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## The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa and the Origins of Thangka

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Fig. 1

The Hahn Cultural Foundation in Korea, where I am working as an academic consultant, has a unique thangka, 75.5 x 49.5 cm in size and reproduced in Volume 2 of their official catalogue,[1] which I edited. (Fig.1) This thangka depicts a Tathāgata seated on a lotus in the centre with his hands in the gesture of teaching (*dharmacakrapravartanamudrā*) and surrounded by various figures listening to his sermon. Below the central figure there is a gold-lettered inscription that reads "Homage to mthong ba don ldan" (*mthong ba don ldan la na mo*). The phrase mthong ba don ldan means literally "the [mere] sight [of something] is beneficial," and it is sometimes applied to Buddhist images and paintings possessing miraculous powers (*byin rlabs can*).

The names of many of the attendant figures are also inscribed in gold letters. In the upper left are eight pratyekabuddhas (*rang rgyal brgyad*), while the eight figures in the upper right are eight Tathāgatas. The monks surrounding the central figure represent eight śrāvakas (*nyan thos brgyad*), and there are also eight bodhisattvas on either side. The names of fifteen of the sixteen bodhisattvas are written in golden letters. Their names are

'Jam dpal (Mañjuśrī), Zla ba'i 'od (Candraprabha), Nor bzangs (Sudhana), sGrib pa rnam par sel ba (Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin), Nam mkha' mdzod (Gaganagañja), Sa'i snying po (Kṣitigarbha), sDig byad(=med) do [2] (Anagha), sPyan bzang (Sulocana), Byams pa (Maitreya), illegible,[3] Spyan ras gzigs (Avalokiteśvara), Phyag na rdo rje (Vajrapāṇi), Blo gros chen po (Mahāmāti), Blo gros zhi ba (Śāntamāti), rNam par snang mdzad (Vairocana[garbha]) and Ngang song spong ba (Apāyajaha).

Statues of a quite similar set of bodhisattvas are found in the congregation hall ('*du khang*) of dPal 'khor chos sde in rGyal rtse, and G. Tucci, referring to Marcelle Lalou's study mentioned later, concluded that this cycle of sixteen bodhisattvas was inspired by a well-known liturgy of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. [4] In addition, the lotus stem supporting the lotus seat is flanked by the two nāga kings, Nanda and Upananda. In the bottom right, Yamāntaka (gShin rje gshed) is depicted on top of a mountain. Below Yamāntaka is depicted a sādḥaka (*sgrub pa po*) holding a pot of offering incense and looking at Mañjuśrī among the sixteen bodhisattvas above.

Avalokiteśvara (Spyan ras gzigs), meanwhile, is depicted on top of a mountain to the left.[5]

This combination of attendant figures resembles another thangka included in the same volume of *Art of Thangka* (Fig. 2).[6] However, in this thangka, inscriptions are not found.

Moreover, it has also come to light that a xylograph from sDe-dge entitled "Deity Yoga of Mañjuśrī" ('*Jam dbyangs lha'i rnal 'byor*) bears a close resemblance to the arrangement of the deities in this thangka.

After a detailed analysis of the iconography, I noticed that the format of these paintings tallies with a painted scroll (*paṭa*) described in the "Prathamapaṭavidhānavistara" of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. [7]

Moreover, I discovered that the phrase "*mthong ba don ldan*" occurs in the concluding verses of the "Prathamapaṭavidhānavistara," which explain the merit of the first painted scroll.

ras ris mthong ba don ldan zhes/  
thub pa'i dbang pos bzhad pa yin/  
mthong ba tsam gyis dag 'gyur te/  
de bas skad cig de tsam gyis//

darśanam saphalam teśam  
paṭam maunīdrabhāṣitam/  
dṛṣṭamātram pramucyante  
tasmāt pāpāt tu tatkaṣaṇāt//61//

Translation:

The painted scroll named *mthong ba don ldan*  
Is expounded by the king of ascetics (*maunīdra*).  
All sins will be purified  
In a moment at the mere sight of it.



Fig. 2

This seems to be the reason why the first painted scroll of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* is called in Tibet "mthong ba don ldan," namely, "the [mere] sight [of it] is beneficial."

This discovery made clear the reason why this painting was called *mthong ba don ldan* and why the sDe-dge xylograph was called "Deity Yoga of Mañjuśrī" even though the main deity is not Mañjuśrī but Śākyamuni.

On the occasion of the International Conference "Contribution of Tibetan Culture to Global Understanding: Progress and Prospects" held in New Delhi in 2009, I read a paper entitled "What is mThong ba don ldan?" and made clear this fact. However, owing to time constraints, I could not deal with it from a broader perspective.

In this paper, I will discuss the significance of the discovery of the tradition of thangka based on the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* for considering the origins of thangka, the most popular genre of Tibetan art, and the historical and stylistic development of Tibetan paintings.

The paṭas of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* were already studied by Marcelle Lalou in 1930. However, the composition of the first painted scroll reconstructed by Lalou[8] is somewhat different from that of mThong ba don ldan since she did not know any example of a modern Tibetan thangka depicting the first painted scroll of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*.

From a stylistic viewpoint, the aforementioned three examples are all modern executions. However, an old example which has the combination of the same attendant figures, made during the 13th to 14th centuries is also found. This is a painting which was once brought to the Hahn Cultural Foundation by an art dealer. This thangka depicts Śākyamuni in the *dharmacakrapravartanamudrā* in the centre flanked by two attendants Mañjuśrī and Maitreya, while the rest of the canvas is divided into eight registers depicting the afore mentioned series of attendant deities.

However, in this thangka, the lotus stem supporting the lotus seat of the main deity and the two nāga kings, Nanda and Upananda are omitted.

On the other hand, Prof. David P. Jackson found another example of the same iconography in a auction catalogue published in 1995. [9] This thangka depicts Śākyamuni in the *dharmacakra-pravartanamudrā* in the centre flanked by two attendants Mañjuśrī and Maitreya, while the rest of the canvas is divided into nine registers. And aforementioned series of attendant deities are arranged in eight registers except for the bottom. This thangka also omits, the lotus stem supporting the lotus seat of the main deity. However, two nāga kings, Nanda and Upananda are depicted on both sides of the throne of the main deity.

Generally speaking, Tibetan thangka developed from the geometric structure stressing the front view to the natural arrangement of a bird's-eye view. The difference of the aforementioned three modern and two old thangkas of the *mThong ba don ldan* is a good example of such a stylistic transition of Tibetan thangka paintings.

However, the arrangement in which the main deity sits on a central lotus seat and attendants sit on small lotus seats branching off from the stem of the main deity's lotus is a traditional design of Buddhist icons that frequently occurs in motifs such as the Buddha performing a miracle at Śrāvastī, the Buddha preaching in an assembly, and Amitābha Buddha in the Pure Land. Moreover, this design is clearly prescribed in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*.

gang bcom ldan 'das kyi rtsa ba'i pa dma'i sdong bu de las 'phros pa'i yal ga las pad ma'i me tog du ma mthar gyis mtho ba bya'o// g'yon gyi phyogs su pad ma'i me tog brgyad byas te/ pad ma de dag la byang chub sems dpa' chen po brgyad kyi gzugs bzhugs pa bri bar bya'o//[10]

Therefore, old examples of the *mThong ba don ldan* intentionally omitted such multi-lotus structures of the *mThong ba don ldan* and applied the standard structure of the old Tibetan thangka to the *mThong ba don ldan*. Modern examples, on the other hand, restored the traditional multi-lotus structure from the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*.

On another occasion, I argued that the Tibetan word thang-ka/kha may be a phonetic transcription of the Chinese word *danghua* ( 唐画) and that *dang* ( ) in *danghua* was frequently used for translating the Indian term paṭa in Buddhist scriptures such as the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. [11]

This fact suggests that the origins of the thangka may lie in the Indian *paṭa*, although Tibetans encountered the painted scroll for the first time in the Hexi Corridor when it was under the control of the ancient empire of Tibet (Tubo/Tufan) and studied it under Chinese painters. If Tibetans studied *paṭa* directly from India, they should adopt the Tibetan translation "ras bris/ras ris" frequently used for translating the Indian term *paṭa* in Buddhist scriptures such as the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*.

The Indian Buddhist *paṭa* is the origin of all Buddhist painted scrolls, including the Tibetan thangka, the most popular genre of Tibetan Buddhist art. However, we do not know any example of an Indian Buddhist *paṭa* since Buddhism disappeared almost completely from Indian soil in the thirteenth century.

Moreover, before this painting, there had not yet been discovered a Tibetan thangka that has a composition completely coinciding with the description of a *paṭa* prescribed in a scripture of Indian origin.

The discovery of *mThong ba don ldan* in the collection of the Hahn Cultural Foundation and the successive discoveries of old examples are important not only for the study of Tibetan Buddhist iconography but also for considering the lost Indian *paṭa*, the

matrix of Buddhist painted scrolls transmitted to all Buddhist countries in Asia.

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## Footnotes:

1. *Art of Thangka*, Vol.2, Seoul 1999, Fig. 38.

2. This do is rdzogs tshig (terminative particle) occurred in the Tibetan translation of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, wrongly interpreted as a part of the name of the deity.

3. As I will discuss later, it should be Kun tu bzang po (Samantabhadra).

4. G.Tucci: *Gyantse and Its Monasteries*, Part 1 (English version of Indo-Tibetica IV.1),1989 New Delhi, p.149.

5. According to the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, the deity depicted there is not Avalokiteśvara but his emanation, Tārā. However, the inscription reads "sPyan ras gzigs" even though the iconography of this deity tallies with that of Tārā as described in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*.

6. *Art of Thangka*, Vol.2, Seoul 1999, Fig. 21.

7. *Mañjusrimulakalpa*, Mahayanasutrasaṃgraha Part II,Darbhanga 1964,pp.39-47; Marcelle Lalou: *Iconographie des étoffes peintes(paṭa)dans le Mañjusrimulakalpa*, Paris 1930,(Hereafter: Lalou 1930) pp.71-87; Taisho No.1191, Vol.20, 859a-862b

8. Lalou 1930, Planche I

9. Sotheby's Indian and Southeast Asian Art NY Sept 21, 1995, No.77.

10. Lalou 1930, p.79, ll.24-28. I converted Lalou's transcription into Wylie system in accordance with the norm of IATS.

11. We know from the phonetic transcription of Chinese text using Tibetan characters in Dunhuang, that the devoicing of voiced consonant like D took place in the north west diarect of Chinese during Tang to the Five Dynasties. In the present orthography of Tibetan, three different spellings: thang ka/thang kha/thang ga are possible. It suggests that thangka was a phonetic transcription of foreign word. Tibetans transcribed *danghua* in three different manners since fi (voiced glottal fricative) of fua did not exist in Tibetan.