

A brief study of Tibetan Buddhist style woodcuts illustrated in Chinese Buddhist books during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)

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The Tibetan Buddhist woodcut occupies an important place in the history of Chinese art of woodcuts. Because of several reasons, only a few art historians have devoted their attention to the research of these woodcuts. Among them, French scholar Heather Stoddard is one of the important scholars. In 1975, she published her important work *Early Sino-Tibetan Art* and studied systematically two groups of Tibetan Buddhist woodcuts. One is illustrations of Tibetan bKav-vgyur printed in 1410 during Emperor Yongle reign, and another is illustrations of ZHU FO PU SA MIAO XIANG MING HAO JING ZHOU printed in 1431 during Emperor Xuande reign. However, most of other Tibetan Buddhist woodcuts of the Ming Dynasty have not brought art historian's attention because these works are scattered in all kinds of Chinese Buddhist books and are difficult to find. Recently, *Collections of Chinese Ancient Woodcuts*, edited by Zhou Xinhui and Published by Xueyuan Press in 1998, collected more than 30 Tibetan Buddhist woodcuts from the Chinese Buddhist books of Ming Dynasty. This book provides a best way for us to continue to understand and research these woodcuts and artistic exchange between Tibet and the interior of China although it does not conduct any research into them. My topic here is focusing on these woodcuts by discussing their dates, donors, styles and artists.

1. On the dates of woodcuts

Most of these woodcuts in Chinese Buddhist books with Tibetan Buddhist style have inscriptions of date. According to *Collections of Chinese Ancient Woodcuts*, these woodcuts were created and printed during the reign of Emperor Hongwu, Emperor Yongle, Emperor Xuande, Emperor Zhengtong, Emperor Chenghua, Emperor Zhengde, Emperor Jiajing, Emperor Longqing and Emperor Wanli, respectively. The earliest one is illustration of Qi FO SUO SHUO SHEN ZHOU JING and its date is 24th year of Emperor Hongwu reign (1391) the latest one is the illustration of LUN GU JIN FO DAO LUN HENG SHI LU and it was printed in the period of Emperor Wanli reign (1573–1619). Among them, most woodcuts were cut and printed during the reigns of Emperor Yongle, Xuande and Wanli, which were coincident with the creation of bronzes with Tibetan Buddhist style in royal court of Ming Dynasty. All these woodcuts clearly reflect not only the development of the Tibetan Buddhist art in interior of China, but also the history of large-scale exchange between Tibetan and Chinese arts through the whole Ming Dynasty.

2. *On donors*

The majority of these woodcuts have not the name of donors and only one-third of inscriptions mentioned their donors' name. According to these inscriptions, donors can be classified into two parts briefly in line with their status. The first part of donors are those who came from government institutes or royal court with official status, mainly including Neifu, department of administrating the royal affairs of court), Senglusi, department of administrating affairs of Buddhist monks and nuns), Empress and eunuch. For example, the illustration of FO SHUO MO LI ZHI TIAN PU SA JING printed in the 1st year of Yongle reign (1403) was donated by the most famous eunuch and navigator Zhenghe. The illustration of NIAN FO WANG SHENG XI FANG GONG JU printed in the 14th year of Yongle reign (1416) was donated by Senglusi. The illustration of YU ZHI JIN GANG BAN RUO BO LUO MI JING JI ZHU printed in the 21st year of Yongle reign (1423) was donated by Neihu. The illustration of FO SHUO CHANG SHOU JIA ZUI HU ZHU TONG ZI TUO LUO NI JING printed in the 2nd year of Jijing reign (1523) was donated by Empress Xingguo. Among these donors, Neihu played an important role in donating these woodcuts. Many of these woodcuts were cut and printed by the order of emperors. The other donors were lay Buddhists. For example, the illustration of GUAN SHI YIN PU SA PU MEN PIN printed in the 7th year of Zhengde (1512) was donated by a Buddhist named Zhushi. In general, official institutes and royal family made a great contribution to these woodcuts. This situation is similar to the creation of bronzes during this period.

3. *On the style and artists*

Generally speaking, these woodcuts take on their remarkable characteristics in style although their style source can be traced to the woodcut of Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), such as the illustrations of Chinese Tripitaka Qishazang. Comparing to woodcuts of Yuan Dynasty, these woodcuts in Chinese Buddhist books of Ming Dynasty with Tibetan Buddhist style have stronger Chinese artistic style. Furthermore, in case of these woodcuts of Ming Dynasty themselves, there also exist some differences in style. In another word, works those were created in earlier time of Ming Dynasty have a stronger similarity with those of Yuan Dynasty. Meanwhile, works those were created after Xuande period have a strong Chinese style. From the period of Zhengtong on, the Chinese style not only gets stronger and stronger but also becomes the domain style of these woodcuts. In the later woodcuts, except for some decorative patters such as halo, throne, its decoration and a few attendant Bodhisattvas, there are not any Tibetan Buddhist art elements. In addition, inscriptions of these woodcuts lack of names of artists. Judging by inscription of donors and style of woodcuts, these artists were not only familiar with Tibetan Buddhist art tradition, but also good at Chinese Buddhist art tradition. To some degree, many of them could be Chinese and they had some close links with royal court.

4. Conclusion

The large-scale political, economic, cultural and religious exchanges between Tibet and interior of China in Ming Dynasty had a great influence on the development of Tibetan Buddhist art in the interior of China. Under these circumstances, Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist arts mixed together and formed a new school with remarkable characteristics of Chinese art. This new school had an important influence on Tibetan Buddhist art creation in both Tibet and the interior of China.