Chapter 3 The wood-engravings of the Bon Canon in Gyalrong

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Chapter 3  The wood-engravings of the Bon Canon in Gyalrong

According to dKa’ bcu gYung drung phun tshogs, the king Kun dga’ nor bu of Khro skyabs asked the Bon master Kun grol in what way he could render service to the Bon religion. The reply was that if he could undertake the engraving of woodblocks of the entire texts of the Kanjur part of the Bon Canon that would be a great legacy of his royal house. This advice of Kun grol was followed and keenly supported by the two brothers of the king, Nang so Nam mkha’ dbang ldan and Nang so gYung drung bstan ’dzin who were in any case disciples of this master.

However, to undertake the engraving of woodblocks, one must first have the texts and these were not readily available. This suggests that there was no complete set of texts of the Canon as such in the Khro chen royal house itself although it had a collection of texts belonging to the sections of the Kanjur as well as those of the bKa’ brten part of the Canon. A search began in earnest for the texts that were needed. People were sent out in different directions in order to look for them in such places as Khyung po, rDza khog, and Nyag rong in Khams, but most of the texts were found in Gyalrong itself including some at the fort Mu khri stag mo rdzong in the Khro skyabs principality. In this search a cousin of Kun grol by the name of sMon rgyal Sangs rgyas rin chen played a crucial role and later also became one of their chief editors.

As to this question of editing the texts assembled, Kun grol himself was in charge of the overall supervision of the whole project and particularly the editing. In this he was assisted by three prominent scholars: the prince-monk Nang so Nam mkha’ dbang ldan, who not only made sure that the mDo and ’Bum, sections of the Canon were complete, but also took on the fastidious task of editing them; rGyal sras Padma rgyal po who was a tantrist and sMon rgyal Sangs rgyas rin chen. The latter particularly oversaw the numbered divisions within one mDo text such as parts (dum bu), sections (bam po) and chapters (le ’u). In this editorial task gYung drung phun tshogs, the author of NG himself also took a major part. Other editors were lHa dbang g-yung drung who was an esteemed scholar among the Bonpo in Amdo and Legs bla ma Shes rab g-yung drung. The latter was a native of the village where King Kun dga’ nor bu was born. They were also joined by the following monks: gYung drung rnam dag, gYung drung gtsug phud and Shes rab tshul khrims.

dKa’ bcu gYung drung phun tshogs gives a fairly detailed account pointing out how difficult it was when dealing with faulty manuscripts that were packed with problems of grammar, of old terminology, inconsistency in the transliteration of Sanskrit or Zhang zhung terms or simply misspellings. No less interesting is it to note the way in which a solution was proposed while preserving the old reading as much as possible.

After editing and copying, the final version of the texts of the Kanjur part of the
Canon amounted to:

- mDo section: 56 parts (dhum bu), in 43 volumes (pu ti ka)
- Bum 118 parts in 49 volumes
- sNgags 88 parts in 15 volumes
- Sems sde 30 parts in 5 volumes

All was written on paper that was about 50 cm long and written in silver on a black background. Each volume had its own 'head cover' (dbu kheb) and the two planks (glegs shing). There were all together 112 volumes, plus one volume that was devoted to the inventory (dkar chag) as well as two more volumes devoted to 'culture' (rig gnas).

It was this group of manuscripts that probably served as the basis of KK by Kun grol as we shall see. In passing the author mentions that the Derge xylographs of the Buddhist Kanjur in 101 volumes and the Tenjur in 208 volumes were brought from Derge for the Khro chen royal house. The Buddhist Canon of the Derge xylographic edition was completed in 1733.

This sketch of the process of assembling the texts, their edition and the making of new copies shows that it was already financially a huge undertaking on the part of the king of Khro skyabs.

The great printery

A temple was built to house all the new manuscripts. gYung drung phun tshogs gives a detailed description of its architectural features as well as its contents consisting of images and stupas. Painters from Central Tibet and from Gyalrong itself all together about fifty artists did the mural paintings. The temple contained one thousand and two copper-gilded images of Sa nig er sangs, gShen lha 'od dkar, Srid pa Sangs po 'bum khri and gShen rab Mi bo. Each image was about 15 cm high and all were duly consecrated.

However, unfortunately the author neither gives the name of the temple nor its location. It was perhaps what Kun grol called Par khang chen mo, the great printings-house. The activity of editing and copying out texts was based mainly in mTshon to Ngo mtshar nor bu gling Monastery. When an editor finished his editing, the text was then copied out by a scribe on special paper. This copy was called par yig which was for engraving on woodblocks. It was then pasted on the woodblock in reverse. The engraver (par rko ba) could then start cutting.

The chiefs of the scribes, who established the par yig, were Phud rgod Shes rab dbang Idan and Hor rgyal ma Shes rab dbang Idan who was very learned in all types of Tibetan scripts (yig rigs) and he especially followed the script tradition described in the 'account of scripts' (yig bsphad) written by Kun grol. Shes rab dbang Idan was joined by Hor rgyal ma Shes rab dbang Idan who was particularly learned in the scripts gshar ma.
and rdzab yig. The two were the chief scribes (‘bri ba’i dpon po) and were assisted by 30 other people all chosen for their skill in calligraphy. To check the par yig, there were 41 monks from the monastery mTshon to Ngo mtshar nor bu gling. The traditional Tibetan way of checking a text needed two people at the same time. While the first person, who must be competent, reads out the newly copied text (bu dpe), the second person, follows him by listening with the original text (ma dpe). In this way, whether a word or a phrase was missing or repeated could be detected. This method was used not just for checking the par yig, but whenever a new text was made, it was checked in this way.

The engraving of woodblocks

gYung drung phun tshogs states that the famous wood-engraver (par rko ba) called A drung was invited from Central Tibet. Here the author, as many writers in Eastern Tibet, uses the word bod in the sense of Central Tibet. Although gYung drung phun tshogs fails to indicate from where exactly A drung came from, this statement is interesting in that the Khro chen house preferred to have someone from Central Tibet rather than from some other place. It is possible that A drung came from Nyemo in gTsang since the place is well known for wood-engraving and also a stronghold of the Bon religion. Whatever the case, he trained many of the local people in the profession such as Chu srin dbon po, rGyal yag, Tan cob pa, Shem go pu, Tsa tsi go, Ki bzo, dGe ‘dun, Kum lug Tshul ‘od and rNam rgyal ye shes. When these engravers became skilled they in turn taught others so that at the time in the Khro skyabs principality alone there were more than 200 skilled craftsmen. In addition to the calligraphers, there were the artists such as Phur pa thar who had been trained by a famous artist from Central Tibet (bod pa’i lha ris), but his name is not given. Phur pa thar was one of the artists who drew the figures that feature on the folios at the beginning and end of a volume known as mchog lha.

gYung drung phun tshogs states that during the period, that is around 1758, due to the merit (sku bsod) of King Kun dga’ nor bu, the ‘representations of speech, body and mind’ were made in different ways such as by drawing, painting, carving in relief, casting and engraving.

The 48 wood-engravings (58.3 x 42.4), which will be treated in Chapter 6, depict the life-story of gShen rab Mi bo. These were printed from the woodblocks that were engraved during the same period i.e. 1758-1773. Although the author does not specifically refer to the woodblocks in question, there is no doubt that the engraving of these woodblocks took place during this time, but the prints which we have were made around 1940. It is fair to say that the 48 wood-engravings are the finest examples of the Tibetan art of wood-engraving that flourished in Gyalrong in the eighteenth century.
The main source for the account of wood-engraving

The sNang ba'i dga' ston (NG) is a historical account of the project of engraving woodblocks of the Bon Canon sponsored by the king Kun dga' nor bu. According to its colophon the author was ordered by the king himself to record all the activities connected with the project. He specifically states that his work is based mainly on KK, the catalogue compiled by his master, Kun grol, but he also received information from Nang so Nam mkha' dbang Idan and sMon rgyal Sngas rgyas rin chen dpal bzang. He further states that there were other catalogues that he had also used. He completed the writing of the work in 1773 at Drug zur rNam rgyal rdzong, the Khro chen palace. However, the date 1773 is rather curious, because the author states that the whole process of the project was concluded in 1774. Nevertheless, as the author himself took part in the editorial work and cooperated in many other respects in the project, his report could be considered as generally reliable if not always completely accurate since it was written at first hand.

It was my friend Tsering Thar of the Tibetological Centre in Beijing who kindly made a photocopy of chapters 4 and 5 of NG (chapter 5 being the last one), and sent it to me, but chapters 1 to 3 were already missing in his copy. NG was therefore a work that had 5 chapters. It is a manuscript copy written in dbu med script. Chapters 4 and 5 in the manuscript have separate paginations and are treated as if they were independent works. This may explain why the first three chapters were misplaced and have not reached us with the rest of them. On the last folio of chapter 4 (f.33a), a note in two lines informs us that “Although I was subjected to the public criticism, humiliation and confession during the Cultural Revolution, I saved these books at the risk of my own life. gYung drung bstan 'phel, the abbot of Ye shes Monastery, Nyag rong”.

This note constitutes a witness to what had happened in the said monastery and at the same time helps us to know the origin of the manuscript. It came from Ye shes Monastery, in Nyag rong, Khams. gYung drung bstan 'phel alias gYung drung bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1922-1996) was later to become known as Ayung Lama. He was rehabilitated and became a vice-president of the Political Consultative Conference of the dKar mdzes Prefecture. He later in cooperation with Shug sdong sKal bzang phun tshogs began to publish the first printed edition of the Bonpo Kanjur in 1985.

There is no information about what happened to the first three chapters of the work. At any rate, chapter 4 is obviously the most important for us as it contains the account of the process of the project of engraving the woodblocks of the Canon. However, as is often the case, the native people of Gyalrong had difficulties in writing Tibetan. His work is no exception. It is laden with obscure and imprecise formulations and passages.

The author states that the whole par yig, i.e. copies of texts prepared for engraving, were all completed in the year water-snake (1773). I suppose the author meant that in that year the par yig of the last texts were completed. He again says in the year wood-
tiger (1774) 112 volumes of the Kanjur part of the Canon, plus one volume of the catalogue (dkar chag), altogether 113, plus two more volumes on ‘culture’ (rig gnas) were completed, hence 115 in all. Here again, I presume he meant that in that year the first xylographic edition of the Kanjur was made. He does not specify who compiled the catalogue which was the hundred and thirteenth volume. He states that the whole process of the project began in the year earth-tiger (1758) and took sixteen years to accomplish, hence in 1774. However, according to the colophon of the xylographic edition of the gZi brjid, the work started in 1752. It is possible that the work on the engraving of some of the texts of the Kanjur started earlier than the actual project. On the completion of the project, a consecration ritual (rab gnas) was performed for the woodblocks by Nang so lhA dbang bstan 'dzin who was obviously a royal personage as his title indicates.

The other relevant source for the wood-engravings of the Khro skyabs Kanjur is SG by Kun grol as noted earlier. It is a work specifically devoted to the historical account of the Khams chen xylographs (par byang). The Khams chen in 16 volumes belongs to the ’Bum section of the Kanjur. Kun grol wrote the historical account in the monastery A khod Dar rgyas gling in Shar rdza, Khams at the age of 67, hence in 1768. The text is added to the end of the last volume of the Khro chen edition.

It was around 1987 that O rgyan thar, a friend of mine, sent me a photocopy of the text from Shar khog, Amdo, but he did not specify from where he obtained it. Nevertheless, it showed that the Khro skyabs xylographic print of the Khams chen still existed.

In 1985 I myself came across the same text in the sKyang tshang Monastery in Shar khog, but it was at the end of volume A of the Chu chen xylographic edition of the Khams chen. In other words, the historical account written by Kun grol was therefore used as par byang for both wood-engavings, namely:

1. The Khro skyabs edition of the Khams chen, volume A, f.521a-541a
2. The Chu chen edition of the Khams chen, volume A, f.369a-383a

While the account of the Khro skyabs xylograph has the genealogy of the Khro chen royal family, that of the Chu chen edition has the genealogy of the Rab brtan royal family. Otherwise the texts are exactly the same. However, the Chu chen wood-engraving of the Khams chen was carried out and completed in 1764 at the chapel called mKha' klong mchod khang in the palace of the Rab brtan king called bKwa' rngom Gyur med pho brang. The wood-engraving of the gZi brjid in Chu chen was completed in 1767. Apart from Kun grol’s scattered references to the xylographs of Chu chen, I have so far found no source at all that transmits an overall account of the Chu chen editions of the Bon Canon if it ever existed. In 1985 I found the Chu chen wood-engravings of the gZi brjid in the library of the Bya 'phur family. The family is usually referred to as dGon gong ma in rNga khog (Ch. A ba).
The xylographs of Khro skyabs and Chu chen have different designs. While the Khro skyabs wood-engravings look very plain and ordinary [Pl. 42-48], those of Chu chen have a superior appearance in their calligraphy and presentation. They are often embellished with motifs and figures of persons and deities on the first two folios and the last two folios [Pl. 49-69]. It would seem that there was a competition between the two courts eager to demonstrate who did the work better. However, the engraving of woodblocks of the Khams chen of the Chu chen editions was completed ten years later than that of the Khro skyabs edition for reasons that will be explained later.

Here is a resume of what Kun grol says about the engraving of woodblocks of the Khams chen of the Khro skyabs edition:

“In 1756 the work on the engraving of the woodblocks of the Khams chen began under the patronage of King Kun dga’ nor bu and the queen Tshe dbang lha mo. It was undertaken in the monastery Ngo mtshar nor bu gling. There were eight chiefs of the engravers (rko dpon) resulting in more than a hundred people; Nang so Nam mkha’ dbang ldan and sMon rgyal Sangs rgyas rin chen did the editing and checking of the new engraving; there were four chiefs of the scribes including Phud rgod Shes rab dbang ldan making altogether eighteen scribes who prepared the par yig; a cook and his servants and the chief smith and assistants altogether more than two hundred people engaged in completing the engraving of the Khams chen alone.”

Kun grol indicates that it took nine months. He further states that the fee which was paid to all those engaged in the work included silk, tea bricks, the chang, horses, mules and yaks. It all amounted to more than 5,335 silver srang. He continues by saying that the woodblocks were deposited in the Par khang chen mo, the great printery. While the account of Kun grol deals specifically with the history of the engraving of the Khams chen in Khro skyabs, NG, of which I made a rough summary earlier, is a general history of the engraving of woodblocks of the Bon Canon in Khro skyabs.

The Project of the wood-engraving of the Kanjur texts

As stated earlier, the project of the Khro skyabs engraving of the Kanjur was sponsored by the king Kun dga’ nor bu and his queen Tshe dbang lha mo. It was obviously a vast project, the most ambitious that had ever been carried out among the populations of Tibet that professed their religion as Bon. The moving spirit behind these endeavors was Kun grol. He was as prodigious a writer and historian as mystic. It was under his spiritual influence that the whole movement was possible as he was the prelate of the kings of Khro skyabs, Chu chen and dGe bshes tsa. These were the most powerful local rulers in Gyalrong in the eighteenth century. As seen above, it all began with the feverish activity of searching and collecting canonical texts first, then editing, making copies of them and finally preparing what is called par yig, that is the copy to
be pasted on the woodblocks to be engraved. There were about 9 principal editors, 34 scribes, 41 correctors, that is to say those who checked after engraving had been completed, more than 200 craftsmen who did the actual engraving as well as an unknown number of artists who did the drawing of figures. They were mostly based in the palace of the king himself as well as in the Khro chen family’s monastery, mTshon to Ngo mtshar nor bu gling.

The first Manchu military campaign against bTsan la in Gyalrong ended in 1749 giving the Gyalong people the encouragement to stand up in the face of aggression, but it took almost 8 years to recover from the war effort and be able to think again about religion.

However, the Manchus were turning towards the south again after their successful conquests in Jungaria in the north. As it was, the surge of the Bon tradition in Gyalrong could not simply be ignored by the Manchus or the dGe lugs pa authorities in Central Tibet. Their unfinished job in 1749 was a bad reminder. If they turned their attention to Gyalrong again, it was in perfect line with their imperial expansionist policy. In 1771 the so-called second punitive expedition started when the Gyalrong people at the Rab brtan court in Chu chen and the Khro chen court in Khro Skyabs were fully embarked on the engraving of woodblocks of the Kanjur.

In this conflict Chu chen bore the main brunt of the conflict and was severely defeated while Khro skyabs was more or less spared. In spite of this military conflict work on the engraving project of the Kanjur continued. By 1774, woodblocks of about 115 volumes had been engraved in Khro skyabs. However, the work on the wood-engraving in Chu chen was thwarted by the war although some parts of the Canon were completed well before the conflict started, for example, the Khams chen in 1764 and the gZi brjid in 1767.

For the first time the Bon religious movement could boast of having a xylographic edition of their Canon. Supposing each volume of the Kanjur has an average of 200 folios, there would have to be 22,800 woodblocks engraved on both faces. In fact, many of the volumes of the Khams chen, for example, had more than 500 folios.

However, Gyalrong was drawn into a military conflict not of their own doing but through sheer aggression involving the combination of a highly organized army backed up by a Buddhist dGe lugs pa lama and a Christian priest at the Manchu court. In the face of such awesome military might empowered by Buddhist magic rites and Western technology, the Bonpo in Gyalrong were finally doomed to a crushing defeat yet they did manage to keep the aggressors at bay for six years.

The activities of engraving woodblocks of Bon texts in Khro skyabs after the war, however, continued and their imprints were made right up to 1955. Kong sprul Yon tan rgya mtsho (1813-1899) reports that in 1846 whilst traveling in Gyalrong he saw about a hundred volumes of the printed Bon Kanjur from Khro skyabs in the palace of the
king of Sog mo (So mang). So mang is situated in the Tsha kho area and traditionally counted as one of the eighteen principalities of Gyalrong.

King skKal bzang rgyal mtshan of Khro skyabs, the last king of Khro skyabs, continued to sponsor the engraving of woodblocks of texts of the Kanjur and Katen. In 1949 a text of the Kanjur was engraved as well as a number of works by Me ston Shes rab 'od zer, one of the important figures of the Bon tradition. His writings were mainly concerned with monastic discipline. The Khro skyabs editions of these works have been reproduced and published by the sMan ri Monastery in Dolanji, India.

In an article I gave the dates of the master Me ston as 1055-1132 following the Bonpo chronology as I did when translating the historical work by Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan (1859-1934) making sure that all the dates obtained from the chronology were preceded by STNN. By doing so I wanted to show that it was not I who made these calculations. Nor did I have in the 1960s when working on the translation the necessary sources for verification. Dan Martin (2003: 3, n. 8) has stated that “his dates might have to be moved forward by one 60-year cycle to 1118-1192”. I most welcome this suggestion. I myself came to notice that many of the dates given in the chronology just mentioned cannot be followed blindly. In fact, the whole chronology of the Bon tradition needs to be systematically reviewed.

One of the last prints

The wood-engravings of the Kanjur from Khro sKyabs were circulated in Tibet, but it does not seem to have reached outside Tibet. In 1955 Hor btsun bsTan 'dzin blo gros rgya mtsho (1889-1975), my great-uncle, sent his disciple Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin (b.1929) to Gyalrong in order to have the Kanjur printed for sKyang tshang Monastery in Shar khog. bsTan 'dzin blo gros was the principal teacher of this monastery. Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin alias Lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyl ma, who is now the abbot of sMan ri Monastery in Dolanji, India, set out for the task. Although Gyalrong is not too far distant a region from Shar khog (Songpan) in Amdo, it involved traveling through difficult terrain on foot and horseback as well as passing through Chinese areas and towns. He met the king skKal bzang rgyal mtshan of Khro skyabs, who was the last king of the Khro skyabs principality. The king told him that he had about fifty wood engravers working on texts before the advent of the Chinese communists. Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin noted that the king had only one son who died very young.

Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin’s mission was crowned with success as he was able to bring back a complete set of xylographs of the Kanjur made from the Khro skyabs woodblocks. The xylographs he had made may have been among the last ones, because the social changes under communism were well under way in the area after his return. All the woodblocks in Gyalrong were utilised regularly as domestic fuel during the Cultural Revolution. In 1985, I found only 3 woodblocks in the bTsun mo lha khang

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temple, in Khro skyabs [Pl. 70].

1 sNang ba'i dga' ston (NG), 'Feast of the Morning Light', f. 17a. Dan Martin briefly discusses the text NG in his introduction to A catalogue of the Bon Kanjur (2003: 8-9).
2 Ibid., f.17a-17b.
3 Ibid., f.19b.
4 Ibid., f.20a-24a.
5 Ibid., f.24a-24b.
6 SG f. 537b; NG f. 24b-25b. It is possible that this printing house was the bTsun mo lha khang also called bDag mo lha khang which served to house some of the printing blocks still in the 1950s (oral information from Lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyi ma (b. 1929) the abbot of sMan ri Monastery in Dolanji, H.P. India. He visited the place in 1956).
7 NG f. 26b.
8 Ibid., f. 26b.
9 Ibid., f. 26b-27b.
10 Ibid., Chapter 5, f. 12a-13b.
11 Ibid., f. 29a.
12 Survey No. 12.
13 NG f. 29a-b.
15 Pl. 12 (Survey No. 136).
16 Volume A, f.521a-541a.
19 SG f. 537b.
21 Survey No. 231.
22 The volume is entitled gyi'ung drung bon gyi bka' dang bka' rtan (sic), but the date of publication is not given.
24 Kvaerne 1971.
Pl. 42 Folio at the beginning of a volume known as dbu kheb, 'head cover'
Pl. 43  Blo Idan snying po, author of the gZi brj bd
Pl. 44  smon rgyal kun grol grags pa, cf. Pl. 10
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Pl. 51  rGyal sras gYung drung dbang ldan, detail from Pl. 50
Pl. 52 Kong bza' khri lcami, detail from Pl. 50
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Pl. 53  Folio 1a, Chapter 39 of the gczi brjod
Pl. 54  Folio 1b, Chapter 39 of the gZi brjid
Pl. 56  Ye gshen Khri bzhi nam tıng, detail of Pl. 54
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Pl. 57 Kong rje dkar po, detail from Pl. 54
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Pl. 61 Detail from Pl. 58
Pl. 62  Ba rab gling bzhi, detail from Pl. 58
Pl. 63  Ba rab gling rtsol, detail from Pl. 58
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Pl. 69  Shakya thub pa, detail from Pl. 65