Introduction

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Western Xia (1038–1227) was a dynastic empire in medieval China, based in the city of Xingqing, later Zhongxing (modern-day Yinchuan of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region). At its height, the Tangut imperium encompassed most of Ningxia, Gansu, northern Shaanxi, western Inner Mongolia, as well as parts of today's Qinghai and Xinjiang.

In the eyes of a historian, one of the most crucial aspects of a bygone empire is its socio-economy. However, when Mongol officials in the Yuan government followed the Chinese historiographical convention to compile chronicles for the preceding Song, Liao and Jin dynasties, they left the history of Western Xia alone unattended. Although the *History of Song*, *History of Liao* and *History of Jin* devoted chapters to the Tanguts, they offer a far too concise account of so complex a regime. This lack of chronicling also means the absence of any specific historical treatise on various aspects of the Tangut society, notably the genre of economic history, known in Chinese historiography as the *Records of Food and Goods* (*Shihuo Zhi*). It is also not surprising that references to Western Xia in Chinese archives are made mostly in the contexts of dynastic changes, military conflicts, and inter-state relations between the Song, Liao, Jin, Huihu (Uyghur) and Tubo (Tibetan) regimes. Very little is addressed or even known about the socio-economic history of Western Xia. In the meantime, most of the scarce narratives on the Tangut economy available to historians have been exhausted and regurgitated into common knowledge by Tangutologists throughout the past decades. As early as the 1980s, Wu Tianchi offered a comprehensive and commendable analysis of the Tangut economy in his *Xixia Shigao* (*A History of Western Xia*), which was based on surviving literatures documented in Chinese archives.¹ Further progress was made in 1994 when Qi Xia and Qiao Youmei published their study, *Liao Xia Jin Jingjishi* (*An Economic History of Liao, Xia, and Jin Dynasties*), where the Dangxiang Tangut economy is discussed within the compass of a chapter.² The ensuing years, however, witnessed a stagnation in this field of study. Handicapped by a remarkable lack of

1 Wu, Tianchi: *Xixia Shigao* [西夏史稿]. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, reprinted 1983.

2 Qi, Xia; Qiao, Youmei. *Liao Xia Jin Jingjishi* [遼夏金經濟史]: *An Economic History of Liao, Xia and Jin Dynasties*. Baoding: Hebei University Press, 1994.

primary sources, experts in Tangut Studies struggled to break the ground. As a result, our understanding of many aspects of the Tangut economy remained vague, if not altogether void.

In the early 20th century, a team of Russian explorers discovered a large pile of manuscripts at the site of Khara-Khoto (part of modern-day Ejin Banner, Inner Mongolia) in north-western China, most of which are written in the Tangut script. The Russians took the entire corpus home, a tragic loss of precious archaeological finds for the Chinese. Nonetheless, this event proved a key catalyst in the birth of the modern field of Tangutology.

It turns out that a significant amount of records on the Tangut economy lurks inside this corpus of medieval texts. The Tangut law code excavated in Khara-Khoto, the *Revised Laws of Heavenly Prosperity*, with its many rules and regulations on trade and transactions, has significantly enriched existing sources on Tangut social and economic history.³ The subsequent publication of a Chinese translation of this important Tangut law code breathed life into new approaches to reimagining the historical economy of Western Xia. Since then, Du Jianlu made important advancements in the study of the Tangut economy with his publications of *Xixia Jingjishi Yanjiu* (*A Study of the Economic History of Western Xia*) and *Xixia Jingjishi* (*An Economic History of Western Xia*), both of which use not only Chinese archives, but also sources from the Tangut laws.⁴

Notwithstanding sound and steady progress, the dearth of primary materials on the Tangut economy remained a major obstacle to scholarship. Not only was the like of a *Record of Food and Goods* nowhere to be found, sources on the social and economic lives of the ordinary Tanguts, which would have enabled case studies of this kind, remained unheard of and unseen. To decode the mysteries of the Tangut Empire, there was no shortcut but to discover more primary sources, especially those written by the Tanguts themselves. By good fortune, this turned into a reality in a dramatic turn of events in the process of preparing and editing the *Russian Collection of Khara-Khoto Manuscripts*.⁵

3 Shi, Jinbo; Nie, Hongyin; Bai, Bin (eds.). *Xixia Tiansheng Lüling* [西夏天盛律令]: *The Tangut Laws of Heavenly Prosperity. Zhongguo Zhenxi Falü Dianji Jicheng* [中國珍稀法律典籍集成]: *A Collection of Rare and Precious Chinese Codes of Law*, vol. 5. Beijing: China Science Publishing & Media, 1994. Shi, Jinbo; Nie, Hongyin; Bai, Bin (eds.). *Tiansheng Gaijiu Xinding Lüling* [天盛改舊新定律令], hereafter *Revised Laws of Heavenly Prosperity*. Series: *Zhonghua Chuanshi Fadian* [中華傳世法典]: *Law Codes in the Chinese Civilization*. Beijing: Law Press of China, 2000.

4 Du, Jianlu. *Xixia Jingjishi Yanjiu* [西夏經濟史研究]: *A Study of the Economic History of Western Xia*. Lanzhou: Gansu Culture Publishing House, 1998. Du Jianlu. *Xixia Jingjishi* [西夏經濟史]: *An Economic History of Western Xia*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2002.

5 Shi, Jinbo; Wei, Tongxian; Кычанов, Е.И. (eds.). *Ecang Heishuicheng Wenxian* [俄藏黑水城文獻], hereafter *Russian Collection of Tangut Manuscripts*. Институт восточных рукописей

The new historical materials discovered towards the end of the 20th century are known as the Tangut social documents. The academia has devoted much attention to these manuscripts in recent years. I am fortunate to have witnessed and taken part in the search, discovery, compilation, registration and study of these documents, which lasted for a total of almost 20 years. The transcription (from cursive to standard script), translation, and interpretation of the Tangut social documents have unveiled many mysteries surrounding the imperial history of Western Xia.

The discovery of this world-class corpus of historical materials is a matter of great fortune. In 1992, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences delegated me to collaborate with experts at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (IOM, St. Petersburg) to publish an exhaustive collection and translation of the Tangut manuscripts first discovered at the site of Khara-Khoto in the early 20th century. An agreement was reached in the spring of 1993, and in the following years of 1994, 1997 and 2000, a Chinese team paid four visits to the IOM to compile the manuscripts, most of which had been organised and registered by generations of Russian scholars.

However, given the enormous size of this collection and the presence of many fragments and single pages scattered across and alongside the better-preserved texts, I could not help but wonder whether the Russian experts had left a number of pages unregistered. After repeated requests, I was informed that there had indeed been some broken and disjointed volumes, but that they would unnecessarily burden our already overwhelming workload in the duration of the short research trip. Finally, on our third visit to the IOM in 1997 and at my insistence, the team was granted access to the unregistered manuscripts. It turned out that the Russian experts had assorted the manuscripts that either lacked fronts and ends, or could not be easily named, identified or classified, into a total of 110 boxes. When I opened these boxes, what I saw was indeed a pile of diverse and disjointed Tangut texts, most of which seemed to be Buddhist scriptures. But in the same collection was a large number of social documents that reflected various aspects of the Tangut society. Most of these documents are written in the cursive script. Fortunately, some prior exposure to the cursive style enabled me to recognise enough to tell the types and traits of these texts. Their potential significance to the field of Tangutology appeared increasingly clear as I identified a wide array of records, ranging from household

Российской академии наук, formerly the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, formerly Institute for Ethnology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1996–2011.

registers, financial accounts, contracts, military documents, legal complaints, announcements, official records, to private letters. In the end, I picked out the social documents, registered them in detail and arranged for the professional production of a collection of photocopies, resulting in 50 boxes of primary materials, index cards and several hundred photocopies of primary materials.

This unexpected reward of invaluable, albeit incomplete manuscripts also greatly impressed another member of the team to the IOM: Dunhuang expert and senior editor of the Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, Mr. Jiang Weisong. It is no secret to any historian that these documents may be rightfully considered social archives, indispensable to any reliable historical narrative. Primary materials such as historical archives are the core and foundation of historical research, for these first-hand accounts are more trustworthy than various kinds of secondary literatures, such as the narratives of historians, research findings abroad, and memoirs of later generations. Uncompromised by artificial or arbitrary editing, and untainted by falsifications or fabrications, primary sources provide a more authentic and straightforward gateway to history. In other words, these social documents are critical to any proper understanding of the Tanguts and their history.

During my fourth visit to St. Petersburg in 2000, I worked through the remaining 50 boxes of materials. An additional discovery was made of numerous social documents pasted to the inner covers of Buddhist sutras. The result was a total of 1,000 registers and more than 1,500 documents. The sheer size testifies to the significance of this historical source.

In the aftermath of the discovery of the Tangut social documents, I was equally fortunate to take part in the interpretive work that ensued from the research trips. Given the sudden appearance and acquisition of a large number of additional materials, much more time is required to reorganise the photocopies. Therefore, the scheduled publication date of the *Russian Collection of Khara-Khoto Manuscripts* was postponed. According to the original plan, based on both the bibliography provided by the Russian experts and the quantity of materials photographed, the secular texts of the Tangut corpus would be printed in 5 books, from volume 7 to 11. The unexpected identification and inclusion of as many as 1,000 secular texts, however, changed our timetable. In fact, this body of social documents were estimated to fill up to three full volumes: 12, 13 and 14, which we duly added to the plan for publication.

Since the social documents were at the time completely new to academia, they had never been edited or studied. It was a daunting task to name each single document, in order to ensure that it appears with a valid caption and description in the forthcoming *Russian Collection of Khara-Khoto Manuscripts*. Surely, to give a fitting title to a document presupposes an accurate

interpretation of its content. Most of these cursive writings would have been difficult to translate even if they had been written stroke by stroke, with perfect clarity, in the standard script. At times, the characters are continuously and ceaselessly cursive, like soaring dragons and fluttering phoenixes; other lines are schematically styled and simplistically scribed. Blurred and damaged parts are spotted throughout the manuscripts. Some texts are written with brush-strokes on both sides, which explains why the ink seeps through the page and ruins another text, only to exacerbate the plight of scholars trying to identify the words. Therefore, the first step to interpret and transform the social documents into user-friendly primary sources is to decipher the code of the Tangut cursive script. But there is no systematic approach to decoding the highly idiosyncratic cursive script other than repeated conjectures and prolonged inferences. Attempting and failing at identifying a character hundreds of times is a kind of work both strenuous and entertaining. In fact, my interest in interpreting the Tangut social documents only intensified over time.

Reading through the social documents repeatedly over the years, I have tracked the shapes and patterns of the Tangut cursive characters in reference to, and by comparison to the standard script. After a long eight years, in 2005, I completed the annotated bibliography of the Tangut social documents for the *Russian Collection of Khara-Khoto Manuscripts*, which range from volume 12 to 14. Throughout this process, I gradually decrypted the abstruse system of Tangut cursive writing. With this knowledge, I then translated a number of the more important documents for the convenience of scholars interested in using these sources for their studies.

The third phase of my research was devoted to a systematic examination of the Tangut social documents. Amongst the approximately 500 registers of economic records excavated in Khara-Khoto, there are household registers, *shoushi* self-reports, demographic accounts and registers by *liliu* and gender, which altogether furnish us with first-hand demographic information on Tangut Khara-Khoto. There are also tax records, including accounts of land and grain taxes, grain loans by *liliu* & households, hay loans, as well as capitation and irrigation taxes, which give us a comprehensive view of the tax system in Tangut-ruled Khara-Khoto. Also available in large numbers are accounts of grains and properties, including grain accounts of the military supervisory district and by *liliu*, accounts of cash and property, livestock, and other miscellaneous materials, which reflect the government's practice of registering, calculating, preserving and storing food and properties. Last but not least, there are documents concerning trade and transaction, such as sales records (sell & purchase taxes, accounts of grain, livestock, and alcohol) and loan records (monetary loan interests, grain loans, and land sales), which tell

us as much about commercial activities and commodity prices in local markets. Contracts constitute the majority of Tangut economic documents. Prior to this discovery, few Tangut contracts had been known: 15 pawning contract fragments in Chinese and 2 other contracts written in Tangut. The newly discovered contracts are much more numerous and diverse, including loan contracts (grains, properties and cash), transaction contracts (land, livestock and human beings), lease and rent contracts (land and livestock), pawning contracts (livestock and properties), employment contracts (human and animal labour), exchange contracts and communal contracts. The size and scope of these materials show the omnipresence and importance of contracts in the daily economic activities of the common people at the base level of Tangut society. The more research done on these social documents reveals more evidence of the value and significance of these historical sources, in and beyond the field of Tangutology.

The Tangut social documents are a novel area of study. First of all, it presumes a high level of familiarity with Chinese economic history, in both primary sources and secondary literature, alongside a wide range of topics: household registration, taxation, pawning and loaning, commerce and contracts. It also requires a thorough engagement with the existing scholarship on social documents excavated at two other archaeological sites: Dunhuang and Turpan. It is on these studies that I spent the past ten years, in which I wrote and published a number of papers on Tangut household registers, taxes and contracts.

In 2007, my research proposal for the *Economic Records of Western Xia* received sponsorship from the National Social Science Fund of China. Thereafter, I continued to uncover more Tangut social documents. Due to the increasing quantity of archives, the project did not come to a conclusion until 2012. The next four years witnessed further research in this field, with the main body of Tangut economic records interpreted, the content of this book enriched, its structure optimised and viewpoints further clarified. Academic research takes place over a long stretch of time, punctuated by a sequence of temporary findings that improve on previous results. For example, in an article published in 2010 titled “Preliminary Discussions on the Appellations and Revisions of the *British Collection of Khara-Khoto Manuscripts*,” I presented and translated a number of Tangut materials then freshly discovered in the British archive.⁶ Some of them were identified for the first time of their type, and had not yet been interpreted with precision, due to excessive loss and damage of

6 Xie, Yujie; Wu, Fangsi (eds.). *Yingcang Heishuicheng Wenxian* [英藏黑水城文獻]: *British Collection of Khara-Khoto Manuscripts*. Second Northwest University for Nationalities, Shanghai Ancient Works Publishing House, and the British Library. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Works Publishing House, 2005.

the manuscript. Within the span of a few years, however, those texts made their ways into the present work, where they are interpreted anew. Thanks to the discovery of an important printed text on the 'junior accounting magistrate' and related topics in the *Laws of Heavenly Prosperity*, the then-unknown document was finally identified as a grain tax receipt. Recent studies have shown that this fragment, only 20 words long, could be the earliest block-printed economic document hitherto known to the world. It has added new materials to both the economic history of China and the history of block-printing, within the larger history of science and technology.

The *Economy of Western Xia* provides new primary sources to Tangut studies, archaeology, linguistics and medieval history. It seeks to add some fresh and well-grounded insights to our existing knowledge of the medieval economy of Western Xia. In this way, it may contribute to not only the social historical scholarship on Western Xia but also the economic history of East and Inner Asia as a whole during this period. From the perspective of palaeography, this work may also serve as a textbook or a source of reference for those interested in acquiring the ability to read the Tangut cursive script.

Classifying a pile of fragmented documents may be demanding and exhausting, but to cultivate a barren land into a fertile soil, and to turn broken pages into a legendary tale, is not a mission to be taken lightly. Twenty years have passed since the discovery of this precious archive in 1997. Throughout these years, I have intermittently taken up other projects, but the interpretive study of the Tangut social documents has always preoccupied the bulk of my time. It is after all the duty of a historian to weave the fragments of the past into a fair tapestry of historical narrative.

Due to both the large quantity of economic records and the difficulty in deciphering the Tangut cursive script, this book may be considered at its best a work-in-progress. Where it commits an error or exposes an insufficient analysis, I am most eager to receive critiques from the readers. It is also my hope that experts in the relevant and allied fields would engage with these sources and produce better research. In this way, we collaborate to deepen our common understanding of Tangut society. Apart from the economic records, there are also a variety of other texts, ranging from military and government records to those in the private sphere.

In 2007, I visited Mr. Ji Xianlin at the 301 Hospital, where I informed him on the selection, compilation, and interpretation of the Tangut social documents, and updated him on the progress and prospect of this research. Praising the work, Mr. Ji handwrote a title, *Xixia Wenshu Yanjiu* (*A Study of Tangut Documents*) for this book in a show of support and encouragement. He passed away only about a year later. Now, eight years have elapsed since our tremendous loss. This book is published in fond and profound memories of Mr. Ji.