The Yongle Northern Canon: Seals and Steles of the Imperial Court

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Abstract

In his long years of investigation of Yongle Northern Canon, the author has taken notice of the seal impressions he found in the extant copies in libraries and temples in the world. The Yongle Northern Canon was initiated and constructed by the Imperial Court. It is natural that the emperor and empress stamped their seals on the Buddhist canon they presented to Buddhist temples. The author has collected as many seals prints as possible and tried to analyze them in the social and historical contexts. These seals may be used to do the following:

To determine the dating of the copies that were printed, for example, Empress Li’s seal 慈聖宣文明肅皇太后之寶.

To enhance our understanding of the persons involved in the imperial court, such as “Wan Wei zhizhang 萬煒之章” and “Taifuzhiyin 太傅之印”.

To demonstrate the auspices of the imperial court, such as “Guangyunzhibao 廣運之寶”.

The author also discusses cases when the seals are absent in some copies in the Yongle Northern Canon.

Keywords: Yongle Northern Canon, Seal, Stele, Empress Dowager Li, Emperor Shenzong, Emperor’s decree
1. Introduction

When I started my research on Yongle beizang (永樂北藏, The Yongle Northern Edition of the Chinese Buddhist Canon, in short, Yongle Northern Canon) at Princeton University in the summer of 2009, I was greatly impressed by the seal of Empress Dowager Li (1545-1612), who was Emperor Shenzong's mother. Her seal impression is placed at the end of the decree of Emperor Shenzong (明神宗 r. 1573 – 1620). In the fall of the same year, I went to Chongqing to attend a conference on Dazu Buddhist stone carvings, and while there, I spent a day visiting Chongqing Library's collection of the Yongle Northern Canon. The Chongqing Library collection is well preserved and complete. I easily found Emperor Shenzong's decree, but there is no seal. I noticed a colophon that indicates that this Chongqing copy of the Yongle Northern Canon was printed in 1706, which was the forty-sixth year of Emperor Kangxi (康熙 r.1662 - 1722).

People generally believe that since copies of the Yongle Northern Canon were printed using the same woodblocks, they should be the same. But when I further examined more copies of the Yongle Northern Canon, I realized that each copy has its unique features. There are differences between each copy. The Japanese scholar Yoshimi Nozawa has made a detailed study on the names of temples that received this Yongle Northern Canon. He listed more than 139 temples. In his Ph.D. thesis, Dr. Zhang Dewei showed that about 160 temples in China received this Yongle Northern Canon from the imperial Court. Zhongguo guji shanben mulu published by Shanghai guji chubanshe in 1996 records about 9 libraries and temples in China where this Yongle Northern Canon is kept. Zhongguo guji zongmu 中國古籍總目 (A general Catalogue of Chinese classic

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1 野沢佳美 (Yoshimi Nozawa), 明代北蔵考 (一) 一下賜状況を中心に (单著) 2003/03.
books) lists 18 libraries that contain the *Yongle Northern Canon*. This catalogue was published by Zhonghua shuju and Shanghai guji chubanshe in 2010.

Supported by University of the West’s Institute of Chinese Buddhist Studies, headed by Dr. Jueji, I began to travel widely in China in the hope of examining all the extant copies since 2010. As a Chinese proverb goes, “Those who work hard will be rewarded,” and I made great progress in understanding this *Yongle Northern Canon* by visiting more than 17 libraries and temples in China and the United States.

This paper discusses the seals and steles that I found during my investigation. I have to admit my shallow knowledge of Chinese seals. When the head monk of Emeishan gave me a photo of a seal more than 16 years ago, I did not possess sufficient knowledge to start the research. Now I that I have gathered more such photos, I feel more confident in exploring these seals and the Buddhist canon.

The paper is divided into six parts:

(1) Introduction

(2) The Seal Impressions at Princeton University

(3) Absence of Seal Impression in Chongqing Library Collection

(4) The Seal Impressions at Yangxian Museum, Guangji Temple and Wuwei Museum

(5) Other Seals

(6) Conclusion

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3 This catalogue is more comprehensive. But it does not record that Princeton University Library and the Regenstein Library of University of Chicago have kept this Yongle Northern Canon, *Zhongguo guji zongmu* 中國古籍總目 (A general Catalogue of Chinese classic books), Beijing and Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju and Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010, zibu 子部, volume 6, pp.2953-2954.
2. The Seals at Princeton University

The first volume of the Yongle Northern Canon contains Emperor Shenzong’s decree. At the end of the seal, a very bright red seal print is sealed on the page. It reads:

慈聖宣文明肅皇太后之寶

Seal of Dowager Empress Li, with 11 words, four lines.

The best inkpad (印泥) was reportedly produced in Zhangzhou 漳州, Fujian Province, in the early years of Emperor Kangxi (康熙, 1662 – 1722) in the Qing dynasty. The producers used the best materials, including pearl, agate, coral, musk, Borneol camphor, gold foil, ruby and amber, to make the vermillion inkpad. The color was enduring and clear. The whole process of production would take a long period of time. Later, it became a tribute that local officials would present to the imperial court for use due to its high quality in brightness and clearness. The seal prints would not fade in color. See http://baike.baidu.com/view/25097.htm It was impossible for me to find records of the stamping pad that Empress Dowager Li used almost one hundred years earlier, but one may assume that the red stamping pad that Empress Dowager Li used would have been of the best quality of the time. The stamps look fresh even after 500 years.
Dating. Although no information has been left on the page, the seal print itself indicates that it must have been designed between the tenth and the twenty-ninth year (1582-1601) of Emperor Shenzong 神宗. In the sixth year of Wanli (1578), Emperor Shenzong got married and his mother returned to Cining Palace to live. She was honored with the words “xuan wen 宣文,” in the tenth year [of the Wanli period] (1582); two words “ming su 明肅” were added to honor her……In the twenty-ninth year (1601), she was conferred with the title “Ci sheng xuan wen ming su zhen shou duan xian huangtaihou 慈聖宣文明肅貞壽端獻皇太后.” 5 Thus, the dating of the seal can be determined between the tenth and the twenty-ninth year of Emperor Shenzong (1582-1601).

Empress Li, a native of Huoxian 漢縣 in Tongzhou通州, Beijing, was from a small merchant family. She was selected as a maid servant for the palace of Zhu Zaihou 朱載垕 (r.1567-1572), then holding the title of the Prince of Yu 裕王.

5 Minshi 明史 (History of the Ming Dynasty), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974, pp. 3534 – 3536.
She bore him two sons, Zhu Yijun 朱翊鈞 in 1563 and Zhu Yiliu in 1568, and a daughter, Princess Ruian 瑞安公主, who married Wan Wei 萬煒 (ca. 1570 – 1644) in 1585. In 1567, the year after the Prince of Yu ascended the throne, she was given the title of Guifei 貴妃, or first grade imperial consort, in the third month of the first year of Longqing (隆慶1567). When her husband Emperor Muzong died, Emperor Shenzong, her own son, honored her as “Ci sheng huangtaihou 慈聖皇太后,” meaning “Loving and Saint Empress Dowager.”

Emperor Muzong's (穆宗 r.1567 - 1572) first wife, née Li, died before the crown prince ascended the throne. Emperor Muzong’s second wife, née Chen, was nominated empress in 1573, but she was childless. She suffered from chronic sickness. The emperor treated her coldly, and she resided in another court in the palace. At that time, Zhu Yijun, the would-be emperor, showed great respect to Empress Chen, who was not his own mother. Every morning, he would pay a visit to the Ancestors’ Hall; after that, he would pay respect to his father, Emperor Muzong, and his own mother, who was then Guifei 貴妃, or first grade imperial consort. Then, he would pay a visit to the palace where Empress Chen resided. When the empress heard the steps of the young crown prince, she was much delighted. His own mother, Li Guifei, was happy to see this, too.

Now Zhu Yijun ascended the throne. He honored Empress Chen as “Ren sheng huangtaihou 仁聖皇太后,” meaning “Benevolent and Saint Empress Dowager,” who now resided in Ciqing Palace. In the sixth year of Wanli (1578), Empress Chen was honored as “Ren sheng zhen yi huangtaihou 仁聖貞懿皇太后,” meaning “Benevolent, Saint, Chaste and Virtuous Empress Dowager.” In the tenth year, two more words were added to her honor: Ren sheng zhen yi kang jing huangtaihou 仁聖貞懿康靜皇太后,” Meaning “Benevolent, Saint, Chaste, ...
Virtuous, Healthy and Tranquil Empress Dowager.” He showed great respect to both Empress Chen and his own mother, making no difference between them. When Empress Chen died in the seventh month of the twenty-fourth year of Wanli (1596), she was given the honorary title of “Xiao an zhen yi gong chun wen hui zuo tian hong sheng huanghou 孝安貞懿恭純溫惠佐天弘聖皇后,” meaning “Faithful, Peaceful, Chaste, Virtuous, Respectful, Gentle and Benevolent, Helpful, Heavenly Great, Saint Empress Dowager.”

According to regulations in the Ming dynasty, whenever a new emperor acceded to the throne, the title Huang Taihou 皇太后 (Empress-dowager) would be accorded to the empress of the deceased emperor. If the new emperor was not her son but the son of a concubine of the former emperor, the concubine – as, in this case, Li Guifei – would, according to precedent, also be recognized as an empress-dowager, but with a qualifying term implying lesser rank. With regard to Li Guifei, however, the eunuch Feng Bao 馮保(? - 1583) proposed to Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525 - 1582) that she receive the identical  

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8 Feng Bao was a native of Shenzhou 深州, Hebei Province. He was well learned. He held the title of Grand Guardian of the Ceremonial Directorate, and also Director of the East Depot, a notorious police department of the Ming. Together Zhang Juzheng, the Grand Secretariat, with the support of Dowager Empress Li, helped to manage the daily court affairs under Emperor Shenzong. After Zhang Juzheng’s death, Feng Bao fell out of favor and was driven out of the capital. He died in Nanjing in 1583.

9 Zhang Juzheng, a native of Jiangling 江陵, Hubei Province, successfully passed the imperial service examination in 1547. He was appointed member of Hanlin. As a skillful politician, Zhang became a Privy Secretary in 1567. Cooperating with the eunuch Feng Bao, his ally, Zhang ousted his colleagues and became the sole Grand Secretary, in effect controlling the entire Ming bureaucracy during the first ten years of the Wanli era. Zhang also played a very important role as mentor and regent during the early years of the reign of Emperor Shenzong. He strongly influenced the young emperor and guided Wanli through his teenage years. Under Emperor Shenzong, he instituted the Single Whip Law to commute all taxes and labor obligations into silver payments. After his death in 1582, the young emperor, who...
title, Huang Taihou 皇太后, implying equal rank with the empress of the deceased emperor. Debate was resolved by conferring the title in each case with a distinguishing and qualifying term – the title Ren sheng Huang Taihou 仁聖皇太后 to Zhu Zaihou’s empress (née Chen 陳) and the title Cisheng Huang Taihou 慈聖皇太后 to Li Guifei. 10 Zhang Juzheng then requested that Empress Li, who was mother of Emperor Shenzong, stay in the Qianqing Palace to look after the young emperor. Thus, Zhang Juzheng became Empress Li’s favorite. He was appointed Grand Secretariat (大學士), whose role it was to assist the emperor. Thanks to the support of Empress and Emperor alike, Zhang was able to push forward both economic and political reform.

Empress Li’s position in the imperial court was next to Empress Chen. Her son Emperor Shenzong conferred honorary titles on her many times. Her final honorary title was “Ci sheng xuan wen ming su zhen shou dian gong xian huangtaihou 慈聖宣文明肅貞壽端獻恭獻皇太后,” meaning “Kind, Saint, Gentle, Serenade, Serious, Chaste, Long-Lived, Dignified, Respectful Empress Dowager.” She died at the age of seventy in 1614. From a low-ranking court maid, she became empress and enjoyed full respect in China for almost eighteen years after the death of Empress Chen in 1596. When she died in the second month of the forty-second year of Emperor Wanli (1614), she was further honored as “Xiao ding zhen chun qin ren duan su zhen shou dian xian huangtaihou 孝定貞純欽仁端肅弼天祚聖皇太后,” meaning “Filial, Calm, Chaste, Pure, Admired, Benevolent, Dignified, Reverent, Heavenly Blessed, Saint Empress Dowager.” 11

Thus, her seals were carved after she was conferred these titles. It may be concluded that the seal with the words “Ci sheng xuan wen ming su huangtaihou zhi 孝宣文廟金熹和太后之印” already feared and hated him before, had his house ransacked and his family members imprisoned.


11 These words are extremely difficult to translate. I just give a rough translation.
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yin 慈聖宣文明肅皇太后之印” (the seal of Empress Li) was made after 1583.

The Empress Dowager was recorded as being “a compassionate empress, devoted to the study of Buddhist scriptures. She donated huge sums of money to build temples in various places. Emperor Shenzong donated money too.” She was also given the name of “bodhisattva on the nine-petal lotus.” 12 She ordered Monk Daowan and others to examine Buddhist scriptures, thus deciding what scriptures should be included when 41 han (函 cases), totaling 410 volumes, were engraved from the seventh to the eleventh years of Wanli (1579-1583).

Since Empress Li often read Buddhist scriptures, she must have had a set of the Buddhist canon in the imperial court. The copy of the Yongle Northern Canon kept at Princeton University most likely belonged to her because her son-in-law Wan Wei later probably inherited this set, leaving many colophons after reading it following the death of Emperor Guangzong, who died in 1620, only one month after the death of his father Emperor Shenzong. 13 Wan Wei began to read the Yongle Northern Canon. He would write these words at the end of each volume:

Tianqi yichou wuyue shaofu jian taizi taifu douwei Wan Wei xunmu baidu

天啓乙丑五月少傅兼太子太傅駙馬都尉萬煒薰沐拜閱

Wan Wei zhi yin 萬煒之印， and Taifu zhi zhang 太傅之章

12 Fu Weilin 傅維鱗 (1608-1666), Mingshu 明書 (History of the Ming), juan 21, Beijing: Commercial Press, 1936, volume 2, p. 274.
13 “Buddhism at the End of the Ming Dynasty as Revealed by Wan Wei’s Colophons in The Yongle Northern Edition of the Buddhist Canon in Princeton University Library,” in Dharma Praviccaya: Aspects of Buddhist Studies: Essays in honour of N.H. Samtani. Delhi: Buddhist World Press, 2012, pp. 245 – 262. I believe that this set of Yongle Northern Canon kept at Princeton University was the property of the royal family because nobody except royal family members would have dared to write anything on books belonging to the royal family.
Wan Wei, Junior Tutor and Grand Tutor for the crown prince, Emperor’s son-in-law, read this scripture with devotion and respect. Dated: in the 5th month of 1625.

The colophon is sealed with two seals “Wan Wei zhi yin (seal of Wan Wei),” and “Tai fu zhi zhang (seal of Grand Tutor).” Wan Wei, uncle of the crown prince, had been appointed grand tutor of the crown prince.

Absence of Seal in Chongqing Library Collection

Emperor Shenzong’s decree is found in the copy of the Yongle Northern Canon kept at Chongqing Library, the reprint of the Yongle Northern Canon in Beijing in 2000, and the copy kept at Princeton University:

I, the Emperor, always believe that the Buddha’s teachings are found in the Buddhist canon. They are used to guide the masses and to enlighten

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14 Fuma duwei (駙馬都尉) refers to the emperor’s son-in-law. In the early Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 25 CE), fuma duwei meant commandant-escort in charge of horses pulling the imperial carriage, an official title instituted by Emperor Han Wudi (漢武帝 r. 140 – 86 BCE). In the Ming dynasty, this title was conferred on the consorts of imperial princesses. CF Charles Hucker, 1985, no. 2083, p.219.
masses, aiming at guarding the nation and protecting the people. Otherwise, the canon would not be useful. My saintly mother, who was given the title of Empress Ci sheng xuan wen ming su huangtaihou, ordered workers to carve and print 41 han (cases) of Buddhist scriptures as supplements, adding to the main Buddhist canon which contains 637 han. They are distributed to your temple. You should always keep reading and chanting it in a solemn way. You should keep it with respect. The canon should never be treated with disrespect by the common people so that copies are lost. Issuing this decree to guard it, I hope that the Buddhist canon will be kept in your temple safe and sound forever. Hence this is the Imperial Decree.

(Dating) Year (Wanli) ______, Month ______, Date ______

The empress’s seal is found neither in the Chongqing Library copy or the reprint of Xianzhuang shuju in Beijing in 2000.

15 The Chinese original is as follows: 朕惟佛氏之教，具在經典。用以化導善類，覺悟群迷，於護國佑民，不為無助。兹者聖母慈聖宣文明肅皇太后，命工刊印續入藏經四十一函，並舊刻藏經六百三十七函，通行頒布本寺，爾等務須莊嚴持誦，尊奉珍藏，不許諸色人等，故行亵玩。致有遺失損壞。特賜護持，以垂永久，欽哉故聖諭。萬曆____年__月____日。
The color of the Chongqing Library copy looks faded. The quality of the brocade matches the quality of the copy of neither Princeton University nor Zhejiang Library.

The image of Emperor Shenzong’s decree on the Chongqing Library copy differs from that of the Princeton University copy. It does not have the pattern of dragons that surround the emperor’s decree.

The page on which Emperor Shenzong’s decree was found in the reprint of Xianzhuang shuju 線裝書局 in 2000 is similar to the page of Chongqing Library’s copy. Neither the seal impression nor the dragon pattern is found. In addition,

16 The copy of Yongle Northern Canon kept at Zhejiang Library was kept at Qizhen Monastery in Lanxi County, Zhejiang Province. It was requested by Zhao Qigao (趙志皋 1521-1601), who was Grand Secretariat during the reign of Emperor Shenzong. When Zhao was a young man, he prepared his studies for the imperial examinations at Qizhen 棲真院 Monastery. Later, he became a successful candidate in the imperial exam. He was appointed a high-ranking official – Grand Secretariat of the Imperial Court. He made a request to Empress Chen for a set of Yongle Northern Canon for Qizhen Monastery as a gift. In the mid-1960s, this set of Buddhist canon became the property of Zhejiang Provincial Library. The brocade of each volume looks magnificent.
taboo words are found with missing strokes. For instance, the word xuan 玄 was written as _three_ and the last stroke in the word “hong 弘” is missing.

This indicates that the copy Xianzhuang shuju reprinted was a copy printed in the Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1912).

The Chongqing Library copy is likely to be one of the last copies of the Yongle Northern Canon. 17

What happened to the woodblocks of the Yongle Northern Canon? This would be an interesting topic. When the Manchus conquered China, they tried to consolidate their rule. Three emperors – Emperor Kangxi, Emperor Yongzheng and Emperor Qianlong were magnificent patrons of Chinese culture, including Buddhism and Confucianism. It was Emperor Yongzheng who initiated the construction of the Longzang 龍藏 (The Dragon Edition of the Chinese Buddhist Canon) In the eleventh year of Emperor Yongzheng (1720), he ordered royal members, high-ranking ministers of Manchus, Chinese and Mongols, and monks, totaling 130 people, to collect scriptures and collate the Buddhist canon. When the carving work had just started in 1735, Emperor Yongzheng died. In the third year of Emperor Qianlong (1738) the whole project of engraving the Buddhist canon was accomplished. After that, there was no urgent need for Buddhist canon woodblocks. Ministers made a memorial to Emperor Qianlong

17 As I have checked many copies of the extant Yongle Northern Canon, I think that the last print of the Yongle Northern Canon that is extant today is likely to be the copy kept at Yongquan Monastery湧泉寺 in Fuzhou. The cabinets that contain all the Buddhist scriptures were made in the fifty-third year of Emperor Kangxi (1714). I visited Yongquan Monastery on July 3, 2013. Although the monk did not open the cabinets to show me the canon, I took photos of the cabinets on which a colophon indicating the year of 1714 was carved. It records that the canon was escorted to the temple by Deputy Commander of Fuzhou Garrison Wang Yinghu in the fifty-third year of Emperor Kangxi (1714) (大清康熙五十三年副都統王應虎送到). Therefore, this copy of the Yongle Northern Canon should have been printed before that date.
in the eleventh month of Qianlong (1738). I will merely give a rough translation of this memorial:

Minister Haiwang is making a memorial to Your Highness:

According to a memo from the Ministry of Rites, the woodblocks of a new set of Buddhist canon are engraved. The old woodblocks, totaling 70,000 pieces, after many years of use, are damaged. The print is not clear. They are useless and even occupy a huge hall to store. The Ministry of Rites asks Mr. Haiwang to take care of the old woodblocks. He may move them out so that the new woodblocks may be housed in the warehouse.

The emperor responds: Now I see.

Thus, Haiwang, general manager of the Imperial Printing House sent his people to examine the warehouse. I also sent people of my department to check the matter with the officials in charge of printing in Wuying Hall. They found out that the woodblocks were carved in the years of Zhengtong (正統1436 - 1449). More than three hundred years have elapsed and the woodblocks have rotted. Many of them are damaged to the extent that they cannot be repaired. I also know that the cost for kilns at Liulichang 琉璃廠 making glazed tiles for the Imperial Palace is high: they have to purchase 160,000 jin (80,000 kg) of wood. The price of wood is 21 liang of silver for 10,000 jin. The cost for two years of wood and its transportation fees would be 700 liang of silver. In my opinion, the woodblocks of Yongle Northern Canon, totaling more than 360,000 jin of wood, could be used for making glazed titles there. Thus, two years expenses could be saved. If you agree, I would order officials in charge of glazed titles in Liulichang to transport the old woodblocks. Only one hundred liang of silver is needed. Therefore, I am asking your instruction.

The emperor answers: I know the issue. Just do it.

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18 The First Historical Archives of China and the Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Qing gong nei wu fu zao ban chu dang an zong hui / Zhongguo di yi
When the Manchus conquered China, they imposed a literary inquisition against the Chinese intelligentsia who showed their discontent with their literary works. The catalogue of the *Yongle Northern Canon* kept at Chongqing Library is a mixed one of both *Yongle Northern Canon* and the *Dragon Canon*. A colophon records that Qian Qianyi (錢謙益 1582 - 1664), a leading man of letters at the end of the Ming Dynasty, was severely rejected by Emperor Qianlong. The emperor issued an order to destroy Qian’s works. Thus, Emperor Qianlong ordered that Qian Qianyi’s *Shou lêngyan jîng shûjie meng chao* 首楞嚴經疏解蒙鈔 be destroyed. This is a piece of concrete evidence of state terror in the form of a literary inquisition that the Chinese ruler imposed on the intelligentsia class.

The Chongqing copy was purchased by Mr. Cheng Dequan 程德全, former governor of Jiangsu Province after the 1911 Revolution. Tired of politics, he...

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20 The Chinese rulers assumed that they might silence Chinese intellectuals by imposing literary inquisitions. “Literary inquisition” literally means “imprisonment due to writings” or speech crime (Chinese: 以言入罪). It refers to official persecution of intellectuals for their writings in imperial China. The inquisition took place under each of the dynasties ruling China, although the Qing was particularly notorious for the practice. However, this practice was foolish – Qian Qianyi’s works were not destroyed completely in spite of Emperor Qianlong’s severe decree. His works spread to Japan and were later reprinted during the reign of Emperor Guangxu (1875 - 1908). Six volumes of drafts of this work are extant today. One of them is kept at the Library of the University of California, Berkeley. One volume was sold at the China Guardian Auction in the fall of 2004. See Shen Jin 沈津, *Shu lin wuyu* 書林物語, Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2011, p.79.
decided to become a Buddhist monk. Before leaving the household life, he sold out all his property and purchased a set of the *Yongle Northern Canon* at Benlitang bookstore in Beijing. As some volumes of the *Yongle Northern Canon* were missing, the buyer suggested that they use *Dragon Canon* to supplement it. Because the *Yongle Northern Canon* has some works that were included in the *Dragon Canon*, the buyer tried to find the works to make a complete set. It is complete in the sense that it includes both the *Yongle Northern Canon* and the *Dragon Canon*.

The Chongqing Library collection has a number of long colophons in the last volume. They were written by Cheng Dequan’s friends and family members when Cheng purchased this copy in 1926.

### 3. Empress Dowager Li’s Seal in other Libraries and Temples

Empress Dowager Li’s seal prints are found in the following temples and museums: Yangxian Museum (洋縣) in Shaanxi Province, Wuwei (武威) Museum in Gansu Province and the Library of the Chinese Buddhist Association at Guangji Temple (廣濟寺) in Beijing.

![Fig. 6: The seal impression of Empress Dowager Li, nine words in three lines. Guangji Temple, Beijing, photographed by the author, 2011](image)

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21 I wrote an essay on this Chongqing Library copy: Chongqing tu shu guan cang ming yong le bei zang yan jiu 重慶圖書館藏明《永樂北藏》研究 (Study on the Yongle Northern Canon Kept at Chongqing Library), American-Chinese Society & Culture, Vol. 12, No.1, fall 2010, pp.91 – 94.
Yangxian County is located in the south of Shaanxi Province. The Yongle Northern Canon was donated by Empress Li to Zhiguo Monastery (智果寺), located 12 km west of the town.

In 2012, Dr. Huang Zheng 黃征, Professor of Dunhuang studies at Nanjing Teachers’ University, led a group of scholars and doctoral students to Yangxian. They examined the Yongle Northern Canon kept at Yangxian Museum. Finally, they found the seal print in August 2012.  

This seal has ten words in four lines:

Cí shèng xuān wén míng sù huáng tài hòu băo 慈聖宣文明肅皇太后寶

Seal of Dowager Empress Li, with 10 words, three lines.

Similar seal impressions were seen in the Library of the Chinese Buddhist Association, Guangji Temple 廣濟寺中國佛協圖書館, Beijing, and Wuwei Museum in Gansu Province 甘肅武威博物館. A similar seal impression is


I would like to express my thanks to Ms. Liang Jihong 梁繼紅, curator of Wuwei Museum, who showed me the Yongle Northern Canon in her museum. Venerable Yuanchi 圓持 also generously arranged my trip to Guangji Temple to examine his library collection. The late Professor Zhou Shaoliang 周紹良 (1917 - 2005) mentioned this seal in his paper “Ming wan li nian jian wei jiu lian pusa bian zao de liang bu jing 明萬曆年間為九蓮菩薩編造的兩部經,” in Gu gong bo wu yuan yuan guan 故宮博物院院刊 (Journal of the Imperial Palace), No.2, 1985, p.40. He believed that the book was sealed with Empress Dowager Li’s seal because it was presented by her. In addition, Mr. Zhou also mentioned another seal he found in one of the stone rubbings of the “Bodhisattva Sitting on the Nine-Pedal Lotus” kept at the Library of the Institute of Chinese Buddhism, affiliated with the Chinese Buddhist Association. This rubbing is 233 cm in length. It bears the seal of Empress Li with the words “Cí shèng xuān wén míng sù huángtaihòu zhi băo 慈聖宣文明肅皇太后之寶,” probably sealed in 1587. It has one more word “zhi 之.” I have not been able to see it with my own eyes, so, I cannot say whether it is the same seal as
found in Ningwu Museum 宁武, Shanxi Province. 24

Emperor Shenzong honored his mother the Empress Dowager five times. Each time, he added one word to her title. Shen Defu recorded that each time when a word of honor was added, the imperial court would make a new seal for her. The seal was carved in gold. 25 She was likely to have had six seals or more.

The seals were made by an official whose post was Zhong shu guan 中書官 and goldsmith. They made the seals together. When the honored title was given, the officials of Zhongshu ke 中書科 and Wuyingdian 武英殿 would take the responsibility to write the words in the style of a seal. The seal was finished by the goldsmith under the supervision of the Imperial Court. These seals were made for ceremonies. However, there was an exception: in the twenty-fourth year of Wanli (1596), fires broke out in Qianqing Palace 乾清宮 and Kunmin Palace 坤寧宮. The Dowager Empress’ seals were destroyed. In the thirty-fourth year of Wanli (1606), it was time to divide land for the crown prince Fuwang 福王, the second son of Emperor Shenzong. According to the rules, it was necessary for both the empress and the first-grade of imperial consort to issue a decree with their seals. Due to a lack of materials, the court decided to look for good wood made from pear trees to carve the seals for the empress. The characters were written by Xie Ji 謝稷, who was a secretary of the Department of the Secretariat. 26

the one I saw at Princeton University. But the words are the same.

http://www.chinabaike.com/article/UploadPic/2007-5/2007510145253408.jpg, cited March 3, 2013. The dating of this Buddhist canon and what edition it represents remain controversial. It is difficult to judge as I have not seen the original. The photo itself shows that it has five lines and each line contains 17 words. The photo itself should be of part of the Yongle Northern Canon.


Bao Yangsheng 抱陽生, Jia shen chao shi xiao ji chu bian 甲申朝事小記初編, see
The seals are treasures of the imperial court. But few seals of emperors of the Ming have come down intact. How did this happen? This question even aroused the interest of Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736 – 1795), who examined the issue. The seal is small in size. If someone got hold of it, he could easily delete the original name and carve his own in its place. At the end of the Ming Dynasty (1644), the rebels plundered the imperial court. It is likely that these seals were lost during that period of chaos.

4. Other Seals

Three other seals are found elsewhere.

(1). In Zhangye, Mr. Wang Kang, director of the Research Institute of the Grand Buddha Monastery in Zhangye 張掖, showed me a photo of the imperial decrees issued by Emperor Yingzhong (英宗 r. 1436 – 1450 and 1457 – 1464). A large seal impression is found at the end of the emperor’s decree:

Emperor’s Decree

[Following] Heaven and Earth, I try to realize my grandfather’s will with a heart to protect my people. Now that this Buddhist Canon is made, I am distributing it to all parts of China. One is given to the Sleeping Buddha Monastery in Ganzhou, Shaanxi Province, to be sustained there forever. All monks and officials should read and praise [the canon] for the state and for the common people’s happiness. You should guard the Buddhist canon carefully so that idlers are not allowed to borrow and

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27 Guo Fuxiang 郭福祥, “Baoxi 寶璽 (Seals),” in Zhao zhongnan 趙中男, Ming dai gong ting dian zhi shi 明代宮廷典制史 (History of Imperial Decrees and Regulations in the Ming Dynasty), Beijing: Zi jin cheng chu ban she, 2010, p.730.
look at it in a light way. That will damage the Buddhist canon. Anyone who dares to violate the rules must be punished. Hence is the decree.

The fifteenth day, second month, tenth year of Zhengtong (1445)

The seal impression with four words “Chi ming zhi bao” (The Seal of Imperial Decree) is sealed on the dates of the imperial decree.

(2) “Guang yun zhi bao” 廣運之寶 - Seal of Great Fortune was used to indicate the print of the imperial court. This was found in the Yongle Northern Canon kept at Zhiti Monastery 支提寺, Ningde City 宁德市, Fujian Province. It is also found in the collection of the Library of the Chinese Buddhist Association in Guangji Temple 廣濟寺, Beijing. Professor Zhou Shaoliang holds that this seal was often used in the imperial court. Many books printed by the imperial court

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28 http://www.gzqlyj.com/Article/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=48 cited March 3, 2013. This artifact is a replica. The original one is well-kept at Wuwei Museum. The wording is slightly different.
have this seal as a mark of the court printing press.  

(3) This “Guang yun zhi bao” - Seal of Great Fortune is seen on the stele inscription of Emperor Shenzong’s decree at Zhiguo Temple in Yangxian 洋縣, Shaanxi Province. A similar seal is found in the carved inscription of Emperor Shenzong’s decree on a large piece of wood in Zhiti Temple 支提寺, Ningde Fujian Province. The seal is carved on the dates of the emperor’s decree. Here is my translation of the decree on the stele of Zhiguo Temple in Yangxian:

**Emperor’s decree**

To abbots, monks and others at Zhiguo Temple:

I, the Emperor, believed that the teachings of the Buddha lie in the Buddhist classics. They are utilized to guide the good people and enlighten the broad masses who might have lost their way. The Buddha’s teachings aim at protecting the whole nation and people. If not, the teachings are useless. Hence, our beloved great, saintly mother, the elegant and well-cultured Empress, ordered printers to construct supplementary scriptures, totaling 41 han (cases). Together with the previously engraved Buddhist scriptures totaling 637 han (cases). Now these scriptures are presented to your temple. You should take great care of them and always read them in a solemn way. The secular people are not allowed to blaspheme the canon to cause any damage. Therefore, I issue this to you for special donation and protection in the hope that the canon will endure through ages. Hence is the kingly decree.

Issued in the 14th year of Wanli, the 9th Month, and Day________.

(The 9th month of 1586)

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30 Emperor Shenzong’s decree in Chinese reads:
A similar seal impression of “Guang yun zhi bao 廣運之寶” is found on Emperor Shenzong’s decree kept at Huacheng Monastery 化城寺, Jiuhua Mountain 九華山, Anhui Province. This decree was issued when a set of Yongle Northern Canon was presented to the Jiuhua Mountain. The dating was the twenty-fourth day, fourth month (leap month), twenty-seventh year of Wanli (1599).

Sichuan Provincial Library in Chengdu has kept a decree of similar contents stating that Emperor Shenzong presented a Daoist Canon to a large Daoist

This decree is identical to the one mentioned in the previous chapter. The only differences lie in the fact that in the beginning of the decree, the abbot and monks of Zhiguo Monastery were addressed and in the end, the date, month and year were recorded. Similar steles with Emperor Shenzong’s decree can be found in many big temples in China.
temple on the twenty-sixth day, eighth month, twenty-seventh year of Wanli (1599). This Daoist canon was engraved in the 1440s.

(4). A seal of “yuji 御記” is found in the copies of Yongle Northern Canon kept Zhejiang Provincial Library in Hangzhou and Shandong Provincial Library in Ji’nan. The seal is small and impressed randomly on many pages. Little is known about this kind of paper specially designated for the imperial court use. Liu Ruoyu 劉若愚 (1584 - 1642), a eunuch in the imperial court, wrote a book Zhuo zhong zhi 酌中志. It records in detail the materials used for printing the Yongle Northern Canon in chapter 18. More than 45023 papers were used to print the canon.

(5). A seal impression in Tibetan language is found in many volumes of Yongle Northern Canon kept at Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. The Tibetan words “Om a hum” are sealed at the beginning and in the end of many

31 Thanks to Dr. Wang Bin 王斌, Leshan Teachers' College, Sichuan, for his help for decoding the word on the seal.
volumes. These words mean the purified body, speech and mind. Similar seal impressions are found in copies Yongle Northern Canon kept at Princeton University, Zhiti Temple in Ningde, Fujian Province (福建寧德支提寺), and a number of libraries. We know very little about how Tibetan Buddhism exerted its impact on the making of Chinese Buddhist canon. It is necessary to further our understanding on this topic.

5. Epilogue

In the past four years, I have visited more than 17 temples and libraries in China and the US, examining the extant copies of the Yongle Northern Canon. I have found both similarities and differences in these copies. As far as the contents are concerned, they are approximately the same. But each copy has its uniqueness in many aspects, including colophons, the brocade utilized in making the covers, woodcut illustrations, supplemental volumes, and others.

One important issue is immediately noticed: the Yongle Northern Canon was the third Buddhist canon that the Ming Court sponsored over the short period of fifty years since the establishment of the dynasty in 1368. Emperor Chengzu showed particular concern for the design, collating, editing and other issues involved in the making of two editions of the Buddhist canon during his reign from 1403 to 1424. We cannot find another example of a Chinese emperor who was so involved in almost every aspect in the construction of a Chinese Buddhist canon. By the time all the woodblocks of the Buddhist canon had been engraved, the emperor was the grandson of Emperor Chengzu. At this time, the Ming court enjoyed a good economy – it was so extremely rich that the imperial court was able to give copies of this Buddhist canon to famous temples in China. All this

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32 Thanks are due to Mr. Baima wangjie who helped me to identify these words. Earlier in 2010, a student Named Zhongshu from Southwest University of Minorities in Chengdu told me that these words mean to “consecrate” after my lecture on Buddhist canon there. I am grateful to this Tibetan student.
reflects the relationship between the imperial court and the Buddhist temples in the years 1400 to 1600.

What is the significance of the seals of the imperial court? Since the Yongle Northern Canon was a court edition and was presented to big and famous temples by the decree of emperors in the Ming Dynasty, these seals fully show the relations between the imperial court and Buddhism. The seal of the Dowager Empress Li certainly consecrated the Yongle Northern Canon. It greatly enhanced its value and the prestige of the temple that received the canon. More than 159 temples throughout China received this edition of the Yongle Northern Canon. These temples apparently were big temples supported by the imperial court and its local officials. Therefore, a part of our study on the Yongle Northern Canon should focus on these temples and their relations with the imperial court.

The Empress Dowager Li was a key person in the later distribution of the Yongle Northern Canon. Why was she so devoted to making merit? From historical records, we know she donated huge amounts of money to build temples, print copies of Buddhist canon, and give financial support to monks. What was her motivation? Why was she so enthusiastic about the propagation of Buddhism by means of the Yongle Northern Canon?

How did these temples treat the Yongle Northern Canon when they received it from the imperial court? What impact did the Buddhist canon exert on the locality? At least, two temples regularly hold a traditional ceremony to sun the Buddhist canon on the 6th day of the sixth month in every year. Monks ask lay devotees to sun every page of the Buddhist canon in order to kill the worms that would eat the paper of the Buddhist canon. The practice was held in Qianfo an 千佛庵小西天, Xixian 隰縣 in Shanxi Province, and Qizhen Monastery in Lanxi 蘭溪市棲真院, Zhejiang Province on the same day in these two temples. Local people join the ceremony to worship the Yongle Northern Canon. Other temples that possess the Dragon Canon have similar activities on the same day to sun the Buddhist canon because on this day, the daylight is the longest and the ultra violet
rays are strongest. These ceremonies were reported via the internet, too. What is the significance of the ceremony? I plan to make field investigations into this question in the future.

**Postscript**

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