists of a straight blade of sharp steel on its right side, set in a simple round wooden handle similar to that of a chisel.

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The printing process consists of clearly established steps: preparing paper and ink; selecting the edition, printing; drying it

in the open; washing the block; storing; grouping pages; proof-reading; binding; coloring paper edges; and packaging.

The ink is produced by the combustion of azalea bark or willow leaves, using azalea ink for printing and willow ink for writing. The resulting slurry is left to dry in water-soluble bars or packed in well-closed container in liquid form. After some time it becomes good soot. This black smoke has a dense appearance and it is diluted in a container about 40 cm in diameter for inking the matrices. The red ink is made from cinnabar, the only material that is not locally produced and is used for texts in red.

The main element that acquires high importance in printing is certainly paper. Its manufacture is difficult, the raw material is obtained from the long and thick roots of the plant *Stellera chamaejasme linnaeus*, which is abundant in the Tibetan plateau. It is a vegetable fiber-based paste. First the roots are washed for defibration and establish inner, middle and outer layers. The middle layer is the finest one, being soft and very white and it is used for official documents. The remaining paper formed by the inner and outer layers is used for printing with wood blocks. Of a bone-like color, its most remarkable qualities are softness and absorbency. The remains of the thick roots are used to make wrapping paper. The paper sheets are normally not glued so printing is dry.



Figure 2. Stamping at Derge Parkhang, 2010. Photo: Reurinkjan.

Printing is done manually by placing the paper on the ink-impregnated matrix and passing a scraper on the back. Printers work in pairs; they sit facing each other and tilting the wood; one inks the tablet up and down with a block covered by a piece of inked leather and quickly places the paper corners at the edges of the matrix with high precision while another printer passes the scraper on the paper (Figure 2). The

5. Ibid.

method allows printing eight to fifteen pages per minute, about 2,500 prints a day. Once printing is completed, the papers are aerated for the ink to dry out (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Papers aerating in the sun, 2010. Photo: Reurinkjan.

Once the printing session is finished, the plates are cleaned by rubbing vigorously with brushes in the water sinks located in the patios. Then they are stored in the reserved rooms on the printing house's building lower floor.⁶



Figure 4. Pecha, Tibetan scripture book, 2010. Photo: Reurinkjan.



Figure 5. Page Count, 2010. Photo: Reurinkjan.

The Tibetan scripture book called pecha is not bound (Figure 4). Pages are carefully counted as they are grouped into piles without sewing (Figure 5), tying them up with strings at their ends and then dyeing their edges in red, resulting in a block of red paper. They are protected by two wooden covers and piled up. For packaging they are wrapped in a cloth of vivid colors.

SUPPORT PLAN

For a long time, Derge Parkhang has raised great interest for its vast collection of ancient books and documents. Relevant Chinese and foreign researchers, touched by the treasury stored at the printing house, try to preserve Tibetan cultural heritage. For this, a team of experts is sorting and repairing the tablets to protect them from the wear they suffer after stamping. The conservation project is progressing slowly, and the originals are now being duplicated. This leads to the need for new manpower but hiring carvers and purchasing materials are very costly, so the printing house has opened its doors to visitors. Many are curious travelers who come to see the place, and generous donations are important.

It is well worth a visit for the pleasure of exploring a timeless world. Spirituality, chants, prayer grinders, bright colors waving on the roof of the world; the moments of meditation, calmness and bustle take us to remote times that evoke the great printing facilities of the Tang period where the transcendental inventions of the printing press and the gunpowder are placed.

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6. See Dege Parkhang Sutra-Printing House [Accessed in June 2016]: available at <http://degeparkhang.org/Printers.htm>

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