

Block Printing and its Transformations of Dhāraṃ Amulet Culture in the Tenth Century

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Since the early years of the twentieth century, amulets of the *Mahāpratisarā dhāraṃ*, the *Suiqiu jide* 隨求即得 or *Da suiqiu tuoluoni* 大隨求陀羅尼, have been discovered in various contexts, both archival (the Mogao “library” cave) and practical (tombs from Chengdu to Luoyang). The amulets typically consist of two parts: a silk or paper sheet adorned with images and an inscription of the incantation in either Indic or Chinese script, and a container in which the sheet was carried on the body. Armlets are the most common examples of the latter in the material record, but others occur as well, such as necklaces or small round boxes to be carried in a sleeve or pocket. The present study focuses on the sheets, which come in two forms. Earlier versions, manuscript and half-manuscript-half-stamped examples, carried forward in China a practical tradition with clear connections to earlier Buddhist practice, while later versions followed the conventions of the printed devotional icon then popular in China.

This shift in the format of the amulets seems in part the result of a shift in the techniques of their production, as well as their assimilation within the new technical culture that accompanied it. Whereas the older amulets carried forward in China a nearly pan-Asian tradition of amulet making (much like its attendant tradition of amulet *wearing*), the later examples, the full xylographs, were shaped within the maturing craft traditions of block printing, especially what seems to have been the absorption into these traditions of certain elements of Chinese Buddhist icon painting. This transition, perhaps a form of technical “sinification,” saw the loss of the vibrant and far-traveled custom of individualizing the potency of the spells themselves, of figuring the designs of the sheets, their images and texts, wholly as blessings for those who wore them. With the transition to full block printing, the names of the donors were, according to the conventions of most of the other portable Chinese merit-making images of the age, shunted to colophons located to the sides or bottoms of the sheets, away from the main action of the incantation. Coincident with this marginalization of the donor was a shift in the iconography of the central images away from those inspired by the *Mahāpratisarā dhāraṃ sūtra* to a new tradition of images of the multi-armed forms of the Bodhisattva of Wish Fulfillment (*Suiqiu pusa* 隨求菩薩) that were then spreading across Buddhist Asia, as sculptures and as figures described in ritual and iconographic manuals for visualization. These transformations, this paper argues, were not merely superficial: they constituted an essential alteration of the nature of the amulets—again, taking the practices of their makings as our focus. No longer were the xylographs enactments of personal empowerment (*jiachi* 加持), where the pictorial and linguistic simulacra of the bearer were central to the logic of the object, but iconic images, to which the bearer’s relationship was merely that of contingent viewer, extra to the basic nature of the thing. This transformation, in removing the direct participation of the bearer from what we might think of as the “internal rite,” in making the amulets more like standard Chinese Buddhist icons, effected a change in the degree and kind of their imagined potency.