The Mystery of the Precious Seal of the Ruler and the Origins of Printing

T. H. Barrett

with Antonello Palumbo*  
SOAS, University of London

ABSTRACT

Although researchers into the origins of printing have already initiated the study of references to seals in Chinese religious texts of the seventh-eighth century, only now has digitization allowed us comprehensive access to Buddhist sources. These reveal a number of references to seals that may well be related to an awareness of printing during the reign of the Empress Wu. The language of Buddhist metaphor is, however, conventional, and therefore cannot yield explicit information on a new technology. It may be that in future Daoist materials will prove to contain more useful materials for linking the use of seals to early printing. Even so, the extensive references to seals in Chinese Buddhist compositions and in translations at this point do help to illuminate the widespread contemporary understanding of the nature of surface to surface pattern transfer at the time that woodblock printing was on the point of appearing in East Asia.

Keywords: Buddhist seals, printing, religious metaphor, Empress Wu, Huayan

Several years ago the first named author above published a study, to which the present short essay is intended as an additional coda, discussing the use of metaphors in religious texts of the seventh century as a source of information on the contemporary understanding of printing processes.1 These metaphors, however, concerned the transfer of pattern in general, and while valuable as evidence for the degree of understanding of such factors as accuracy, speed and repeatability in that context, could not of themselves be immediately taken as evidence of the existence at that time of printing as we would understand it. The use of moulds and of seals would have provided enough experience of the technologies involved in the transfer of pattern—including the transfer of text—to account for all of the examples discussed. In one particular case, however, the Buddhist thinker Fazang(643-712) uses an extended metaphor concerning enlightenment that involves an entire sentence of text being created at once.2 In a forthcoming work Chen Jinhua shows that briefer uses of this metaphor occur elsewhere in Fazang’s work, and in that of his later follower Chengguan(738-839), though he feels that none of this evidence amounts to proof that Fazang had witnessed printing as we would understand the term, rather than the use of elaborate seals or the like.3 His caution is not universally shared: the belief that the first passage at any rate refers to printing, which—as pointed out in the earlier study—originated in Japanese academic circles, has also been endorsed in China.4

This first passage, moreover, occurs in a text that for many centuries in
China and yet longer in Japan—to say nothing of Korea—was always seen as the best source for studying Fazang’s thought, and so was subject to incessant commentary.¹ Fazang was, after all, regarded as the third and in some ways most important patriarch in the Chinese Huayan school, an intellectual lineage that was also held in great esteem in Korea and Japan. No early commentator provides any remarks on the passage in question, but it is taken up by one of the greatest of East Asian exegetes, the Japanese scholar Gyōnen(1240-1321), who drew on a rich tradition of written and oral commentary, including much earlier information otherwise lost to us. In his massive Gokyoji tsūro ki he explains the metaphor quite unambiguously: ‘The printing blocks have carved characters, and the master printer prints them. The artisan creates (the characters), and they are printed simultaneously. The characters that are printed are in sequence and do not encroach on one another. This has been the constant form from ancient times of the artisan’s method of printing.’⁶ The reference to blocks indicates that the use of seals is definitely not what this erudite of commentators envisages.

Of course a much later commentator, no matter how learned, can always be mistaken. There do exist, furthermore, passages in Chinese Buddhist literature that could at first sight be construed as undermining Gyōnen’s interpretation. For the most obvious way to confirm or deny it is to check the use of similar metaphors in Buddhist writers after the time when printing became unambiguously present, to see if explicit links with printing are made. Even in their absence, however, we cannot be quite certain that we have disproved his interpretation, since the later author may be drawing on materials from before the epoch of printing. We need also to be sure that we are dealing with metaphors that clearly envisage the transfer of text from one surface to another—ideally in sufficient quantity to indicate a full printing block, given that we hear in fourth century China of one famous talismanic seal carrying one hundred and twenty characters.⁷ Seals were in fact so well known in both India (where every Buddhist monastery had one) and China that all sorts of abstract metaphors based on their use can be found in sources originating from both cultures, often shifting the meaning away from the transfer of a written character or design towards much vaguer notions of imparting a characteristic.⁸

Bearing such matters in mind, an examination of a couple of potentially useful passages does reveal some fresh information. One is to be found in the Zhu Xinfu(Annotated rhyme-prose on the mind), a work with auto-commentary by Yanshou(904-975), one of the most eminent monks of his day, who lived to see the small, Buddhistically-inclined kingdom in which he lived in the lower Yangze valley incorporated into the newly reunified China of the Song dynasty.⁹ There is no question but that Yanshou would have understood printing perfectly from actual observation. He was a notable publisher, responsible for putting four hundred thousand printed images of Buddhist figures in circulation.¹⁰ Yet his use of the same type of metaphor as that introduced by Fazang shows not the slightest hint of any connection with any printing process using woodblocks. It occurs in a slightly different context, in which Yanshou is trying to convey in his main text the uniformity of the underlying ‘mind’ that is the topic of his rhyme-prose—rather than, as the authorial annotation to the opening lines suggests, the all-embracing ‘mind’ described in the Awakening of Faith.¹¹ After comparing the coherence of this mind to that of a swarm of bees, the main text continues with the words “It imprints before and after, without any differentiation”.

This the author then glosses with these words: “It is like the precious seal of the ruler[wang zhi baoyin]. Its text appears all at once; there is no interval between before and after. Furthermore this seal fixes the world. This is like the Buddhā’s dharma—if there were no seal of the mind, it would not constitute the Buddhā’s dharma. From this we know that before is mind, and after is mind; the past is mind, and the present is mind.”

These words require a gloss or two themselves. Despite the fact that the repeated use of seals sometimes appears as a metaphor for an unchanging single phenomenon capable of multiple reproduction, the opening of this piece of commentary would seem to make it fairly clear that it is the end result of a seal that is in view—that is, its ability to produce a complete written text from beginning to end instantaneously—rather than its function as an unvarying matrix. “All at once” renders the Chinese Buddhist term dun, famous as the epithet given to ‘sudden enlightenment’, though as discussion of that context has shown, in this term the idea of totality is also incorporated into the more obvious idea of instantaneity: ‘at a stroke’ might be on rendering of its meaning.¹² For all the rather abstract use of

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² For monastic and monkish seals in India, see Schopen 2004:61-2, 85-6, 232-3.
³ Zhu xinfu 1/10d; in Danshou zoku zōhi 2A 16/1. For Yanshou, see Welter 1988:247-274.
⁴ See, in particular, Stein 1987:41-66.