3 Historical and cultural background

The Tangut state existed for about two centuries and in the course of its existence it developed a thriving civilization with a native writing system and a wealth of written material. In an unfortunate twist of fate, this culture was subsequently forgotten and written relics only resurfaced in the early 20th century from the garrison town of Khara-khoto. The excavated materials allow us to learn about the daily life of the people in the city and the Tangut state in general. But excavated books and artefacts are unable to provide us with a continuous narrative of the history of this people and their state. Such a narrative has to be largely reconstructed on the basis of Chinese written sources.

Unfortunately, historical sources on the Tangut state are relatively scarce. While official histories for the Jin (1115–1234), Liao (907–1125) and Song (960–1279) dynasties were created during the Yuan period (1271–1368), the recognition of the Tangut state as a legitimate dynasty was brought into question and thus a dynastic history was never completed. The majority of what we know about the Tangut state comes from the histories of the other three dynasties and a handful of other historiographical works. Naturally, such a unilateral dominance of Chinese language sources on the history of a former, and more importantly, defeated, enemy state unavoidably presents a skewed picture and should ideally be counterbalanced with other types of material. Native Tangut documents, however, are even more meagre and even the language itself was forgotten during the early modern era. It is only following the discovery of Khara-khoto and other sites of the former Tangut domain that researchers gained access to first-hand sources written in Tangut and Chinese. Additional information came from other sources, including the rich collections of manuscripts discovered at Dunhuang and various sites of Western China. These, however, are extremely fragmentary and in most cases give highly localised information about specific aspects of social or economic history, rarely being able to modify the general narrative reconstructed from Chinese histories.

The historical overview presented here is by no means a comprehensive one and is merely meant to provide background information for the study of book culture, which is the topic of this book. Several excellent historical studies have been written in the past decades and at least one of these is available in each of the main languages of Tangut studies (i.e. English, Russian, Japanese and Chi-

334 For an overview of historiographical sources on Xia state, see Kychanov 1968, 5–10.

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nese). At the same time, as new sources come to light, earlier studies will require modifications. Characteristically, although not always, new discoveries that can help re-evaluate or modify our understanding of the history are written in Chinese. These are typically stele inscriptions which contain bits and pieces of information that can be tied to historical events known from historiographical works. The most noteworthy of such epigraphic material is, of course, the bilingual Liangzhou stele from 1094, discovered around 1804 in Wuwei, which played a crucial role in the decipherment of the Tangut script during the early stages of research. But new inscriptions continue to be discovered and some of these can supplement and refine the existing historical narrative.

### 3.1 Tangut tribes before the Tangut state

The Tangut state was a multilingual and multiethnic empire where different peoples and cultures lived in symbiosis. Not only did the empire encompass newly conquered territories with peoples of diverse background, the administration also employed officials and military personnel from distant lands that lay far beyond the physical boundaries of the state. The languages used in official communications, however, were Tangut and Chinese. Of these Tangut was the language spoken by the majority of the population, including its ruling elite. This people identified itself as *Mjɨ ni̯a*, an ethnonym that appears in Tibetan sources as Mi-ñag and in Chinese ones as Miyao. The ethnonym “Tangut” first appears in the Orkhon inscription written in 735 in old Turkic with the runic script. The Chinese name for the same tribes was Dangxiang who feature in Chinese sources from the 6th century onward, from the time they come into contact with the Chinese states. The *Sui shu* (636), calls them Dangxiang Qiang, thereby grouping them under the general ethnonym Qiang, which included a variety of north-western peoples living next to China since pre-Han times. The *Jiu Tang shu* (945) specifically states that they were one of the peoples known under the generic term of Western Qiang during the Han dynasty.

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336 For a book-length study of this inscription, see Dunnell 1996.
339 *Sui shu* 83, 1845.
340 *Jiu Tang shu* 198, 5290.
The *Sui shu* further describes that there were two major types of Tanguts, the Dangchang 宕昌 and the Bailang 白狼, and they both referred to themselves as Mihou 猿猴. The names themselves are of some interest, as Dangchang is very likely another way of transliterating Dangxiang, neither of which is meaningful in Chinese and thus must have been of foreign origin. The second name Bailang means “White Wolf,” which in the context of semi-nomadic pastoral tribes is possibly a translation of an endonym connected with an origin myth. At the same time, Bailang may be an alternate transcription of Bailan 白蘭 (“White Orchid”), the name of a Tangut tribe identified in the *Jiu Tang shu* as one of those subjugated by the Tibetans in the 660s. The two names are phonetically similar and despite the suggestive meaning of the former they may be variant phonetic transcriptions of an ethnonym, perhaps borrowed into Chinese at different times from different dialects but ultimately going back to the same source. The Bailang are also known from earlier times and the *Hou Han shu* records three Bailang songs transcribed in Chinese characters which were submitted to the Emperor Ming of the Han 漢明帝 (r. 58–75). Although the songs are difficult to interpret, most scholars today agree that they represent a Lolo-Burman language.

Similarly, the term Mihou used as a self-designation of both peoples literally means “macaque,” which is unlikely to derive from a native word and may instead represent a Chinese folk-etymological rendition of the sound of the original term. It is not impossible that it is somehow related to the endonym Mi-nya, although the second syllable makes direct identification problematic.

According to the *Sui shu*, the Tanguts were divided into different clans and each of these formed a separate tribe ranging from one to five thousand mounted riders. They inhabited mountain valleys and lived in houses or tents woven from yak tail and goat hair. Their customs were those of military people, they had no laws and the tribes joined one another only in times of war. They raised cattle, sheep and pigs for food but knew no farming, had no compulsory service and taxes and were the lewdest and most incestuous of all barbarian peoples. They had no writing and kept track of the years and seasons by observing how the grass and trees grew. Every three years they gathered together and offered cattle and sheep as sacrifice to heaven. If someone died over the age of eighty, the people did not cry because they considered that the person had outlived his

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341 *Sui shu* 83, 1845.
342 *Jiu Tang shu* 198, 5292.
343 *Hou Han shu* 86, 2855–2857.
344 South-Coblin 1979.
or her natural years; but if someone died young, they considered this a major injustice and greatly lamented his or her death. Naturally, we have no way of knowing how faithful such ethnographic descriptions provided in Chinese histories are and whether they are based on customs observed among the Tanguts or merely on earlier texts associated with border tribes. Yet there are very few non-Chinese sources that could be contrasted with the narrative of official histories in an attempt to authenticate the information in them.

From the mid-6th century onward, the Tangut tribes made frequent raids on Chinese territories along the border, often taking advantage of turbulent times. With time they grew into a consistent problem and the Chinese courts were forced to resolve the situation. Punitive expeditions were costly and not always successful, and did not produce lasting results. Accordingly, the Sui and Tang administrations tried to persuade Tangut leaders to submit by offering them military titles and putting them in charge of their own lands. Thus in 584, over a thousand Tangut families submitted to the Sui and the following year Tuoba Ningcong 拓拔寧叢 and others lead those under their command to Xuzhou 旭州 (in modern-day Gansu) to serve under the Sui, for which the leaders received the title “general-in-chief” (da jiangjun 大將軍). In 596, the Tanguts once again raided Huizhou 會州 (Gansu) and the court sent against them the troops stationed in the Longxi 隴西 region (southern Gansu), defeating them and inflicting heavy casualties. Following this, the tribes submitted to the Sui and the leaders were obliged to send their sons and younger brothers to the court as hostages.

Tangut leaders adopted the surname Tuoba 拓拔 sometime after the demise of the Tuoba Wei 拓跋魏 dynasty (386–535), most likely motivated by reasons of prestige and political expediency. As a Qiangic people who spoke a Tibeto-Burman language, the Tanguts were not related to the royal Tuoba lineage, who were of Turkish origin. Later on, the ruling clan was granted imperial surnames from the Tang and Song courts but with the rise of their own state, as a means of establishing an independent imperial identity, they also began to use their native Tangut surname Ngwemi (ŋwe mji 貰楌). According to Guillaume Jacques, this native name (written in Chinese as Weiming 嵬名) may derive from a phrase that meant “the one who was fed milk by a cow,” reflecting a Tangut origin myth that survives in several Tibetan texts.

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345 Ibid.
346 Sui shu 83, 1846.
348 Jacques 2010a.
Under the Tang, further Tangut groups submitted to the throne who established on their land the four prefectures of Juzhou 堆州, Fengzhou 奉州, Yanzhou 岩州 and Yuanzhou 遠州, appointing their chieftains as prefects. One of the last to submit was the powerful chieftain Tuoba Chici 拓拔赤辭, a former ally of the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾 (Tib. 'Azha), who eventually became a loyal vassal to the throne and to whom the Tang court granted the imperial surname Li 李.349 From the mid-7th century, the expansion of the Tibetan empire would have been the main reason why the throne invested so much energy into subjugating the Tangut tribes, as an attempt to fortify the frontier region against the Tibetans. The Tanguts also felt the growing Tibetan pressure and many of them sided with the Tang, requesting to move farther inland. This was the time when they began to populate the territory of the future Tangut state, leaving their old land to the Tibetans. The Tang court settled them in Qingzhou 慶州, with additional tribes moving to the region in the following decades.350 The submission and migration of the Tanguts, however, had its own set of challenges. Their allegiance to the court, especially that of the tribes living along the frontier, was fragile and they often sided with rebel forces. Thus at the end of the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion (755–763), they supported the Turks and the Tuyuhun against the Tang. When the rebels were eventually scattered, the court settled these tribes further inland in the Ordos region.351

During the Huang Chao 黃巢 rebellion (875–884), when the rebel forces took the Tang capital Chang’an, the Tangut leader Tuoba Sigong 拓拔思恭 (d. 886) joined the imperial forces to defeat the rebels, for which Emperor Xizong 僖宗 (r. 873–888) appointed him acting military commissioner of the Xia-Sui-Yin 夏綏銀 circuit. The campaign turned into a lengthy and difficult affair and Tuoba Sigong’s merits in the final victory are not entirely clear, but when the Tang forces regained control, he was created Duke of the Xia State 夏國公 and awarded the imperial surname Li.352 After his death, his brothers continued their services for the Tang court and served as military commissioners. In 895, at the time of Wang Xingyu’s 王行瑜 (d. 895) revolt, the two brothers were put in charge of the northern and north-western forces.353 The rise of the Tangut Tuoba clan and its imperial recognition laid the foundations for the future Tangut state. The Li imperial surname was hereditary and remained in use in contacts

349 *Jiu Tang shu* 198, 5290–5293.
350 Ibid., 5292.
351 *Xin Tang shu* 221, 6216.
352 Ibid., 6218.
353 Ibid.
with China for more than 130 years until the Tangut ruling clan felt strong enough to try to gain complete independence.

Following the collapse of the Tang, the Tanguts grew relatively independent and were only nominally under the control of the Chinese court. Tuoba Sigong’s son appears in Chinese records with his Chinese surname as Li Renfu 李仁福 (d. 933). When in 910 one of his officers assassinated his cousin who had been serving as military commissioner of the Dingnan circuit, the local authorities executed the assassin and supported Renfu in becoming the military commissioner, a title that was officially sanctioned by the Later Liang 後梁 (907–923) court. The Later Tang 後唐 (923–937) court made him Prince of Shuofang 朔方王. With his death, the Tang court, concerned with the growing power of the Tuoba (i.e. Li) clan, wanted to isolate his son Li Yichao 李彝超 (d. 935) from his power base by putting him in charge of the troops at Yan’an 延安 (Shaanxi). Unsurprisingly, Yichao refused to leave his native land and his insubordination gave the Later Tang court a casus belli for a military conquest of Tangut territories. But the campaign ended in failure and this further increased the strength and influence of Tangut rulers. As a result, they grew even bolder in their dealing with the court and frequently took advantage of rebellions and unrests for their own material gain.

Yichao was followed by his brother Li Yiyin 李彝殷 (r. 935–967) whose reign lasted over three decades. Shortly after his coming to power, the Later Tang court also recognized him as military commissioner of the Dingnan circuit. He was relatively loyal to the succession of short-lived Chinese dynasties, helping them in their struggles against the Khitans in the north. Later, with the advent of the Song, he even changed the second syllable of his name from Yin 殷 to Xing 興 to accommodate the Song imperial name taboo, as the character 殷 occurred in the personal name for Emperor Taizu’s 太祖 (r. 960–976) late father. After Yixing’s death, the Song court posthumously created him Prince of Xia, and also created his son military commissioners of the Dingnan circuit. His two sons were likewise created military commissioners and the younger one, Li Jipeng 李繼捧 (r. 980–1004) maintained close relations with the court throughout his reign. His distant cousin Li Jiqian 李繼遷 (963–1004), however, was a strong supporter of Tangut independence and challenged Song authority. He moved with his people to the northern part of the Ordos and joined forces with

354 Zizhi tongjian 267, 8721.
355 Jiu Wudai shi 132, 1747.
356 Zizhi tongjian 278, 9082–9084.
357 Song shi 485, 13982.
other Tangut clans, frequently raiding the Song border. Despite numerous military expeditions, the Song could not overcome him and by 989 he allied himself with the Khitans, marrying princess Yicheng 義成. The Liao court granted him the title Prince of the Xia State 夏國王, thereby acknowledging him as a ruler of an independent state. At the same time he was a vassal to the powerful Khitan state. When in 991, due to internal strife, Jiqian decided to temporarily submit to the Song to protect his interests, the Khitans immediately sent a punitive expedition to the territories under his control, inflicting heavy losses.358 During the following years Jiqian skilfully manoeuvred between the Khitans and the Song, using them against each other in order to strengthen his own position and expand the territories under his control.359 His relationship with the Song was a complex sequence of conciliations and provocations, involving extended periods of warfare. For his military achievements against the Song, the Liao court in 997 bestowed on him the title Prince of Xiping 西平王.360 In the same year, he tried to make peace with the Song and Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 997–1022) who, in an attempt to resolve the prolonged and extremely costly conflict, created him prefect of Xiazhou 夏州 and military commissioner of the Dingnan circuit, thereby effectively giving him control over the five Tangut prefectures.361 This also eliminated the internal opposition against Jiqian from Tangut leaders loyal to the Song, lending additional strength and support to his power base.

Having solidified his position both at home and vis-à-vis the Song and the Liao, in 999 Jiqian once again began a series of raids on Song territories, successfully demolishing the troops sent against him. He moved his capital from Yinzhou 銀州 to Xiazhou, renaming it Xipingfu 西平府, and by 1000, had control over most of the central regions of the future Tangut state, with the exception of Lingzhou 靈州 and Shizhou 石州.362 By this time the Tibetans and the Uyghurs were also concerned about Tangut expansion and tried to join forces with the Song. To stabilize his position, Jiqian concentrated all of his efforts on seizing the strategic city of Lingzhou and when he finally succeeded, he moved his capital there from Xipingfu.363 The following year he was mortally wounded by an arrow while fighting the troops of the Tibetan ruler of Liangzhou.364

358 Liao shi 115, 1525.
359 For a detailed overview of these tactics, see Kychanov 1968, 33–43.
360 Liao shi 13, 149; Liao shi 115, 1525.
361 Song shi 485, 13988.
362 Kychanov 1968, 37.
363 Song shi 308, 10144.
364 Ibid. 492, 14156.
3.2 Birth of the Tangut empire

Jiqian was succeeded by his eldest son Li Deming 李德明 (981–1032; r. 1004–1032) who at this time was twenty-three years old.365 These were turbulent times: the Tibetans were fighting the Tanguts and the Khitans the Song. Deming tried to resolve the conflict with the Song, agreeing to a semi-autonomous vassalship in exchange for the titles of military commissioner of the Dingnan circuit and Prince of Xiping, as well as annual payments from the Song court.366 The Song were eager to secure peace with the Tanguts not only because the conflicts were ruinously costly but also because of a continuous Khitan threat from the north. The agreement was concluded in 1006 and in addition to the material benefits also meant that the Song officially recognised the Tangut state with its ruler, which added legitimacy and prestige in dealing with the Tibetans and Uyghurs.367

Deming kept his end of the bargain and maintained peaceful relations with the Song until his death for nearly three decades. At the same time, he progressively increased his power and prestige within his home base, effectively ruling his domain according to imperial rites. As part of this, he posthumously recognised his late father Jiqian as Taizu 太祖 (“grand ancestor”) of his dynasty. In addition, following his eldest son Li Yuanhao’s 李元昊 (1003–1048; r. 1032–1048) victories against the Uyghurs, he made him crown prince. In 1020 he moved the capital from Xipingfu to Huaiyuan garrison 懷遠鎮 (modern Yin-chuan, Ningxia) and renamed it Xingzhou 興州.368

The peace with the Song provided the Tangut state with a much needed opportunity to grow and become stronger. The two states were in continuous contact, exchanging embassies and engaging in lively trading. The Tanguts, however, were anything but friendly towards their western neighbours, the Tibetans and Uyghurs, whom they kept under continuous pressure as they expanded westward. This irritated the Khitans who were also unhappy about the growing strength of the Tanguts and its friendly relations with the Song. Even though initially they had recognized the Tangut state and had conferred on Deming the title Prince of the Xia State, with time the relations worsen and escalated into open hostility. In 1020 the Khitan ruler allegedly personally led five hundred thousand troops under the pretext of hunting and attacked the Tanguts. Dem-
ing, however, defeated him. Following this incident, Khitan-Tangut relations were gradually restored.

Deming died in 1032 and was given the temple name Taizong 太宗. He was succeeded by his eldest son Yuanhao who by this time had achieved a number of brilliant victories in the western frontier. Thus in 1028, he defeated the Uyghurs and took both Liangzhou and Ganzhou 甘州, which up to that point had successfully fended off Tangut attacks. According to the Song shi, he had a bold and uncompromising nature and on many occasions had urged his father not to remain a Song vassal. His father cautioned him not to offend the Song who for three decades provided their clan the means to “wear silk brocades,” to which Yuanhao allegedly replied that the Tanguts were comfortable wearing furs and leather clothes as they herded animals, therefore they had no use for fancy clothing.

Succeeding his father, Yuanhao was officially recognized by both the Liao and Song courts and received a range of titles from them, including those of the Prince of Xia (from the Liao) and Prince of Xiping (from the Song). Soon he instituted a series of concrete measures designed to liberate himself from the subservient role in relation to his neighbours, especially the Song court. His state rituals revolved around him as the emperor, and were largely modelled after the Song example. He wore a narrow white upper garment, felt cap with red lining and red tassels hanging at the back. He proclaimed himself Weiming wuzu 我名吾祖, in which Weiming was his Tangut surname and wuzu (also transcribed in Chinese as 兀卒 or 烏珠) the native Tangut term for emperor. The Song shi explains the term wuzu as the title of khagan, which was an utter insult towards the Song, especially that he called himself this way in official communications with the court. Elsewhere, the term wuzhu 烏珠 (i.e. wuzu) is explained as the

369 Song shi 485, 13991. The figure of half a million seems a mistake, especially if they were led to Tangut territories under the pretext of hunting. A campaign of such scale would have probably warranted more than one sentence in official histories.
370 Ibid., 13992. The Song shi actually says that he died in the 10th month of the 9th year of the Tiansheng 天聖 reign (1031) but the commentary suggests that this might be a mistake and the correct date is the 10th month of the 1st year of the Mingdao 明道 reign (1032). The Liao shi (115, 1526) indeed records that he died in the 1st year of the Chongxi 重熙 reign (1032) of the Liao emperor Xinzong 興宗 (r. 1031–1055).
371 Song shi 485, 13992–13993.
372 Ibid., Liao shi 115, 1523.
373 Song shi 485, 13992 and 13998.
“Son of Blue Heaven” 青天子. He also began using his Tangut surname Weiming in his correspondence with the Song, instead of his Chinese surnames Li or Zhao 赵 that had been granted to his lineage by the Tang and Song courts. For the offices of secretariat director, grand councillor, military affairs commissioner, grand master, director of chancellery, defender-in-chief and those below, he appointed Chinese and Tangut officials. He instituted a strict dress code for the different levels of officials. Common people had to wear green clothes to distinguish themselves from nobility.

Since the Tanguts were using the Song calendar, the first character of Emperor Renzong’s Mingdao 明道 (1032–1033) reign title violated the name taboo of Yuanhao’s father Deming and for this reason within the Tangut state the reign title was renamed Xiandao 顯道, which effectively meant placing the Tangut ruling house above that of the Song. Later on, Yuanhao announced his own reign title called Kaiyun 開運 (1034), which was a month later changed to Guangyun 廣運 (1034–1036) because advisors pointed out that Kaiyun had been the reign period during which the Later Jin 後晉 dynasty (936–947) was annihilated by the Khitans, and was therefore highly inauspicious.

Yuanhao also continued territorial expansion and by 1036 extended his control over the prefectures of Xiazhou, Yinzhou, Suizhou 綏州, Youzhou, Jingzhou 靜州, Lingzhou, Yanzhou 鹽州, Huizhou 會州, Shengzhou 勝州, Ganzhou, Liangzhou, Guazhou and Suzhou 肅州. The conquest of Shazhou 沙州 prefecture with the city of Dunhuang at its centre, however, only happened much later, sometime between 1052 and 1074. The lower limit of this range is the time when Shazhou sent envoys to the Song court and thus still functioned as an autonomous state. The latter one is the date of the earliest Tangut dated inscription at the cave temples around Dunhuang, indicating that by 1074 the Tanguts were already present in Shazhou. From this time on, their presence is amply documented by the caves and inscriptions commissioned by Tangut donors at the cave temples of Mogao and Yulin. The territory of the Tangut state

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374 Xu Zizhi tongjian changpian 122; Dunnell 1994, 181. On the identification of this term in Tangut, see Shi 1986b, 72; Nie 2000, 122–123; and, most importantly, Jacques 2010b.
375 Song shi 485, 13993.
376 Ibid., 13993. Wang 1997, 329 also quotes the Rizhi lu 日知錄 which describes the same event.
377 Ibid., 13993–13994.
378 Dunnell 1994, 179.
379 Tangut language inscriptions at the Dunhuang caves have been collected in Shi and Bai 1982. For the discussion of the caves and their significance for the history of the Tanguts in the region, see Liu 1982 and Yang 2006.
stretched from west to east for about 1,400 km from Dunhuang to the Yellow River, and from north to south for about 650 km from the region of Khara-khoto to lake Kokonor.\textsuperscript{380}

At this time, as a young and dynamically expanding empire, the Tanguts were a multiethnic state in which the core Tangut population lived alongside Chinese, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Khitans and other peoples. In addition to this, the Tanguts themselves were not ethnically unified but consisted of a variety of tribes probably speaking different dialects of the Tangut language.\textsuperscript{381} Most of the tribes and foreign groups became part of the empire as it grew larger and annexed the regions inhabited by these peoples. Thus as a result of military expansion, it was quite common that people of the same ethnicity ended up living on both sides of the Tangut border, blurring the division between foreign and domestic population. We must assume that “foreign” often must have been seen not so much in terms of ethnicity but as an allegiance to a particular state or regime. Non-Tangut peoples living within the borders enjoyed relative equality under Tangut law. Social status or position within a clan was more important in terms of people’s legal responsibilities than their ethnic or tribal affiliation, and only in cases of equal rank did Tanguts enjoy priority.\textsuperscript{382}

One of the most important measures of Yuanhao’s reign was the introduction of a national script. Chinese sources disagree on who actually invented the Tangut script: the \textit{Song shi} credits Yuanhao, whereas the \textit{Liao shi} his father Deming. Whoever the “real” inventor may have been, the script was implemented as the official script of the state in 1036 by Yuanhao as part of the measures aiming to emphasize autonomy from the Song and the Khitans.\textsuperscript{383} In a letter to the Song court, Yuanhao refers to the creation of the Tangut script as one of the main achievements of his reign, which brought the various tribes around him to submission.\textsuperscript{384} This corroborates the view that the introduction of the script was primarily a political move of a symbolic nature, rather than an act that arose out of a desire to enable the Tanguts to write in their native language.\textsuperscript{385}

\textsuperscript{380} Kychanov 1968, 60.
\textsuperscript{381} Nishida 2010, 246, n. 2.
\textsuperscript{382} Dunnell 1994, 147, Kychanov 2008a, 200.
\textsuperscript{383} Song shi 485, 13995. Kwanten (1977) suggests that the script was invented by the more scholarly minded Deming, rather than the militaristic Yuanhao who at the time was busy fighting the Tibetans.
\textsuperscript{384} Ibid., 13995–13996.
\textsuperscript{385} Dunnell 1996, 37. For the analysis of the rhetorics of Yuanhao’s letter sent to the Song court, as well as its political implications, see \textit{ibid.}, 40–43.
In the autumn of 1038, Yuanhao officially assumed the title of emperor and at the beginning of the new year sent a letter about it to the Song court. He claimed that the conquered tribes were unhappy with him being called a prince (*wang* 王) and were urging him to assume the imperial title, which he did only after repeated requests. He named his state the Great Xia 大夏 and changed the reign title to Tianshou lifa yanzuo 天授禮法延祚 ("Extended Blessings of the Rites and Laws Conferred by Heaven"). He asked the Song emperor to acknowledge him as fellow emperor and offered his eternal friendship.386

From the Song court’s point of view, the letter was an act of utter insolence to which it reacted by stripping Yuanhao of all titles granted earlier, ceasing border markets and mobilizing troops along the frontier. It was announced that whoever was able to capture Yuanhao or could at least present his head, would be appointed military commissioner of the Dingnan circuit. In response, Yuanhao sent a messenger with an insulting letter and returned the various emblems and insignia he had received from the court.387 This began a period of open conflict between the Tanguts and the Song, which involved frequent warfare and lasted nearly seven years.388 The fact that the Song were not able to suppress the new Tangut state testifies to its military strength and the opportune timing of Yuanhao openly confronting the Song.

Being drawn into a war with the Khitans, in 1044 Yuanhao sent a treaty proposal to the Song court, in which he suggested that the Tanguts would return their recently captured cities and forts, and the Song would pay an annual 255 thousand *liang* 棒 of silver, silk and tea. The court accepted the terms and at the beginning of 1045 sent envoys with regalia and gifts to Yuanhao, including a pair of matching sets of clothing, a golden belt, saddle and bridle ornamented with silver work, 20 thousand *liang* of silver, 20 thousand bolts of silver and 30 thousand *jin* 斤 of tea. He also received a certificate written with lacquer on bamboo slips and a gilded silver seal with the words “Seal of the Ruler of the Xia State” 夏國主印. According to the agreement, the Tangut ruler was to be called “subject” 臣 in Chinese correspondence and he had to use the Song calendar. At the same time, the Song emperor did not directly address him by his name and he was permitted to set up and run his own administration; Tangut envoys travelling to the Song capital were able to use the postal relay stations and were allowed to engage in trading. In turn, the Song envoys were not allowed in the

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386 *Song shi* 485, 13995–13996.
388 For a detailed chain of events of the war with the Song, see Kychanov 1968, 138–156.
Tangut capital but could only come as far as Youzhou, and Yuanhao could continue to rule as emperor within his own domain.389

One of the main reasons for the successful conclusion of peace with the Song was the Khitan threat from the north. When the Khitans attacked the Tanguts, they sent envoys to the Song, asking them not to sign a treaty with the Tanguts but the Song court felt defeating the Tanguts would make the Khitans even stronger, which was a situation they were eager to prevent. Thus they reacted by expediting the negotiations and concluding the treaty with the Tanguts. The Khitans led a massive campaign against the Tanguts. Being greatly outnumbered, the Tanguts avoided direct combat and retreated deeply into their territory, scorching the land behind them and thereby leaving no fodder for the Khitan cavalry. As a result, with time the Khitan horses were starving and growing increasingly susceptible to diseases and this is when the Tanguts began engaging them in battle. In a final battle the Khitans suffered a decisive defeat and Emperor Xingzong 興宗 (r. 1031–1055), who had been personally leading the main army, was forced to flee for his life. Yuanhao let him escape and subsequently sent envoys to the Liao court to conclude a treaty.390

3.3 The Tangut state after Yuanhao

Yuanhao died in 1048 from a wound he suffered by the hand of his son Ninglingge 寧令哥, born from an empress of the powerful Yeli 野利 clan. Chinese accounts are conflicting on the chain of events that led to this but it seems that the fatal encounter was the last of several assassination attempts driven by inter-clan rivalry over political power and the succession of the throne.391 With Yuanhao’s death the throne went to his infant son Liangzuo 諒祚 (1047–1068; r. 1048–1068). He was a son by an empress of the Mozang 没藏 clan, therefore with his enthronement his mother became the empress dowager and power fell into the hands of the Mozang clan, with Mozang Epang 没藏訛龐 acting as regent and the de facto ruler of the state. Following his mother’s death in 1056, Liangzuo became increasingly disgruntled with the regent’s rule and when someone accused Epang of plotting against the throne, he seized the opportunity and had him executed, also wiping out his entire clan. Not long after this, he requested the Song court’s approval to abandon Tangut rituals and follow the

389 Song shi 485, 13999.
390 Ibid., 14000.
391 For a reconstruction of events, see Dunnell 1994, 189–191.
Chinese model.\textsuperscript{392} Naturally, this was a symbolic act aiming to strengthen the ties with the Song court and gain its support. In 1062 Liangzuo presented horses to the Song court and requested to be given official copies of the classics, to which the court reacted by sending them the Nine Classics and returning the horses.\textsuperscript{393} Despite Liangzuo’s pro-Chinese policies, his reign was characterized by ongoing conflicts with the Liao and the Song, as well as internal strife.\textsuperscript{394} He was not much older than twenty when he died, probably as a result of an injury suffered in a battle with Song troops, fighting over border disputes. He received the temple name Yizong 毅宗.\textsuperscript{395}

Following Liangzuo’s death in early 1068, the throne went to his eldest son Bingchang 秉常 (1061–1086; r. 1068–1086), who at the time was only seven years old. Control of the state went into the hands of his mother, empress dowager of the Liang 梁 clan, who acted as regent.\textsuperscript{396} The power of the Liang clan was further cemented by having the young emperor marry his own cousin from the Liang clan. Thus his entire reign was under the overwhelming influence of the Liang clan, which significantly weakened the authority of the Weiming clan. During the eighteen years Bingchang was on the throne, relations with the Khitans and the Tibetans improved but the conflict with the Song continued with varying intensity.\textsuperscript{397} When he died in 1086, he was given the temple name Huizong 惠宗 and was succeeded by his three-year-old son Qianshun 乾順 (1083–1139; r. 1086–1139).\textsuperscript{398}

Once again, the power was in the hands of the empress dowager, Bingchang’s widow from the Liang clan. This inevitably further strengthened the position of the Liang clan. Although Qianshun and his father Bingchang were both direct line descendants of Yuanhao and in theory represented the Weiming clan, due to their young age, state affairs were run by the empress dowagers and their relatives. During the early years of Qianshun’s reign, actual power concentrated in the hands of the state minister Liang Yibu 梁乙逋 (d. 1094), the empress dowager’s brother. But the Liang clan itself was torn with

\textsuperscript{392} Song shi 485, 14000–14001.
\textsuperscript{393} Song shi 12, 249. Nie Hongyin (2002, 86) believes that this request suggests that at this time the Confucian classics were not commonly available in the Xia state and most people would have only had access to digested and popularized versions of these books.
\textsuperscript{394} For the war with the Khitans, see Kychanov 1968, 170–173; for conflicts with the Song, see ibid., 173–177 and Dunnell 1994, 192.
\textsuperscript{395} Song shi 485, 14003. For an account of Liangzuo’s death, see Mengxi bitan 25, 247–248.
\textsuperscript{396} Song shi 485, 14007.
\textsuperscript{397} Dunnell 1994, 193.
\textsuperscript{398} Song shi 485, 14015.
internal frictions and the empress dowager was gradually stripped of influence, a situation that antagonized her against her brother and the rest of the clan. Eventually, this led to the downfall of the entire clan. In 1094 Renduo Baozhong 仁多保忠, Weiming Awu 戛名阿吳, Sachen 撒辰 and others killed Liang Yibu and wiped out his family. At this time Qianshun was merely eleven years old and thus power remained in the hands of the new clique, aided by the empress dowager. The Liao court, however, was opposed to her and wanted Qianshun to rule independently, presumably because he was hoped to be more susceptible to Liao influences. As a result, in 1099 Khitan assassins poisoned the empress dowager, which put the young Qianshun in actual control of the state. Having been freed from the yoke of regents, unlike his father Bingchang, Qianshun had a chance to grow up and enjoyed a reign lasting over half a century.

In the meantime, contacts with the Song remained as problematic as before, ranging from local border conflicts to major military campaigns. Finally in 1100 Qianshun was able to reach an agreement with the Chinese, asking the court to restore the original treaty concluded with Yuanhao over sixty years earlier. The Song court agreed to this and promised to send annual gifts. It did not, however, relinquish its newly annexed territories. Even though it was clear that peace was temporary, having achieved a more or less stable relationship with both the Liao and the Song, Qianshun could finally turn his attention to stabilising his position within his own state. He consolidated the power in the hand of the Weiming clan, appointing close relatives to the most important positions. To further strengthen relations with the Liao, he married a Liao princess.

Qianshun was also active in promoting cultural enterprises and education. In 1101 he established a state school (guoxue 国学) with three hundred students fully supported by government funds. Education in the school primarily consisted of Confucian learning, such as Chinese language, literature and history. Most likely, the aim of the project was to develop a core group of educated elite capable of serving in public offices and diplomatic service. This was undoubted-

400 Xixia shushi 29, v. 13, 103.
401 Ibid. 31, v. 13, 112.
402 For an overview of border conflicts and the 1096–1099 Song-Xia war, see Kychanov 1968, 213–222.
403 Song shi 486, 1418–14019.
404 Ibid.
405 Kychanov 1968, 223.
ly a move towards recruitment for public employment based on merit and talent, instead of kinship. It is clear that at least part of the rich corpus of surviving Tangut material was created during Qianshun’s reign, and many of the translations made at this time continued to be copied and reprinted in later periods.

Qianshun died in 1139 after an extremely long reign of fifty-three years and was given the temple name Chongzong 崇宗. He was succeeded by his son Renxiao 仁孝 (1124–1193; r. 1139–1193) from an empress of the Chinese Cao 曹 clan, sixteen years of age. Early in the following year, the new emperor announced as his empress a lady from the Tangut Wang 罔 clan. Chinese histories record a series of disasters from the first years of the reign, including rebellions, severe famines and a series of earthquakes that lasted for months. They claim that the earth opened up and black sand gushed forth from below. Perhaps as a measure against these calamities, to symbolize a new era, in 1143 the reign title was changed from Daqing 大慶 to Renqing 人慶.406

In the same year, new Confucian schools were opened throughout the empire and a secondary school (Xiaoxue 小學) was established within the imperial palace, with the emperor himself among the instructors. This attests to the learnedness of Renxiao who grew up during the prosperous period of the later part of his father’s reign. At the same time, his personal involvement in teaching inside the palace also shows the importance he attached to education. Indeed, starting from 1145, a series of measures were launched with the aim of implementing Confucian style education and official recruitment system in the Tangut state. Among these measures was the establishment of the Academy of Chinese Learning (Dahan taixue 大漢太學), inauguration of the cult of Confucius, introduction of Chinese-style official examinations, and the founding of the Academy of Inner Learning (Neixue 內學) with eminent Confucian scholars in charge. Later on, in 1161, the state established the Hanlin Academy 翰林學士院 where Jiao Jingyan 焦景顏, Wang Qian 王僉 and others were appointed as academicians in charge of compiling the historical records of the dynasty.407

By all accounts, Renxiao was an enlightened and active ruler who transformed the Tangut state into one of the major cultural centres in East Asia. He was born from a Chinese mother and received Confucian education, which may partly explain his pro-Confucian policies. We know from the printed books and manuscripts found at Khara-khoto that a number of Confucian and other works were translated and printed during his reign. He and his family members were also enthusiastic supporters of Buddhism, especially his second consort em-

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406 Song shi 486, 14024.
407 Ibid., 14025.
press from the Chinese Luo 羅 clan who sponsored several ambitious printing projects. Buddhist sutras were printed in both Tangut and Chinese. If we were to take the Kozlov collection as a representative sample of the translation and publication activities in the Tangut state, twice as many dated Buddhist texts come from the time of his reign than from all other periods of the Tangut state together. While this may be partly attributed to his unusually long time on the throne, his reign was also the time when the publication of Tangut translations of Buddhist texts began on a relatively wide scale, as only three items date from the before that.\textsuperscript{408} The Chinese texts in the collection show a picture similar to that of the Tangut material. For example, all dated copies of the Chinese Diamond sutra found in Khara-khoto come from Renxiao’s reign and belong to two distinct editions: the first, printed in 1167, survives in six copies; the other from 1189, in thirty-five.\textsuperscript{409}

The reign of Renxiao was relatively quiet in terms of the relations with neighbouring states. By this time the Jurchen Jin state had grown into a formidable entity, conquering the Liao in 1125 and progressively taking control of northern China at the expense of the Song who were forced to retreat further south. The Jurchens also had smaller conflicts with the Tanguts but on the whole Renxiao managed to maintain good relations with them. Similarly, Tangut contacts with the Song were relatively peaceful, especially in comparison with the turbulent periods before and after. One of the major internal problems in the Tangut state in this period was the rise of a Chinese officer Ren Dejing 任得敬 (d. 1170), father of the empress dowager, who had a dominant influence on the court for two decades. His rise to power was viewed with concern both internally and by the Jurchen court, and as events escalated, Ren Dejing eventually lost its support base and was executed for treason.\textsuperscript{410}

Renxiao reigned for fifty-five years until the age of seventy. When he died in 1193, he received the temple name Renzong 仁宗 and was succeeded by his son Chunyou 純佑 (1177–1206; r. 1193–1206), born from Empress Luo.\textsuperscript{411} In the first half of his reign, Chunyou sustained amicable contacts with the Jin, which is illustrated by the fact that when his mother Empress Luo became ill, he turned

\textsuperscript{408} These statistics are based on the data presented in Kychanov’s catalogue of Tangut Buddhist texts in the Kozlov collection (Kychanov 1999).
\textsuperscript{409} Men’shikov 1984, 10.
\textsuperscript{410} Jin shi 134, 2869–2870. For the career of Ren Dejing and the events that led to his rise and downfall, see Dunnell 1994, 199–202 and Kychanov 1968, 241–246.
\textsuperscript{411} Song shi 486, 14026.
to the Jin for doctors and medicine. Subsequently relations deteriorated, undoubtedly contributing to the impact of Mongol raids, which began affecting the Tanguts from 1205. Chunyou ruled for thirteen years until 1206, dying at the age of thirty. He was given the temple name Huanzong 桓宗. During his reign the printing of Buddhist sutras continued, as evidenced by a number of surviving copies dating to the 1190s.

Map 1: Location of the Tangut region against the map of modern China.

412 Jin shi 134, 2871.
413 Song shi 486, 14026.
414 Men’shikov 1984, 11–12, 16. The existence of several dated copies and fragments from any particular period makes it probably that at least some of the undated items date from the same period.
3.4 The Mongol invasion

In 1204 Temüjin (i.e. the future Genghis khan) destroyed the Naimans and gained full control over the Mongolian steppes. From this time on, the Mongols began raiding the lands of their neighbouring states. In 1205, they raided Tangut territories, pillaging two fortified cities and taking with them a large amount of captives and livestock. The Mongol attack came as a surprise to the Tanguts who were occupied at the time with internal conflicts. It further weakened the position of the emperor, as many high-ranking officials and courtiers did not believe that he would be able to withstand the Mongol threat. As a result, in 1206 Chunyou’s cousin Anquan 天祐 (1170–1211; r. 1206–1211) staged a coup and proclaimed himself the new emperor. The deposed Chunyou died soon afterwards. As part of the arrangement, Chunyou’s mother Empress Luo sent a letter to the Jin court, claiming that Chunyou was unable to maintain his throne and because of this she and the chief ministers, after careful deliberation, decided to enthrone Anquan. She asked for an official recognition from the Jin

415 Kychanov 1968, 257.
416 Yuan shi 1, 13.
417 Song shi 486, 14026; Jin shi 134, 2871.
court, which after some wavering granted this and created the new ruler Prince of Xia.\footnote{Ibid.}

The second Mongol attack came in the autumn of 1207, when the attackers seized the fort of Uraqai (Wulahai 兀刺海 or Woluohai 斡羅孩). They did not retire until the following spring, leading smaller incursions into Tangut border territories. In the spring of 1209 the Uyghurs submitted to Genghis khan. Following this, Genghis led a campaign to the Hexi region against the Tanguts. Anquan sent an army under the command of the crown prince but the Mongols defeated it and captured the deputy commander. They once again sacked Uraqai and enslaved its commander Xibi Eda 西壁訛答. Then they advanced to Keyimen 克夷門 and yet again defeated the Tangut forces, capturing their commander, a general of the Weiming clan. They laid siege to the Tangut capital Zhongxing 中興 and diverted the river to flood the city. In the course of this operation, however, the dikes broke and the Mongols were forced to withdraw. Having been unable to take the capital by force, they sent Xibi Eda into the city to negotiate with Anquan the terms of peace settlement. In the end, an agreement was reached and, as a way of cementing it, the Tangut ruler gave one of his daughters in marriage to Genghis khan.\footnote{Yuan shi 1, 14.}

In 1211, after only five years on the throne, Anquan died and was given the temple name Xiangzong 襄宗. Even though he had a son called Chengzhen 承禎, presumably the one defeated in 1207 by the Mongols at Uraqai, the throne went to Anquan’s cousin Zunxu 遵頊 (1163–1226; r. 1211–1223). The new emperor was a learned man and had been the first person in the imperial lineage to have ever earned the “advanced scholar” (jinshi 進士) degree at the civil examinations. His ascension to the Tangut throne was also acknowledged by the Jin emperor who the following year created him Prince of Xia.\footnote{Song shi 486, 14026–14027.}

Tangut relations with the Jin reached a state of crisis in the course of the Mongol attacks. The primary reason for this was that the Jurchens refused Tangut pleas for help on several occasions. Yet conquering the Tanguts was merely the first step in the overall scheme of Mongol expansion. Having cut the Jurchens off from one of their potential allies, the Mongols were now keen on moving against the powerful Jin state. The Tanguts were in a difficult situation because as Mongol allies they had to back Genghis khan in his war against the Jin, with this eliminating their own potential ally against the Mongols. Therefore, they tried to avoid a full-scale war with the Jin with whom they had been
on relatively good terms for the past decades. As a compromise, they began raiding Jin border territories without engaging in more serious campaigns. The pretext for this was revenge for the lack of support from their ally over the previous years. Nevertheless, the Jin court did not completely abandon the idea of gaining Tangut cooperation in their struggle against the Mongols, which is why they were happy to acknowledge Zunxu as the new Tangut ruler.421

In 1213 the Jin emperor Wanyan Yongji 完顏永濟 (1153–1213; r. 1208–1213), also known as Prince Shao of Wei 衛紹王, was deposed and shortly after that assassinated by one of his commanders. The throne went to the emperor’s cousin Wudubu 吾睹補 (1163–1223; r. 1213–1223) but the change happened at the worst possible moment, when Mongol troops were already advancing towards the Central Capital (Zhongdu 中都, i.e. modern Beijing). In the winter of 1213–1214, the Mongols blockaded the Central Capital and the Jurchens sued for peace, offering one of Wanyan Yongji’s daughters in marriage to Genghis khan. The Mongols withdrew but when following this the Jin court relocated to the Southern Capital (i.e. Kaifeng), they chose to interpret this as preparation for war and led a campaign against the Central Capital. They took the city the following year.422

In the meantime, in 1214 war broke out between the Tanguts and the Jurchens, leading to costly consequences for both parties. The Tanguts were aided by the Song but some internal factions were clearly against fighting the Jurchens, considering the war an affair that merely drained their resources without yielding concrete benefits. The war lasted for a decade and no doubt greatly facilitated the eventual Mongol destruction of both states.423

In the winter of 1217–1218, the Mongols led a campaign against the Tanguts and besieged the capital. Zunxu put his son in charge of defence and himself fled westward to Xiliang 西涼 (i.e. Liangzhou).424 The Mongols demanded that the Tanguts assist them in their military campaign against Khwarezm in Central Asia. According to the Secret History of the Mongols, before the Tangut emperor could respond, a certain Asha Gambu stepped in saying that if Genghis khan did not possess enough military strength for the campaign, he should not be a khan at all. As expected, his words deeply offended the khan who decided to take his revenge after his return from the Central Asian campaign.425 In 1219, the

421 Kychanov 1968, 302.
423 Kychanov 1968, 303. For an overview of the Xia-Jin war of 1214–1224, see ibid., 301–306.
424 Yuan shi 1, 20; Jin shi 15, 334.
425 de Rachewiltz 2004, 189.
khan personally led his main forces on the campaign, leaving behind his general Mukhali (1170–1223) to continue the war against the Jin. In 1221, Mukhali asked the Tanguts to allow his troops to pass through Tangut territory when leading a campaign against the Jin and the Tanguts acquiesced. Not only that, they joined the Mongols with a force of fifty thousand men, giving them military assistance. Although the Tanguts did their best to comply with the demands of the Mongols and keep up amicable relations with them, they had to endure an increasing amount of abuse. Eventually, Zunxu abdicated in favour of his son Dewang 德旺 (1181–1226; r. 1223–1226) who the following year ended the war with the Jin, which was draining their resources. As part of the peace agreement, the relationship between the Jurchen and the Tangut states was described as that between elder and younger brothers.

The Mongols attacked the Tanguts as soon as they learned about the unannounced change of rulers, the implications of which were no doubt clear to them. The Tanguts were able to resist them, forcing their troops to withdraw. More campaigns followed and eventually the Mongol troops sacked and pillaged Yinzhou. Not long after this, in the winter of 1225 Genghis khan returned with the main forces from his victorious Central Asian expedition and immediately marched against the Tanguts. Whatever the real reasons for this may have been, the pretext was that the Tanguts had refused to assist him in his campaign against Khwarezm and that, more recently, Dewang did not agree to send his son as hostage to the Mongol court. According to the Secret History of the Mongols, the khan’s envoys sent ahead of the main forces were once again disrespected by the same Asha Gambu who apparently had a strong influence at the Tangut court.

The Mongol armies took one Tangut city after the other, starting with those in the Hexi corridor and then Eçina (Khara-khoto). The Tanguts desperately tried to resist but were unable to withstand the massive force of the onslaught. In 1226, after the fall of Suzhou, the attackers massacred the population of the city but spared the residents of Ganzhou due to the intervention of Chahan 察罕, a Tangut officer in Mongol service. Then the Mongols took Xiliang and soon after that, led by the khan himself, pressed on to Lingzhou. Even though a Tangut

427 Jin shi 134, 2876.
force of hundred thousand rushed to the defence of the city, the Mongols defeated them and sacked the city.\textsuperscript{430}

In the meantime, Zunxu, the abdicated Tangut emperor died in the spring of 1226 at the age of sixty-four. His son Dewang passed away in the summer of the same year, while the Mongols successively occupied the major provinces of the Tangut state.\textsuperscript{431} The throne went to Xian 昕 (?–1227; r. 1226–1227) who only ruled for a few months before the Mongols completely annihilated the Tangut state.\textsuperscript{432} But the Tangut campaign proved fatal for Genghis Khan himself. He died in the spring of 1227, right around the fall of the Tangut capital Zhongxing. The \textit{Secret History of the Mongols} merely mentions that he “came back and in the Year of the Pig (1227) ascended to heaven” without elaborating on the circumstances.\textsuperscript{433} Other sources, however, offer different scenarios on how this important event had actually transpired.\textsuperscript{434}

When after an extended siege Zhongxing finally fell, the Mongol generals seized the last Tangut emperor and had him killed. They also intended to massacre the population of the city but, once again, Chahan managed to dissuade them and save the remaining inhabitants.\textsuperscript{435} Naturally, the fall of the capital and the death of the emperor meant the end of the Tangut state. From this time on, the Mongols assumed complete control over Tangut territories and annexed them into their own domain.

Nevertheless, the destruction of the state did not automatically mean the end of the people and the language. Officials and scribes with Tangut names, and at times explicitly identified as of Tangut origin, are often seen in sources related to the history of the Mongols. For example, according to the Persian historian Juvayni (1226–1283), Möngke Khan (1209–1259; r. 1251–1259) had stipulated that appointed officials were to be attended by scribes of every kind, including Persian, Uyghur, Khitan, Tibetan and Tangut ones so that they could write decrees in the language and script of the people of their destination.\textsuperscript{436} The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{430} Yuan shi 120, 2956; Dunnell 1994, 211–213.
\item \textsuperscript{431} Zunxu was given the temple name Shenzong 神宗, and his son Dewang was named Xianzong 献宗; Song shi 486, 14027–14028.
\item \textsuperscript{432} Song shi 486, 14028. The Jin shi (134, 2876) claims not to know the name of the last emperor and describes the last years of the imperial lineage as follows: “... in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} month Zunxu died, in the 7\textsuperscript{th} month Dewang died, his successor’s name is unknown. The following year, the Tangut state perished.”
\item \textsuperscript{433} de Rachewiltz 2004, 200.
\item \textsuperscript{434} Wright 1997.
\item \textsuperscript{435} Yuan shi 120, 2956.
\item \textsuperscript{436} The History of the World-Conqueror, 607.
\end{itemize}
fact that Tangut scribes were needed three decades after the fall of the Tangut state means not only that there were people who did this job but also that for part of the population Tangut remained the main language they used in daily life and that such people were numerous enough for the administration having to consider them at the level of legislation.\textsuperscript{437}

Similarly, a number of Tangut and Chinese language documents found at the ruins of Khara-khoto come from the Yuan period, well after the fall of the Tangut state and the Mongol occupation of the city. All this suggests that the city was not wiped out by the Mongols but that it continued to be occupied by people who read and wrote in Tangut. In fact, when Marco Polo travelled through this region, he described several cities in “Province of Tangut,” including that of Eçina (i.e. Khara-khoto).\textsuperscript{438} The presence of Tangut documents from the Yuan period in itself is proof to the use of the script and language following the Mongol conquest.

\section*{3.5 The invention of the Tangut script}

The Tanguts stand out among the peoples of East and Central Asia as one of the few cultures that invented a native script to write their language. According to the \textit{Song shi}, the script was created in 1036 by Li Yuanhao, the ruler of the newly founded Tangut state, shortly after declaring himself emperor in 1032:

\begin{quote}
元昊自製蕃書，命野利仁榮演繹之，成十二卷，字形體方整類八分，而畫頗重複。
Yuanhao created Tangut writing himself, then ordered Yeli Renrong to develop it further and work out the details. [He put together a book] forming 12 \textit{juan}. In their shape, the characters were angular and orderly, resembling the \textit{bafen} [style of the Chinese script], yet their strokes were manifold and repetitive.\textsuperscript{439}
\end{quote}

This terse statement attributes the invention of the script to the emperor, which probably meant that he was responsible for the basic idea of the script, perhaps along with its primary components, whereas the whole system was subsequently developed on his orders by Yeli Renrong (d. 1042) who was also put in charge of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{437} For an example of a Kashmiri monk by the name of Jayānanda who held the rank of a state preceptor in the Tangut state, see van der Kuijp 1993.

\textsuperscript{438} \textit{The Book of Ser Marco Polo}, v. 1, 202.

\textsuperscript{439} \textit{Song shi}, 13995.
\end{flushright}
the Tangut Academy when it became established in 1039.\textsuperscript{440} Perhaps he was the person responsible for an initial round of standardisation that laid down the foundation for a practical implementation of the system. The people were taught this new script so that they could use it to read and write, and, probably to aid the process of learning, several common Chinese primers were translated into Tangut. The script that resulted from this project was immediately put into use and remained in use for over four centuries.\textsuperscript{441} The Mongol conquest and the annihilation of the Tangut state in 1227 did not mean the death of the language and the script because there is evidence of Tangut being written even in Ming times, especially in a Buddhist context.

Indeed, the Tangut language and script is attested as late as the beginning of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century. The latest known examples are the two stone pillars discovered at Baoding (Hebei) in 1962, which contain an inscription with a \textit{dhāraṇī} transcribed in Tangut.\textsuperscript{442} One of the pillars has a date ascribing the carving of the text to 1502, which places it 275 years after the demise of the Tangut empire. An earlier version of the same text also appears on the six-script inscription at Juyongguan, near the Great Wall north of Beijing. This inscription is dated to 1345, thus it is much earlier than the Baoding stone pillars but still considerably later than the end of the Tangut state.\textsuperscript{443} These examples demonstrate that the language and the script continued to be used well after the Mongol conquest of Tanguts. Especially for the later period, we do not know whether this happened exclusively in a religious context or there were Tangut descendants who spoke the language and were able to read and write using the Tangut script.\textsuperscript{444}

Although there are still many unresolved issues concerning the principles behind the invention of the Tangut script, there is little doubt that the Chinese

\textsuperscript{440} The \textit{Song shi} account is only one of several slightly different scenarios found in Chinese historiographical sources offer regarding the invention of the Tangut script. For a discussion of these, see Nishida 1964–1966, 539–541, and Kwanten 1977.

\textsuperscript{441} It is sometimes assumed that the Tangut script was used only for a short period of time. Thus in his study of variant characters, Han 2005, 58 comments that Tangut characters did not have a long history and for this reason had relatively few variants. But the same idea was voiced at the dawn of Tangut studies when Albert Terrien de Lacouperie (1894, 70–74) gave a brief overview of the Tangut script in the chapter “Short-lived writings in Central Asia” among the Khitan, Jurchen and ‘Phags-pa scripts. But four and a half centuries does not strike one as a short period, even if talking about a particular writing system.

\textsuperscript{442} For a description of the pillars and their discovery, see Zheng and Wang 1977; Peng and Yang 2011.

\textsuperscript{443} For the Juyongguan inscription see Murata and Fujieda 1955–1957.

\textsuperscript{444} On possible descendants of the Tanguts, see, for example, Ikeda 2006.
writing system was a major inspiration for it. It is very likely that the Khitan scripts also exerted some influence, but it was the Chinese script that served as the primary model for the Tangut inventors when designing the system. The reason for this was certainly not that the Chinese script was the only writing system in East Asia at this time and thus the only viable choice, as precisely at this moment in history a large variety of local scripts were in use on the northern and western peripheries of China. Apart from the small and large Khitan scripts in the north, there were also important writing systems in use in the West, most notably the Uyghur script which had been borrowed from Sogdian and ultimately derived from Syriac. Indeed, a multitude of languages in what is today northern and western China were written with phonetic scripts of west Asian origin.

Such a multilingual and multi-scriptural cavalcade is best illustrated with the contents of the Dunhuang cave library which contained tens of thousands of manuscripts, the largest portion of which came from the 9th–10th centuries, only a century or so before the invention of the Tangut script. The manuscripts were written in a dozen and a half languages and scripts and there was not always a consistent relationship between script and language. Chinese was one of the more stable languages in this sense, as it was almost always written with Chinese characters; conversely, texts written in Chinese characters for the most part recorded Chinese texts. But there are also examples where Chinese was transcribed using the Tibetan or Brahmi script or when Chinese characters were used to transcribe Tibetan names or Sanskrit dhāraṇīs.445 Sometimes it is clear that Chinese characters recorded other languages not only phonetically but they were vocalized according to their semantic value in another language, such as Uyghur.446 In some cases the Chinese characters followed the Uyghur word order, making them completely ungrammatical if attempted to be read in Chi-

445 For a monograph-length treatment of a manuscript where all of these cases occur togeth-
er, see van Schaik and Galambos 2012. There are quite a number of texts from Dunhuang where Chinese is transcribed using the Tibetan alphabet and this material is invaluable for the recon-
struction of contemporary (i.e. 9th–10th centuries) Chinese dialect in the Hexi region; see Takata 1988.

446 The use of Chinese characters as part of Uyghur literacy is similar to how they were used in Japanese and Korean, having a received Chinese reading and a semantic reading. The Uy-
ghur use of Chinese characters is more commonly evidenced among the Turfan manuscripts;
see Takata 1985, Shōgaito 1995 and Shōgaito 2004. For a study of how Chinese was transcribed using the Sogdian script, see Yoshida 1994; for Chinese written with the Brahmi script, see Csongor 1972.
To be sure, Uyghur was an extreme case of scriptural flexibility and surviving manuscripts from Dunhuang and Turfan evidence that it was written, apart from the special cases such being written in Chinese characters, on a regular basis in Brahmi, Runic, Manichaean, Sogdian and Uyghur scripts.

Most of the scripts in modern northern and western China were alphabetic or syllabic and would have been perfectly suitable for writing Tangut. A particularly apt solution would have been the Tibetan alphabet, especially since the Tangut language is remotely related to Tibetan. Yet the Tanguts opted for creating a Chinese-type writing system which not only emulated the general principles of character creation, or rather how these principles were understood at the time, but adopted the strokes of the regular Chinese script (\textit{kaishu}). They assembled these Chinese-style strokes using the compositional principles of Chinese characters into completely different kinds of characters which resemble the Chinese ones but are in fact totally illegible to Chinese readers.\footnote{As Zhang Shu, the first person in the modern period who identified the Tangut script as Tangut, wrote about the script on the Liangzhou bilingual stele he discovered in 1804, “looking at it (i.e. the stele) casually, all the characters seem legible; but if you take a close look, you cannot read a single one of them.” Quoted in Niu 1993, 48.}

Thus on the one hand we see an effort to emulate the Chinese example and to live up to the prestige of its literary tradition, and on the other hand a desire to stand apart by creating a completely unique writing system. From our modern point of view it seems obvious that implementing a phonetic alphabet or syllabary would have been more efficient and practical than the invention of a new system with approximately 6,000 unique logographs. A small set of phonetic symbols would have been much easier not only to learn but also to use. Yet the Tanguts, like the Khitans nearly a century before them, chose to devise a script with thousands of characters that resembled the Chinese ones and yet were different from those.

The dependence on the Chinese tradition is seen not only in the nature of the Tangut script but also in the types of texts written with that script. A significant portion of the Tangut texts that survive are translations from Chinese, and to a lesser degree from Tibetan, whereas native Tangut texts are relatively rare. Among the non-translated material are the dictionaries which in most cases also deal with the connection of the Tangut script and phonology with Chinese.\footnote{Kychanov (Gromkovskaja and Kychanov 1978, 174) mentions the possibility that a Tangut-Tibetan dictionary may have existed in the Kozlov collection but was later lost. Nevsky claims that he heard about such a dictionary from someone while in Beijing but Ivanov denied having seen it. In 1927, however, the existence of the dictionary was confirmed in a letter by the}
Even though the majority of the extant Tangut corpus is Buddhist in nature and is thus ultimately of South-Asian origin, the Tanguts usually used the Chinese translations of these sutras rather than their originals written in Indic languages. In other words, they opted to regard the Chinese text as the source text, even when it was a translation itself. For this reason, Tangut translations of Buddhist sutras name the Chinese translator after the title of the text, rather than the Tangut one. For example, a printed edition of the *Diamond Sutra* in the Kozlov collection in St. Petersburg (No. 53, 3834), which is an incomplete concertina with 32 pages, has a note at the beginning which states that the Tangut version was carefully checked against the Sanskrit and Chinese versions, as well as existing Tangut commentaries. The final line of the colophon, however, says that the sutra was translated by the Kuchean monk Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (334–413) of the Yao Qin 姚秦 dynasty (384–417), which obviously refers to the birth of the Chinese version many centuries earlier. Therefore it is the Chinese translation of the sutra that is regarded in the Tangut context as the original version, even if the note claims to have compared it against a Sanskrit version as well. In contrast, little emphasis is placed on the Tangut translators and their involvement seems to have been regarded less consequential.

In this respect, the Tangut situation was similar to that in other parts of East Asia, most notably Japan and Korea, where China remained the main source of the Buddhist tradition and Chinese texts continued to be used and recited even after the appearance of vernacular translations.\(^\text{450}\) This does not deny the non-Chinese, especially Tibetan, influences on Tangut Buddhism, which is also attested in the surviving material. But China clearly emerges as the most important source of tradition. Accordingly, the Tanguts translated not only authentic Buddhist sutras but also apocryphal scriptures composed in China with no Indic originals. For example, the Kozlov collection contains a Tangut translation of the *Sutra of Parental Kindness*, the original of which is believed to have been compiled in China sometime before the end of the 8th century.\(^\text{451}\) The col-
lection also has a Chinese copy of the same text, attesting to its popularity in the Tangut state.\textsuperscript{452}

We may assume that prior to the invention of the Tangut script, the Tanguts were using Chinese as the written language. This would have meant that their spoken language was different from the written one, a situation not unlike the Chinese case where the spoken language by this time was quite different from the written one that was ultimately modelled after the language of the philosophical and literary texts of the pre-Qin literary tradition. Learning to read and write in the Song period entailed not only the memorisation of the basic set of Chinese characters but also the learning of the language of classical texts, as this constituted the language of education and literacy. In this sense, the task of a Tangut student would not have been very different than that of his peers in China or Japan. He learned to read and write by internalizing Chinese primers and classics and with time this enabled him to compose texts in the same artificial language which served as a written \textit{lingua franca} in much of East Asia. An additional difficulty he would have had was the pronunciation of characters, which unavoidably differed from the phonological structure of his own spoken language. This, however, would not have been a major problem as cultures that used the Chinese script tended to develop their own system of reading those according to their own phonology. This was the case in Korea, Japan, Vietnam and even among the Uyghurs. The practice of reading Chinese characters with Sino-Tangut pronunciation is not documented but it is likely that a system analogous to that in place in Japan and Korea would have developed among the Tanguts.

Although we do not have textual evidence of reading Chinese characters in the native language among the Tanguts, there are occasional descriptions of this technique in other cultures around China. Thus the \textit{Zhou shu} \textit{周書} (636) gives the following description of the Uyghurs of Qocho (Gaochang 高昌, modern-day Turfan) using Chinese characters in the second half of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century:\textsuperscript{453}

\begin{quote}
文字亦同华夏，兼用胡书。有《毛诗》、《論語》、《孝經》，置學官弟子，以相教授。雖習讀之，而皆為胡語。
\end{quote}

The script was also the same as in China but they concurrently used \textit{hu} scripts as well.\textsuperscript{454} They had the Mao version of the \textit{Book of Poetry}, the \textit{Analects of Confucius} and the \textit{Classic

\textsuperscript{452} Nie 2010.

\textsuperscript{453} \textit{Zhou shu}, 915.

\textsuperscript{454} The term \textit{hu} ("barbarian") here means "non-Chinese." It is a common designation of Central-Asian, and more specifically Iranian, peoples but in this context it obviously refers to the Uyghurs.
of Filial Piety, and they established [positions for] teacher-officials and apprentices so that they could teach [these works]. Even though they were well-practiced in reading these, they did this completely in the hu language.

These words essentially describe the practice of reading Chinese texts by vocalizing the words in Uyghur, which is comparable to the kundoku 訓読 method used in Japan. In a sense, this was similar to translating the text while reading it, although the translation closely followed the original and the words are vocalized according to predefined “readings” chosen from among a limited set of available possibilities depending on how the reader interpreted the meaning of the text. In a language such as Uyghur, this would have meant jumping back and forth in the text to accommodate for the different word order. The change of word order when reading Chinese characters in a different language is attested in Hong Mai’s 洪邁 (1123–1202) Yijian zhi 夷堅志: 455

契丹誦詩
契丹小兒初讀書, 光以俗語顛倒其文句而習之。至有一字用兩三字者。頃奉使金國時, 接伴副使秘書少監王補, 每為予言以為笑。如「鳥宿池中樹, 僧敲月下門」兩句, 其讀時則曰：「月明里和尚門子打, 水底里樹上老鴉坐。」大率如此。補錦州人, 亦一契丹也。

Khitans reciting poetry
When Khitan children begin to read books, they practice reading solely in the vernacular language, inverting the order of phrases and sentences. They may even read one character as two or three syllables (lit. characters). In the past, when I have been sent as envoy to the Jin state, Wang Bu, the escort vice commissioner and vice director of the Palace Library often discussed this with me in order to make me laugh. For example, the two lines of the poem “A bird perches on a tree in the middle of the pond, a monk knocks on the door beneath the moon” they recite more or less as “moon-bright-in-monk-door-knock; water-bottom-in-tree-on-crow-sit.” Wang Bu was a native of Jinzhou and himself a Khitan.

Hong Mai’s description, which he obtained while visiting the Jin state, is a rare first-hand account of how the Khitans read Chinese texts. It is especially valuable since we know very little about their written culture. 456 According to Hong Mai, when Khitan children learned to read Chinese, they vocalized the text in their native language, using colloquial Khitan. The statement about inverting the word order shows that this was not simply a translation of the Chinese sen-

455 Yijian zhi, bing 丙 18, 514.
456 Hong Mai does not mention the use of the Khitan script, probably because the inverted reading of Chinese characters was of more interest to him. For an analysis of the Khitan language and script in general, see Kane 2009. For a discussion of the recently discovered manuscript volume written in the Khitan large script, see Zajtsev 2011.
sentences into Khitan but a Khitan reading of the Chinese text. Although the poem he brings up as an example is intended to illustrate the comical aspect of such a practice, it is a fitting illustration of how Chinese characters were glossed in Khitan. The resulting string is, of course, nonsensical in Chinese but it works well for an Altaic language in which the verb comes at the end of the sentence and is preceded by the object. Another point worth noting is that Wang Bu attributed this practice to Khitan children at their initial stage of learning to read Chinese. He himself was Khitan but apparently he could identify with Hong Mai’s amusement at such a reading, even though he would have presumably also learned to read Chinese in this manner. As a person in charge of welcoming Chinese delegates he would have not only been fluent in spoken Chinese but also well versed in the Chinese literary tradition. Therefore he himself represents a special case and we do not know whether the Khitans continued to read Chinese texts in this way once they moved beyond the level of primary education, as it was the case in Japan and Korea.

These examples offer a plausible analogy for how the Tanguts may have used Chinese writing before the invention of the Tangut script. The invention of a native script undoubtedly marked the beginning of a new era in this respect. As a national script, it would have become the primary means of written communication and, as such, would have been taught in schools. Yet archaeological evidence tells us that Chinese characters did not fall into disuse but continued to be used alongside the Tangut script. In the Tangut empire different languages and cultures interacted on a daily level and the population was a mixture of Chinese, Tangut, Tibetan, Uyghur and other peoples. The overall majority of the texts discovered at Khara-khoto, however, are written in Tangut and Chinese. It is sometimes assumed that the Chinese material was written by the Chinese population but that is likely to be an oversimplification of the situation and it is more likely that there was no clear distinction between who wrote in what language, at least not according to ethnicity. It is quite feasible that the same person or group of persons would produce texts in two or more languages and that the Chinese and Tangut books reflect not the linguistic background of the scribes or printers but traditions associated with particular texts. As a general principle, a cosmopolitan society is not made up of different groups of peoples who stick to their own linguistic and cultural background but is rather an amalgam of these cultures, with multilingual members using more than one lan-

\[457\] Another curious feature of the Khitan reading of the poem in Hong Mai’s example is that it reversed the two lines. Such a reversal of parallel clauses has also been noted in Tangut translations of Chinese texts; see Nie 2001 and Peng 2011.
The linguistic diversity of manuscripts found in Dunhuang and in the region of Turfan attests that this was a viable scenario in north-western China in the pre-modern period.

3.6 Characteristics of the script

In terms of handwriting styles, Tangut had a similar range of options as handwritten Chinese. There was a regular script which we could call \textit{kaishu} or regular script (e.g. Tang.335/14), a variety of which was also used for printed texts. Printed books in general show greater stylistic regularity than manuscripts and because of this we can read them easier today. Still, manuscripts written with an even script are just as legible. In contrast, manuscripts written in a cursive hand can be very difficult to decipher (Fig. 7). Obviously, this is primarily due to our unfamiliarity with Tangut writing, as a semi-cursive text in Chinese usually poses no problem for anyone who is familiar with handwritten Chinese. Yet in the Tangut case reading becomes significantly more difficult as the degree of cursiveness increases. We know from the Chinese example that the way to improve our ability to read cursive hand is to become more familiar with Tangut handwriting in general, plus to have a higher competence in the language itself, as legibility improves dramatically with a thorough knowledge of the linguistic context. In many cases the reader anticipates the next word and thus the graphic form, even if drastically abbreviated, may function as a visual device that triggers the reader’s linguistic repertoire and thereby disambiguates between the possibilities, rather than “spells out” words in full.

Fig. 7: Cursive handwriting in fragment Or.12380/214.
In some cases the hand changes within the same manuscript, even if it is written by the same person. One such example is manuscript Tang.335/9, a long concertina manuscript with the Mahāprajñāpāramitā sūtra from the Kozlov collection in St. Petersburg. Here the beginning of the manuscript is written in the regular script but later on the handwriting gradually accelerates and changes into cursive (Fig. 8). There is no clear point where the writing style abruptly changes so we cannot attribute this to a different copyist. Quite to the contrary, it seems that both the regular and cursive characters were written by the same person and the only reason for the shift towards the cursive script is that the copyist became less attentive to the handwriting style he was using. In the latter half of the manuscript, the handwriting somewhat normalizes and loses most of its cursiveness.

Fig. 8: Changes in the handwriting style within the same manuscript. On the left hand side is a section from the beginning of concertina Tang.335/9, and on the right a section around half-way through.
The varieties of Tangut handwriting ranging from regular to semi-cursive and full cursive hands are clearly analogous to the Chinese case where we have the well-defined categories of regular (kai), semi-cursive (xing 行, i.e. “running”) and cursive (cao 草, i.e. “draft” or “grass”) scripts. While this equation is admittedly superficial and may be regarded as an inevitable development in any scribal culture, a more specifically Chinese category is that of the seal script (zhuanshu 篆書) used on seals and headings of stele inscriptions. In the Chinese tradition the seal script was an archaic style that went back to the scripts of the pre-Han period which were later superseded by the “clerical script” (lishu 隸書) of the Qin and Han dynasties. In fact, all modern forms of Chinese writing evolved from these early scripts through the process known as clericiation (libian 隸變). On the most basic level, this process was a cursive simplification which entailed the adoption of popular graphs used in everyday writing as the norm, in contrast with their full versions employed under more formal circumstances.

In the Tangut case, however, the script was invented anew in the 11th century and there were no “ancient” graphs to fall back on when an occasion called for the use of formal script. Yet the Tangut script generally followed the Chinese example and this necessitated the use of the seal script on seals and stele headings. The solution was to rely on the Chinese seal script and create artificially archaized Tangut characters. Since the basic strokes and handwriting features of Tangut characters emulated the Chinese regular script, the creation of Tangut seal script graphs was not particularly difficult. The strokes of the regular script were simply replaced with those of the Chinese seal script, which created Tangut seal script characters that were unsurprisingly quite reminiscent of Chinese ones. The number of surviving Tangut seals and inscriptions is small but even within this limited set we can see that there were several types of seal script. Once again, the Chinese tradition served as an example and different styles of seal script were employed in different contexts. For example, the characters on the heading of the Liangzhou stele shown in Fig. 9a is reminiscent of the Chinese “small seal script” (xiaozhuan 小篆), supposedly introduced during the Qin dynasty. The characters on the seal in Fig. 9b are quite different from this, as they seem to emulate the “nine-fold seal script” (jiudiezhuan 九叠篆) used on official seals starting from about the Song dynasty. Here the strokes are characterized by a tendency towards symmetry and an excessive ornamental folding

458 For a monograph-length study of the complex process of clericiation, see Zhao 2009. See also Galambos 2006, 69–77.
pattern, part of the function of which was to fill out the available space and thereby prevent the modification (i.e. forgery) of the original inscription.

The different types of Tangut seal-script characters imitate their Chinese counterparts both in design and function, unambiguously pointing to their source of inspiration. These examples of Tangut seal script provide an intriguing case of an artificial invention of a palaeographic tradition with no historical precedence. In this respect the Tangut script is not unique, as other scripts in northern China have also created artificially archaized seal script characters, and there are archaeological examples of official seals written in such nine-fold seal script in the Khitan large script, the 'Phags-pa or the Manchu script.460

Following the same line of creativity, the Tanguts also invented the characters used in the Chinese tradition in Taoist and Buddhist charms. Thus manuscript N.335 in the Kozlov collection has several such complicated characters.461

459 This seal imprint is #7 in Luo Fuyi’s collection of Xixia official seals (Luo 1982).
460 For examples of the Khitan seal-script characters, see West 2012.
461 See, for example, the illustration in Kychanov 1999, 783.
The inspiration for these obviously comes from the Chinese Buddhist tradition, even though in their original context these characters are supposedly of archaic origin, which was not the case for the graphs used in Tangut charms.

Another curious case of emulating the Chinese textual tradition is the observance of name taboos (bihui 避諱), a phenomenon evidenced in some Tangut books. In China, this was a custom which commenced around the beginning of the dynastic period and which was an important part of Tang and Song book culture.\(^{462}\) With time, the presence or absence of taboo characters became an accepted method of dating books in traditional philology.\(^{463}\) The basic idea behind the custom is that the personal names of the rulers of the reigning dynasty, and other revered figures or certain members of the imperial household, could not be written down directly. Thus the name of Li Shimin 李世民, that is, Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–649) of the Tang dynasty, was tabooed throughout the dynasty, for nearly three centuries. Because of this, the characters 世 and 民 were either written without their last stroke, or replaced with the characters 代 and 人, whose semantic value is synonymous with that of 世 and 民. As time progressed and new emperors ascended the throne, the list of tabooed characters increased until the fall of the ruling house rendered the taboos irrelevant. With the beginning of a new dynasty the whole system began anew. Thus theoretically the presence or absence of specific taboo characters make it possible to date texts because they indicate which emperors have already reigned and which have not. In practice, however, the system was far from consistent and thus relying on it for dating purposes is problematic.

Similar taboo characters occur in Chinese manuscripts from Khara-khoto. For example, TK327 from the Kozlov collection is a manuscript of the Zhong you shen yaomen 中有身要門, a Tantric text translated from Tibetan.\(^{464}\) Accordingly, this is a Chinese booklet that was not brought to Khara-khoto from China proper but translated and written down in Chinese for the first time in the Tangut state. In the manuscript, the character 明 is written as 明.

\(^{462}\) For the problems associated with the taboo of the name of the First Emperor of Qin, see Beck 1987.

\(^{463}\) For taboo characters in general, see Wang 2007 and Soymié 1990; for their use in the medieval period and especially the Dunhuang manuscripts, see Dou 2007 and Galambos 2012b.

\(^{464}\) Shen Weirong 沈衛榮 (2010, 349) translates the title as The Essential Instruction of the Body in Intermediate State (bar do) and points out its significance, along with a series of similar titles, for understanding the religious history of the Tangut kingdom and Central Asia. For photographic images of the manuscript, see E cang, v. 5, 106–112.
missing the last two strokes on the inside of the component 月. The apparent reason for this is that ming 明 was part of the personal name of Yuanhao’s father Deming and thus the character could not be written in its full form. Another solution, also analogous to the Chinese custom, was to replace it with the character xian 顯, as it was the case when Yuanhao decreed that the new Song reign title Mingdao 明道 should be written in the Tangut state as Xiandao 顯道.

A surprising phenomenon is that taboo characters were also used in the Tangut script. While we do not know well enough the Tangut texts to spot cases when a tabooed character was replaced with a synonymous one, there are examples of omitting a stroke from a character. Such Tangut taboo characters so far have only been identified in translations of the annotated versions of the Analects of Confucius and the Classic of Filial Piety. Both of these texts were printed during the reign of Renxiao when Confucian teachings enjoyed a privileged status in the Tangut state. It is unclear why only these two books contain taboo characters and whether this means that this custom was limited in scope. In these two books nine characters have been identified but the system was used rather inconsistently, which mirrors the use of taboo characters in China. Among the taboo characters were 毛 (孝 “filial piety”) and 严 (里 “village”), both of which were tabooed because of their link with Chinese characters that were part of the Chinese name of the ruler, i.e. Li Renxiao. We do not know Renxiao’s Tangut name but his Chinese surname was Li and presumably the Tangut character 严 was tabooed because its meaning matched that of the Chinese character 里, which was homophonous with the Chinese surname of the ruler. Similarly, the character 毛 had the meaning “filial piety” which was part of Renxiao’s Chinese name.

465 Taboo characters are not only seen in manuscripts but also in print. See, for example, Shi 2007, 833.
466 It is interesting to see that even in the same manuscript the character 明 is not always tabooed. For example, on the last page there are tabooed and non-tabooed forms together. Similarly, the manuscript of Zhuohuo neng zhao wuming 拙火能照無明 (The Inner Heat which is Able to Illuminate Ignorance, gtum mo [Shen 2010, 349]) uses the same type of modified 明 even in its title, both at the beginning and end of the text (Ecang, v. 5, 252–256). Parallel to the inconsistent observance of the name taboo also the orthographic inconsistency between the head and end title, in which the last word is written respectively as 無明 and 无明, that is, with a full form of the character 無 and then its non-standard variant.
467 On the Tangut translation of the Analects, see Nishida 1968; on the Classic of Filial Piety, Nie 2007a.
468 Jia 2011.
The above peculiarities of the Tangut script and especially how it was used in different social and ritual contexts show its indebtedness to the Chinese writing system. The artificial invention of archaized seal-script characters and the existence of taboo characters are features closely connected with Chinese characters as used in traditional China. That the Tanguts reconstructed the same features within their own script demonstrates that they intended to produce an analogous system, which at the same time was distinctly non-Chinese. The Tangut script emulated its Chinese prototype, including its socio-ritual function and its handwriting and orthographic characteristics. Even though a new logographic script was clearly not the best fit for the Tangut language, the Tanguts did not choose any of the Central Asian alphabets but constructed their own system which appears extremely complex. While we do not fully understand the principles behind the script, there is no question that the adoption of an alphabet or a syllabary would have greatly facilitated the acquisition of literacy skills. The fact that the Tanguts opted not to go down this path shows that convenience and facility were less important for them than the ambition to produce a system that could match the Chinese script and its unequalled prestige throughout East and Central Asia, which was also closely connected with its role in the dissemination of Buddhist scriptures.