The Empire of Western Xia and the Tangut Economy

Contemporary to the Song Empire, a dynastic regime of mighty power and lasting influence emerged in what is today the northwest of China. The inhabitants of the land named their regime the ‘Great Xia Kingdom White and High,’ or simply the Kingdom of Great Xia. And since it was located to the west of the Song, it is by convention referred to in the Chinese historiographical tradition as Western Xia (1038–1227 AD). The imperial dynasty was ruled by a total of ten emperors, spanning a history of 190 years. The Tanguts stood off against the Northern Song and Khitan Liao in its early history, and later against Southern Song and Jurchen Jin. In each of the two ‘three-kingdom’ periods, it constituted a major force and played a critical role in a delicate balance of power in medieval China. Further adding to the complexity of imperial diplomacies in this period was the presence of the Uyghurs, Tibetans, and other ethnic groups with overlapping territories, mutual goals, and conflicting interests. The majority of the population in Western Xia was the prominent Tangut tribe of Dangxiang Qiang. During their rule, the Tanguts excelled in military power, steered a large economy, and prospered in all aspects of cultural life.

Although the Tanguts built an empire not inferior to the Song, Liao, and Jin Dynasties, imperial historians of the Yuan Dynasty left the history of Xixia unchronicled. As a result, unlike the *History of Song*, *History of Liao*, and *History of Jin*, the vast number of Tangut historical records have not survived in the form of imperial chronicles. Furthermore, when the Mongol army breached the walls of Xia, a sizeable portion of Tangut publications and cultural artefacts were destructed in war. Whilst some precious materials have luckily survived, they have been buried deep in the dust of history over many centuries. All of these misfortunes have added to the aura of mystery around the Tangut Empire. Nevertheless, the main contour of the history of Xia has remained accessible to those who consult the brief and cursory portrayals of the Tanguts within the pages of the Histories of Song, Liao, and Jin.

The geography and natural environment of a historical regime is a key factor in its socio-economic experiences. Therefore, it is fitting and proper to first investigate the natural conditions of Western Xia before proceeding to discuss the state of its economy.

1 Natural Conditions of Western Xia

The Tanguts inhabited a territory that encompassed a diverse range of geographic features, which are the main factors in the formation of the Tangut society. Especially noteworthy are the landscape, waters, and climates.

The territories of the Tangut empire encompassed a wide range of landscapes and diverse geographic features: plains, steppes, mountains, and deserts. After the Dangxiang tribe migrated north from the medieval Songzhou (prefecture of Song, Songpan of Sichuan province) in the Tang Dynasty, they scattered and settled on the Loess plateaus of the Shaanxi and Gansu areas. By the time the Tangut empire was proclaimed in the early 11th century, the Tanguts had significantly expanded their territory. The east and south were the Loess plateau, with the Liupan mountains as its southernmost barrier. To the north were the Ordos and Alashan areas of the Mongolian Plateau, featured by its long-stretching deserts dotted by pastures, including the Mu Us Sandyland, the Tengger Desert, and the Badain Jaran Desert. To the west are the northern borders of the Tibetan plateau, where the Qilian mountains stand as a shield to the Hexi corridor. The Helan Mountains are embedded in this landscape like a piece of beautiful Sapphire. Here are the fertile Hetao plain and the thin stretch of oasis across the otherwise sandy Hexi corridor.

A broad sketch of the Tangut landscape reveals the predominance of high mountains, bleak deserts, and limited arable land. In a sharp contrast to the

FIGURE 1 The Helan mountains

Central Plains covered with a higher proportion of hills and plains suitable for agriculture, Western Xia suffered obvious geographical disadvantages in the production of grains. Chronicles from the Song Dynasty record that “The Xia relied on the fertile land south of the River, bound by the Heng mountains on the right, and by the Tiandu and Maxian mountains on the west. The rest of its land is insufficient for cultivation or animal-husbandry.”¹

Not only does the Yellow River flow across the entire Tangut territories, but some of its branches upstream and midstream also fall within the Tangut realm, such as the Rivers Huangshui, Tao, Qingshui, Kuye, and Wuding. Since time immemorial, the Yellow River has been exploited for the purpose of irrigation and remained a lifeline for local agriculture throughout the life of Western Xia. Irrigation by river was especially important for Tangut peasants dealing with persistent draught, who could afford to count much less on natural precipitation as a reliable water supply. The Hetao area “enriched the five grains, especially in the growing of rice and wheat. Between Gan (zhou) and Liang (zhou), however, irrigation relied on the many rivers nearby. As for Xing (zhou) and Ling (zhou), there are ancient waterways: the Tanglai and Hanyuan canals, both diverted from the Yellow River. With the benefit of irrigation enjoyed, there is less risk of flood, or peril of draught.”² Although the Yellow River has earned for what is present-day Ningxia the reputation of the “Prosperous Jiangnan beyond the Northern Frontiers,” it also furnishes the area with natural catastrophes. With an unexpectedly heavy rainfall, dams break, unleashing floods upon the humans and livestock of the farmlands.

There are also endorheic rivers within the Tangut territory, which form an area of inland waters in the Hexi-Alashan and another near Ordos. The most renowned is the ‘Black Water’ from the melting snow of the Qilian mountains, which flows into the Juyan Lake (Mongolian: Gashuun Nuur), nourishing a trail of oases along its way, thus providing an ideal base for Tangut agriculture. By “between Gan and Liang, however, irrigation relied on the many rivers nearby,”³ the chronicle refers to rivers formed by the convergence of meltwaters from the Qilian mountains. One of the oases was Shazhou (modern-day Dunhuang, Gansu) where “residents relied on locally-produced wheat as their

1 Li, Tao (Song Dynasty). *Xu Zizhi Tongjian Changbian* [續資治通鑑長編], hereafter *The Extended Zizhi Tongjian*. Book 466, Sixth Year of Yuanyou (1091), Ninth Month, Renchen. Emended Critical Edition. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1979.

2 Tuo Tuo, et al. (Yuan Dynasty). *Songshi* [宋史], hereafter *History of Song*. Book 486. “The State of Xia” Part II. Emended Critical Edition. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1977.

3 *History of Song*, Book 486, “The State of Xia” Part II.

FIGURE 2 The Yellow river near Yinchuan, Ningxia

FIGURE 3 The Yellow river near Zhongwei, Ningxia

principle source of nourishment.”⁴ This demonstrates beyond doubt the existence of developed agricultural zones along the Hexi corridor. The very city of Khara-Khoto, where the largest corpus of Tangut manuscripts was discovered, was one of the oases along the downstream of the ‘Black Water.’

The climate in Western Xia is typically continental, with long winters of low temperature and dry air that allow a short time for crops to grow. Some areas are plagued by chronic draught and negligible rainfall, which cause enormous challenges to farming lands and raising livestock. The Tanguts did, however, enjoy nature’s gift of ample sunlight, since adequate heat, strong solar radiation, and high diurnal temperature variation are all favourable conditions for agriculture. With that said, in those areas farther away from the natural waters, draught alone is able to cripple the economy. Thus, where rainfall in the spring and autumn are indispensable for sowing and harvesting, the Tanguts depended solely on the mercy of heaven and their own fortune for their livelihood.

4 A.J.H. Charignon, *Le Livre de Marco Polo*. Pékin: Albert Nachbaur, Vol. 1. 1924, Vol. 2. 1926, Vol. 3. 1928. Ch. 57.

FIGURE 4 Juyan Lake Basin, Ejin Banner, Inner Mongolia (near Khara-Khoto)

FIGURE 5 Badain Jaran Desert, Inner Mongolia

In sum, the natural condition of Western Xia is inferior to that of the Central Plains. Lands naturally favourable for habitation such as the Hetao area are extremely rare. Although in more than a few regions, it may be said that vegetation used to be more plentiful than now, it should also be observed that water and land resources had already been overly exploited under the Tanguts. The frequency of war and the forced exile of the people further exacerbated the deterioration of the natural environment.

2 Dangxiang People and Their Economy before the Tangut Empire

The early Dangxiang Tanguts, a branch of the Western Qiang ethnics—as they were known in the Han Dynasty—lived between expansive steppes and hills in what are modern-day south-eastern Qinghai and north-western Sichuan. According to the *Old Book of Tang*, “as the Western Qiang weakened after the Wei and Jin dynasties, its tribes either succumbed to the central power, or fled to the fields and mountains. It is only after Zhou destroyed Tanchang and Dengzhi,⁵ that the Dangxiang gained strength. Their territory sets its eastern boundary near Songzhou, borders Yabghu to the west, reaches the Chongsang, Misang and other Qiangtic tribes in the south, and connects with the Tuyuhun in the north. They are situated in the middle of hills and valleys, and stretches across three thousand *li* of land.”⁶ To the west of the Dangxiang ethnics were the Tibetans, and to its northwest lied the regime of Tuyuhun. At the time, Dangxiang was comprised of multiple clans by their unique family names, of which the most powerful was Tuoba. In the early Tang period, Tuoba Chici, the Dangxiang chief of the Tuoba clan, paid tribute to the Empire. Honoured by the bestowment of the Tang imperial name, Li, the leader was named the Xirongzhou Dudu, or Commander of the Prefecture of Western Rong.

Originally, the Dangxiang were a people of herdsman. And up to the times of Sui and Tang, they knew only how to raise livestock and engaged in no agriculture. The *Book of Sui* states plainly that the Dangxiang “herded yaks, sheep and swine for food, and knew not how to sow and reap.”⁷ Even during the Tang

5 TN: Tanchang (Chinese: 宕昌), a Qiangic regime based in southern Gansu, near modern-day Tanchang county; Dengzhi (Chinese: 鄧至), a Qiangic power established in present-day northern Sichuan, to the west of Jiuzhaigou.

6 Liu, Xu, et al. *Jiu Tang Shu* [舊唐書]: *Old Book of Tang*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975, Book 198, “Dangxiang Qiang”; see also, Li, Yanshou, et al. *Bei Shi* [北史]: *History of the Northern Dynasties*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, Book 96, “Dangxiang”; Wei, Zheng et al. *Sui Shu* [隋書]: *Book of Sui*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1977. Book 83, “Dangxiang.”

7 *Book of Sui*, Book 83. “Western Regions: Dangxiang.”

Dynasty, the Dangxiang “raised yaks, horses, donkeys and sheep as a source of nourishment. But they knew not how to sow and reap, and grew not the Five Crops in their fields.” At that time, all that the Dangxiang relied on for food, clothing, and other utilities came directly from animal husbandry: they consumed meat and milk, and fabricated clothes using the fur and skin of their livestock. Even their internal chambers were “covered with woven wool of sheep and hairs from Yak tails.”⁸

However, with the rise of the neighbouring Tibetan power, the Dangxiang tribes came increasingly under pressure. Scattered around present-day northern Sichuan, southern Gansu, and Qinghai, they finally migrated closer to the Central Plains in the early 8th century. The Tang Empire moved the Commandership of the Jingbian Prefecture, originally established in the Longxi area, to the Qing Prefecture (modern-day Qingyang, Gansu), and appointed the Dangxiang chief, Tuoba Sitai, as the Commander in effective control of twelve prefectures. In mid-8th century, the Tibetans seized the moment of the Anshi Rebellion (755–763 AD) to invade the poorly-guarded Hexi and Longyou, forcing the Dangxiang tribes in these areas to once again move eastward, to an area north to Yinzhou (modern-day Mizhi county of Shaanxi), and east to Xiazhou (today’s Baichengzi, north of Jingbian county, Shaanxi). The Commandership of Jingbian Prefecture relocated to Yinzhou. Over time, a large number of Dangxiang clans arrived in Suizhou (present-day Suide county of Shaanxi) and Yanzhou (Yan’an, Shaanxi). Some of the tribes aided the Tibetans in their assault on Tang cities, culminating in the fall of Chang’an. In the second wave of Dangxiang migrations, the clans dwelling near the Qing prefecture were commonly referred to as the “Tribes of the Eastern Mountains” (Dongshan-bu) whereas those that entered the Xia prefecture were called the “Tribes of the Plain Xia” (Pingxia-bu). The southern borders of Pingxia are marked by the Heng mountains, which was known to the Tang as the Southern Mountains, hence the name for the Dangxiang clans that settled down in this area, “The Tribes of the Southern Mount” (Nanshan-bu). The Dangxiang tribes that migrated inland still maintained their habitual practice of herding. As their wealth accumulated and population bloomed, a process of social stratification based on ownership and proprietorship gradually took shape within the clans.

In the First Year of Guangming during the Tang Dynasty (880 AD), Huang Chao’s peasant rebels captured the imperial capital, Chang’an (Xi’an, Shaanxi). In the First Year of Zhonghe (881 AD), the Dangxiang chief Tuoba Sigong, then Regional Inspector (Cishi) of the You Prefecture, joined other Regional Commanders (*Jiedushi*) in answering Xizong Emperor’s call to suppress

8 *Old Book of Tang*. Book 198, “Dangxiang Qiang.”

FIGURE 6 Site of Tongwan city, prefecture of Xia

the Huangchao rebels. After Chang'an was recovered in the Third Year of Zhonghe (883 AD), Tuoba was awarded the title of *Dingnan Jiedushi* (Regional Commander of the Dingnan Circuit), and once more conferred the imperial name of Li, ruling five prefectures from his government in Xiazhou. The place was, a few centuries ago, the capital of the Xiongnu Xia state (407–431) founded by Helian Bobo during the Sixteen Kingdoms period of Eastern Jin Dynasty. The other four prefectures were Yin, Sui, You (Jingbian county, Shaanxi), and Jing (Mizhi county, Shaanxi). Since then, Tuoba exercised *de facto* autonomous rule in the region. Throughout the Five Dynasties period (907–960), the Dangxiang regime based in Xiazhou attached itself to Liang, Tang, Jin, Han, and Zhou, assorted dynasties that rose and fell in rapid succession in the Central Plains. At the same time, it fought a series of wars with neighbouring cities and emerged from these struggles an even greater power than before.⁹

9 Xue, Juzheng, et al. *Jiu Wu Dai Shi* [舊五代史]: *Old History of the Five Dynasties*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1976. Book 138, "Dangxiang"; *History of Song*. Book 485–486. "State of Xia" (Parts I & II); Tuotuo, et al. *Liao Shi* [遼史]: *History of Liao*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974. Book 115, "Extra Sources on Western Xia"; Tuo Tuo, et al. *Jin Shi* [金史]: *History of Jin*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975. Book 134. "Western Xia." See also Wu, Guangcheng (Qing Dynasty). *Xixia Shushi* [西夏書事]: *Book of Western Xia*. Fifth Year of Daoguang (1835) printed edition (TN: see also Beijing: Wenkuitang, 1935; Taipei: Guangwen, 1968).

FIGURE 7 Tangut mural of ploughing oxen, in Yulin cave, No. 3

The great migration in the Tang Dynasty did not significantly alter the Dangxiang reliance on herding as the main pillar of its economy. The Dangxiang Tanguts traded their animal products for grains, cloths, and other commodities from the Central Plains. A main Tangut export was the famed breed of Dangxiang steeds, favoured by the inlanders and traded at extravagant prices.

A sizable number of Dangxiang Tanguts, however, did resort to farming once they settled on cultivated lands. These families thus began a historical process of transitioning from nomadic herding to settled agriculture, eventually becoming farmers. This change in economic production greatly enriched the Dangxiang social life. Historically, many areas which came under Dangxiang rule had already preserved a base of agriculture with a high speed of development and economic production. The joint cultivation efforts by both Dangxiang and Han Chinese peasants in the area unleashed a long-lasting impact on the shape of the Tangut society.

The Anxi Yulin Cave No. 3, west of Dunhuang, Gansu, is a reservoir of Tangut art. In its mural portraying the Fifty-one-faced, Thousand-armed Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, is an image of ploughing: two oxen bear a horizontal frame connected to the plough shaft—the so-called ‘two oxen drawing the plough’ method—whilst the peasant lays one hand on the plough and has the other clutch the whip, a vivid depiction of the ploughing field in Western Xia.

3 Founding of Western Xia and Its Economy

In the early years of Northern Song, the Dangxiang ethnarchs were tributary kings to the Song Empire. Li Jipeng's succession to his elder brother in 980 AD, however, catalysed conflicts within the tribes. In the end, he resorted to surrendering the five prefectures to direct rule by Song officials. In the seventh year of Song Taiping Xingguo (982 AD), Song bestowed on Li Jipeng the title of Regional Commander of Zhangde Circuit (*Zhangdejun Jiedushi*)¹⁰ and sent an army to Xiazhou to take control over the Tangut prefectures. The imperial edict required not only the settlement of Jipeng in Kaifeng but also the presence of all Tangut Li royalties within the *Sima* range of family relatives in Bianjing.¹¹ Li Jiqian, a younger cousin of Li Jipeng and at the time in charge of Dangxiang internal affairs within the *Dingnan Jiedushi* (*Duzhi Fanluoshi*), vehemently opposed the transfer of the five prefectures and the Song demand for the Li family as virtual hostages. He led a cohort to flee to Dijinze, in modern-day Ordos, Inner Mongolia, where he proclaimed autonomous rule from the Song Dynasty.

Li Jiqian stood fast against Song summons of surrender and offers of recruitment, to which he responded with more looting. In the First Year of Yongxi (984 AD), Jiqian reached the Xiazhou area, where he suffered a major defeat by Yin Xian (932–994), the Song prefect of Xiazhou (*Zhizhou*), and Cao Guangshi (931–985), the inspector-commissioner (*Duxunjianshi*) whose thousand-strong cavalry dashed into the Tangut camps in Dijinze. The Song army prevailed decidedly against Jiqian's force, captured the chief's mother and wives, and forced him into dormancy, waiting for fortune to turn her tide. In the following year, however, Jiqian maneuvered a deceptive surrender, where he surprised Cao Guangshi in an ambush, killing the general and his followers before capturing Yinzhou. Now with a prefecture, Jiqian assumed the position of *Dingnan Liuhou*, giving him temporary command of affairs within the Jiedushi, and appointed officials who formed a new bureaucracy around him. Enraged, Emperor Taizong of Song dispatched four armies to besiege Jiqian, but although serious damages were inflicted, the expedition was not able to uproot the foundation of the new Dangxiang regime in Xiazhou, due to the lack of effective military coordination on the frontiers.

10 TN: Zhangdejun (彰德軍) was a circuit near present-day An'yang, established by the Later Liang as a strategic post, and abandoned after mid-10th century. It was an empty title recycled as an honorary status for Li Jipeng.

11 TN: *Sima* (緦麻): the funerary costumes worn for the deaths of cousins, grandparents and children, married aunts, and in-laws. Here, it specifies the range of family relatives.

Jiqian, fully aware that his emerging power was far from a full-fledged kingdom, came to the strategic decision to submit to Khitan rule in a diplomatic effort to leverage support against the Song Dynasty. He was subsequently dubbed the King of Xia by the Liao emperor, the archenemy of Song, and was given a Khitan princess as wife. The deal was within his reach: in a fierce rivalry between Liao and Song, the rise of a Dangxiang power within Song's western gates was all benefit and no menace to Liao. For the court in Bianjing, which sees itself as the only orthodox and legitimate heir of the Central Plains, the Dangxiang lands had been former Song territories. For the Song Empire to recognise Tangut independence, therefore, was as painful as cutting off its own flesh and bones. Even worse was the prospect of an alliance between the Dangxiang and the Khitan, which would have placed Song between two formidable enemies. For these reasons, the Song court resolved to forestall the growth of Tangut power. So, whilst Jiqian was exploiting Song-Liao hostilities to carve out a space for his ambitions in the west, Song tried to leverage Jipeng to check and undermine Jiqian by re-appointing the elder cousin as the *Dingnan Jiedushi* in the First Year of Duangong (988 AD), with a new imperial name of Zhao Baozhong, to prepare for a campaign against Jiqian. Jipeng, however, compliant overtly but, considerate of his own interests covertly, wavered in his thoughts and oscillated back and forth between the two sides. Furthermore, Liao again crowned Jiqian as King of Xia, pressing him to launch an offensive against Song.

Amongst all Chinese dynasties, Song is known for its suboptimal military power. The inadequacy of its army was aggravated by the lack of prudent command. These are the reasons that there are many more losses than victories in Song's war records. In the Third Year of Zhidao (997 AD), Li Jiqian forced the Song Dynasty to recognise his status as *Dingnan Jiedushi* based in Xiazhou. All the five prefectures were recovered to Dangxiang rule.

Li Jiqian then set his eyes on Lingzhou, modern-day Wuzhong, as his new strategic focus. Through repeated interceptions of Song deliveries of supplies and munitions, he reduced the prefecture to isolation. By this time, years of attrition had witnessed the rise and fall of Li Jiqian's fortune. His Dangxiang regime finally emerged from a succession of surrenders and revolts, and proved itself a major threat to the Song Dynasty. After another disappointing campaign five contingents strong, Song officials sank into a quagmire of hesitations and debates over the cost of giving up Lingzhou. Those who opposed the abandonment considered the prefecture "a strategic location for herding, farming and campaigning," a barrier against barbarians from across the borders. Indeed, as

the Central Plains' gateway to purchase horses from the Hexi areas, Lingzhou was important for not only military but also economic reasons.¹²

In the Third Year of Xianping (1000), Li Jiqian again seized grains and provisions from a Song division, and besieged Lingzhou with a cavalry force of 50,000 in the following year. With key outposts and strategic locations occupied, he ordered soldiers to cultivate more fertile lands around the outskirts of the city, showing determination for a long-term siege. As large towns near Lingzhou fell to Jiqian one after another, the lifeline between Lingzhou and the rest of the Song Empire was cut off completely. It was only a matter of time before the entire city collapsed. In the spring of the Fifth Year (1002 AD), Jiqian concentrated his picked troops in a swift assault on Lingzhou. Prefect Pei Ji, desperate for aid, fell together with the wall.

After capturing Lingzhou, Jiqian immediately reported the victory to Liao. For the first time, there was a large, central city within Tangut territory. The next year, he renamed the Ling prefecture 'Xipingfu,' transforming it into a new centre of Dangxiang rule. This is followed by the capture of Xiliangfu, in present-day Wuwei, Gansu.

Immediately after the victory at Lingzhou, the coupled effect of political instability and a severe draught convinced Li Jiqian of the importance of agriculture in consolidating Tangut power. For a long-term politico-economic policy, he promoted water conservation and irrigation projects in support of agricultural production.

Just as the Dangxiang leader's ambition grew in the flames of two conquered imperial cities, the Tibetan chief Pan Luozhi, who recently received a commission from Song in the Sixth Year of Xianping (1002 AD), devised a stratagem against the Tanguts. In a feigned surrender, he surprised the Dangxiang army in a sudden attack, leaving Li Jiqian fatally wounded. As a result, Song's emergent threat from the northwest was temporarily alleviated. In the ninth month of the same year, the Khitans sent a massive army against Song, but meeting tenacious resistance, they settled for peace in the famous 'Chanyuan Treaty.' Song thus gained relief in both the Midwest and most of the North within the same year. This relative stability laid the foundation for a period of successful development.

After Li Jiqian died in battle, his son Li Deming succeeded the kingship. In a general state of amity between Liao and Song, he continued the Pro-Khitans

12 *Zizhi Tongjian* Book 44. Second Year of Xianping in Zhenzong's Reign (999), Sixth Month, Wuwei.

policy of his father, but also tried to amend ties with the Song Dynasty, resulting in rather cordial diplomatic relations between the two regimes. The Song emperor honoured Deming as the *Dingnan Jiedushi* and King of Xiping, in addition to annual gifts of silver, silk, and tea: the imperial award bestowed reached as much as 40,000 in silver, cloth, and coins, as well as 20,000 *jin* of tea leaves. A further testament to the bilateral friendship was the establishment of trading markets in *Bao'an jun*, an area in modern-day Zhidan county of Shaanxi province. The Song empire traded economic benefits in return for quietness on the western front, whilst the Tanguts further secured and strengthened their power.

The Deming regime, rather isolated on the periphery of trade and production hubs in the Central Plains, still fell short of a well-rounded economy. Indeed, it still remained in need of exchanges, subsidies, and complements from the Song Dynasty. Through markets established along the frontiers, the Tanguts were able to trade a wide array of livestock and other local produces for goods such as silk and handicraft merchandises:

Since the Fourth Year of Jingde, Western Xia trading markets are set up in *Bao'an jun*, where silk clothes and fabrics are exchanged for camels and horses, cattle and sheep, jade, fur-felt carpets, and *gancao* herbs; perfume and spices, porcelains and lacquerwares, ginger and cinnamon, etc. are traded for *mila* amber, *sheqi* musk, fur and hemp shirts, goat-antelope horns, the mineral *sal ammoniac*, bupleurum herbs, cistanche, safflower, and plume. Those outside the official markets are free to trade with each other, and so are those paying tributes in the imperial capital allowed to trade their goods.¹³

Given the many and mutual economic benefits of commerce, there also arose private initiatives of cross-border trade. Song officials in those prefectures reported these incidents to the emperor, who nonetheless showed a spirit of magnanimity and reconciliation:

The Hedong border-pacification commission (*Yuanbian Anfusi*) reports: "Civilians in the Prefectures of Lin and Fu engage in frequent transactions of goods on their own initiatives and set up unauthorised markets near the borders of Xia prefecture. It is hereby hoped that the Imperial Majesty grants a permission to arrest the miscreants, and to establish a system of prize and punishment in order to dissuade them from further

13 *History of Song*. Book 186, Eighth Chapter on Food and Goods, On Mutual Trade.

pursuing such activities.” The emperor replies, “I have heard that the roads in yonder lands are rugged and hazardous. As for those who trade amongst themselves, so long as the quantity is not large, it is sufficient to apply the previous edict, with an additional, reasonable amount of alert and attention into this matter.”¹⁴

Deming’s territory covers stretches of lakes and lands teeming with the famed ‘dark and white salt’ (*qingbaiyan*). Both of high quality and at low prices, Tangut salt threatens the sales and profits of Xiechi salt (Yuncheng, Shanxi) in the Song Dynasty. Whether to tighten or to relax imperial sanctions against Tangut salt was the subject of numerous debates within the Song court.¹⁵ It was also true that sometimes, Deming’s envoy tasked with paying tributes visited Song cities to purchase contraband goods and weapons to make up for his own needs.¹⁶

When natural disasters befell the Tanguts, Deming requested a large sum of grains for famine alleviation, both out of economic concerns and intention to force the Song emperor into a difficult decision. Wang Dan, then premier of Song, offered his counsel:

Zhao Deming once requested grains in the number of millions under the pretext of a famine. The emperor circulated the memorial to the officials. All are enraged, “Deming has just agreed to his share of the treaty, and now he breaks his oath by such an outrageous request. We humbly entreat Your Majesty to issue an edict to scold him.” Wang Dan alone remains silent. The emperor asks him, “What then is your opinion?” Dan replies, “It is my wish that an edict be issued to Deming, saying that in such a crisis of famine on your territories, the imperial court which always pacifies and defends faraway lands would as a matter of course grant aids to those in need. And yet, since grains stored in border cities as provisions for the army are the source on which too many imperial guards depend, they cannot be easily appropriated for other purposes. Therefore, the Emperor has demanded that the three main Bureaus hoard grain, in the number of a million, in the imperial capital Bianjing, and that Deming dispatch his own men to come in order to fetch them.” The emperor, delighted,

14 *Zizhi Tongjian*, Book 72. Second Year of Dazhong Xiangfu in Emperor Zhenzong’s Reign (1009). November, Yimao.

15 *Zizhi Tongjian*, Book 73. Third Year of Dazhong Xiangfu in Emperor Zhenzong’s Reign, (1010), Fifth Month, Renwu.

16 *Zizhi Tongjian*, Book 79. Fifth Year of Dazhong Xiangfu in Emperor Zhenzong’s Reign (1012) Eleventh Month, Bingwu.

adopts the advice. When Deming received the imperial edict, he paid his worship on bended knees, “There is real talent in the Imperial Court, and it is not appropriate for me to act in this manner.”¹⁷

Over time, Deming moved his base from Lingzhou near the Song border farther north. In the Fourth Year of Tianchi in Northern Song (1020 AD), Li Deming officially designated the town of Huaiyuan by the Helan mountains as his new capital, which he then renames Xingzhou (today the city of Yinchuan, in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region). The new ‘Prefecture of Prosperity’ gradually grew into the magnitude of a grand metropolis in the northwest, and the fertile land around this area formed the base and lifeline of the Tangut economy.

With the increase of his power over the years of rest and restoration, Deming shifted from his father’s policy of eastward expansion into Song territories to focus instead on the western frontiers, scheming against the weaker Tibetans and Uyghurs along the Hexi corridor. In fact, Li Jiqian himself arranged an army to take over Liangzhou, an effort that was quickly lost. Deming’s own campaigns against the Uyghur regime in Ganzhou was thwarted and relaunched several times without much progress. By this time, however, the Tangut kingdom had eclipsed the Uyghurs with respect to both their military and economy.

In the Sixth Year of Tiansheng (1028), Deming placed his son, Yuanhao, at the head of an army sent to once more test the strength of Ganzhou (modern-day Zhangye, Gansu). In horror and haste, the Uyghur Khan fled the city at night, handing Yuanhao an achievement which earned him the official title of the Crown Prince.

During Deming’s reign in Western Xia, the Prefecture of Liang (present-day Wuwei, Gansu) came under the occupation of the Tibetans, Dangxiang, and the Uyghurs. Dispatched there in September of the First Year of Mingdao (1032), Yuanhao first lulled the Uyghurs to rest by the delusive appearance of engaging the Song army in Huanqing but then attacked Liangzhou in a sudden strike. After capturing this strategic post in the Hexi area, the Tanguts received the surrender of Guazhou (today’s Guazhou county, Gansu) and Shazhou.

In this way, Dangxiang power under the leadership of Li Deming claimed the entire Hexi corridor, effectively replacing the Tibetan and Uyghur supremacies in the region. The dramatic expansion of Tangut territory not only laid the blueprint for the foundation of Western Xia but also invigorated its economy in the long run by claiming the rich and moist Hexi lands suitable for

17 *Zizhi Tongjian*. Book 68. First Year of Dazhong Xiangfu in Emperor Zhenzong’s Reign (1008), First Month, Renshen.

both pasturing and harvesting.¹⁸ Indeed, given the double-edged legacy of the Yellow River as the source of both irrigation and inundation throughout the history of imperial China, it is worth noting that the Hetao region between Ling, Xia, and other prefectures alone enjoys all benefits and little harm from the “Mother River.” Naturally, this plain proved to be the lifeline of the Tangut economy. Overall, during this period, both Fan and Han populations dwelled and flourished on Tangut lands with general stability, where they produced and traded in large quantities, building an economic and military backbone for the future empire.

As king, Li Deming showed moderate ambitions. Mindful of the cost and futility of excessive military campaigns, he hoped instead to leverage Song’s economy to improve Tangut livelihood. Historical archives have passed down an interesting conversation between Deming and his heir, Yuanhao:

[Yuanhao] many times remonstrated Deming against submission to the Central Empire. Deming then admonished him, “We have been in wars for too long, which is ultimately counterproductive. In vain, we exhaust ourselves. Our tribes have for thirty years received fine silk clothes thanks to the benevolence of the divine Song emperor, a grace we shall not betray.” Yuanhao replies, “To herd in fur clothes is the nature of the Fan people. The destiny for such heroes is kingly hegemony, so what use is there for fine silk?”¹⁹

This conversation vividly contrasts the distinct characters and ambitions of Deming and Yuanhao, as well as the different emphases in their economic policies: whereas the father aimed to invigorate trade and receive benefits from Song, the son preferred to revitalise the traditional economy based on raising livestock. Indeed, this conversation was a symbolic prelude to the eventual separation of Western Xia and its resistance against Song under Yuanhao’s reign.

4 Tangut Politics and Economy in the Early Period of Western Xia

Ever mightier than before, the Western Xia after Yuanhao’s succession saw ripening conditions to proclaim an independent empire. With a far-reaching vision and an unrelenting spirit of innovation, the new King enacted a series

18 *History of Song*. Book 486. “Western Xia” Part II.

19 *Zizhi Tongjian*. Book 111, First Year of Mingdao in Emperor Renzong’s Reign (1032), Eleventh Month, Renchen.

of political, military, and cultural policies in preparation for the establishment of a new regime.

With respect to titles, Yuanhao replaced the Tang and Song imperial surnames of Li and Zhao with Weiming (猘明 [ɣwe mji]), meaning 'the close family of Dangxiang.'²⁰ He altered his own title to 'Wuzu,' the Tangut word for 'emperor.' Regarding literacy and literature, the king ordered his reliable adviser, Yeli Renrong, to create an entirely new script to record the Tangut language. The Fan and Han Academies were established and placed in charge of printing texts in the Tangut and Chinese languages. Buddhist in faith, the Dangxiang royalty set up translation bureaus that interpreted and printed sutras.

Yuanhao's institutional reforms integrated ethnic customs with the imperial model of the Central Plains. The emperor established an elaborate bureaucracy, where officials were assorted into the Departments of Literary and Military affairs, respectively. Below the ranks of the Central Secretariat (*zhong-shu*), Grand Chancellery (*zaixiang*), Council of Military Affairs (*Shu[mi]shi*), Grandees (*dafu*), Palace Commanders (*shizhong*), and Grand Commandants (*taiwei*), both Fan and Han officials held a variety of positions. The city of Xingzhou was elevated to the status of a great metropolis, Xingqingfu: The Capital of Prosperity and Festivity.

Culturally, however, Tangut customs and mores prevailed in the new empire. A new edict was passed, requiring all Dangxiang adults to shave their heads to match the Tangut hairstyle. Administrators and generals wore different costumes both on duty and in private, leaving the commoners in blue and green dress in order to distinguish the noble from the vulgar.

Yuanhao launched ambitious reforms in the military. Within the Tangut territories, the emperor established a number of military districts with their own supervisory commissions:

[The Emperor] established twelve supervisory military districts under the commands of appointed aristocrats: 70,000 strong from the North of the Yellow River to the Wularuo mountains,²¹ on guard against the Khitans; an army of around 50,000 is on duty south of the Yellow River

20 Shi, Jinbo. "Xixia Minghao Zakao" [西夏名號雜考] (Miscellaneous Studies on Tangut Titles). *Zhongyang Minzu Xueyuan Xuebao* [中央民族學院學報]: *Academic Journal of the Minzu College (University) of China*, issue 4, 1986.

21 TN: Wula or Moni mountains is a part of the Yin Mountains in present-day Inner Mongolia.

in Hong,²² Baibao,²³ An and Yan Prefectures,²⁴ Luoluo,²⁵ Tiandu and Weijing Mountains, on alert against Huan, Qing, Zhenrong and Yuan prefectures;²⁶ The left-wing Youzhou district boasts 50,000 men,²⁷ in defence against Lin, Yan, Lin, and Fu Prefectures;²⁸ The right-wing Ganzhou district deploys 30,000 men to keep a watchful eye on the Tibetans and Uyghurs; Helan is protected by a legion of 50,000 in size, Lingzhou by another force of 50,000, and finally, 70,000 more are stationed in the Xingqing city of Xingzhou. The total number amounts to more than 500,000.²⁹

Yuanhao launched a series of military campaigns against Northern Song, Tibet, and the Uyghur Khanate to expand the Tangut territory. At his time, the map of Western Xia encompassed present-day Ningxia, most of Gansu province, northern Shaanxi, western Inner Mongolia, as well as vast lands in eastern Qinghai. Western Xia emerged a third major force in the game of great powers, competing on equal terms with Song and Liao empires. And although Tangut-owned lands were generally on the more barren peripheries of the Central Plains not known for the best environmental conditions, there were still plenty of arable lands for agriculture and livestock to flourish.

On the 11th day of the 10th month in the first year of Song Baoyuan (1038 AD), Yuanhao ascended the throne and claimed the heavenly mandate for imperial rule. After he officially proclaimed the founding of the Great Xia and himself as its emperor, Yuanhao submitted a public memorandum to the Song to notify

22 TN: Hongzhou (洪州) is a Tangut prefecture in an area southwest to modern-day Jingbian county, Shaanxi province.

23 TN: Baibao (白豹), a strategic fort along the Song-Xia frontier, near present-day Baibao town of Wuqi, Shaanxi.

24 TN: Anzhou and Yanzhou (安鹽州), near modern-day counties of Dingbian, Shaanxi and Yanchi, Ningxia. Two cities south of the Yellow River.

25 TN: Luoluo (羅洛), an area.

26 TN: Prefectures under Song control: Huanzhou (環州), modern-day Huan county, Gansu; Qingzhou (慶州), today's Qingyang and other parts of southern Ningxia; Zhenrong (鎮戎), the site of a major Xia victory over Song, designated as a post-war trading city, near present-day Guyuan, Ningxia; Yuanzhou (原州), today's Zhenyuan and Pingliang.

27 TN: Youzhou (宥州), in the time of Western Xia, was an area named Changze to the northwest of Xiazhou, along the modern-day border between the south of Inner Mongolia and Shaanxi province.

28 TN: Linzhou (鄜州), Shaanxi District under Song control, encompasses modern-day Ganquan, Fu and Luochuan counties; Yanzhou (延州), near Yan'an; Linzhou (麟州) and Fuzhou (府州), today's Shenmu, and Fugu counties of Shaanxi, respectively, would both be conquered and annexed by the Tanguts around 1148 AD.

29 *History of Song*. Book 485. "State of Xia" Part II.

FIGURE 8 Geography of Western Xia in the era of Northern Song

his former patron of his independence.³⁰ The new kingdom would stand firm in the northwest and prove a fierce rival in a two-century standoff against the empires of the Central Plains. With *de facto* imperial status along with new modes and orders modelled after the example of the celestial empire, the Tanguts effectually moved into a 'feudal' order characterised by the system of 'lordship' and 'fiefdom:' the royalty, nobility, and upper stratum of the clergy constituted the three major pillars of the ruling estates, with a vast base population composed of common peasants and herdsmen and an additional class of serfs and semi-slaves regularly traded as 'shijun' and 'nupu' in the market.³¹

30 *Zizhi Tongjian*. Book 122, First Year of Baoyuan in Emperor Renzong's Reign (1038). Tenth Year, Jiayu.

31 Wu Tianchi, 1983, pp. 151–159; Shi, Jinbo. *Xixia Shehui* [西夏社會]: *Tangut Society* (vol. 1). Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press. Aug. 2007, pp. 211–229; Shi, Jinbo. "Heishuicheng Chutu Xixiawen Mai Renkou Qi Yanjiu" [黑水城出土西夏文賣人口契研究]: "A Study of the Tangut Contracts of Human Transaction Excavated in Khara-Khoto" in *Zhongguoshe-huikexueyuan Yanjiushengyuan Xuebao* [中國社會科學院研究生院學報]: *Academic Journal of the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, Issue 4, 2014.

At his ascension to the imperial throne, Yuanhao recognised and endorsed new modes of economic productions. With equal emphasis on herding and farming, he enacted a dual policy of maintaining traditional animal-husbandry whilst advancing agriculture. Moreover, the emperor resorted to and relied on benefits from the neighbouring Song Empire, especially to compensate for the weaknesses of the Tangut economy.

Due to its chronic dearth of grain, Western Xia cultivated its agricultural economy with care and eagerness. The Tanguts not only fully exploited the expediency of the Yellow River for the purpose of irrigation, but also took over the Qin (*qinjia*), Han (*hanyan*), and Tang (*tanglai*) canals, in addition to projects of their own. The “Canal of King Hao” (*haowangqu*), a site that remains to this day in Yinchuan, Ningxia, is reputed to have been built during Yuanhao’s reign.

As one of Xia’s patron states, the Liao empire often acted as the mediator between Song and Xia. However, the founding of the Tangut Empire, significant as it must have been, did not find itself into the “Annals” (*Benji*) and the “Book of Xixia” in the *History of Liao*. What is certain is that Yuanhao’s coronation exacerbated an already flimsy ground for diplomatic relations between the states, adding more tension to their frigid relations. As expected, the Song Court, in a spur of fury, lashed out against Yuanhao, depriving him of titles and imposing a sanction against all cross-border markets. Announcements were posted on walls near the border, declaring anyone who captures or beheads Yuanhao to be the next Dingnan Jiedushi,³² at which point the frozen bilateral relation dipped to its nadir. The Song government first adopted a policy of yanking exchange markets (*hushi*) and removing trading posts (*quechang*) in an attempt to choke the Tanguts into submission.

At the time of Yuanhao’s revolt, the Emperor ordered the Shaanxi and Hedong to cease their trade activities and abolish the Bao’an district markets; later, military authorities in Bingbian, Shaanxi were also prohibited from exchanging with the Qiangic people. After a long period of time, Yuanhao voluntarily submitted himself again as a subject, and dispatched several emissaries to request the restoration of the markets.³³

But before that, the begrudged Song, eager to punish the ungrateful client, and the ambitious Xia, intent on marching into the Central Plains, contended in three successive battles near Sanchuankou (to the northwest of modern-day Yan’an), Haoshuichuan (to the north of Longde county, or at the town of Xinglong in Xiji county, Ningxia), and Dingchuanzhai (to the northwest of today’s Guyuan, Ningxia). In 1040 AD, the third year of Jingzong’s new reign,

32 *History of Song*. Book 485. “State of Xia” Part I.

33 *History of Song*. Book 186. Eighth Section on Food and Goods, Laws on Mutual Trade.

FIGURE 9 Territories of Western Xia

some of Song's most eminent generals were captured, leaving Yanzhou in a precarious condition. The next year, numerous military leaders including Ren Fu, the Song general in command of the camp, along with soldiers in the tens of thousands fell in the Battle of Haoshuichuan. The catastrophe shook Song cities in the Guanyou area—to the east of Hangu and Tong fort—and left the Renzong emperor with hardship. The next year was marked by another disaster for Song, this time in Dingchuanzhai, where Ge Huaimin, the associate general of Jingyuan district,³⁴ and another forty high-ranking officers died in battle, with nearly ten thousand soldiers also captured alive by the Tanguts. Pursuing the rout deep into the enemy's territory, Yuanhao's legions looted Weizhou (present-day Pingliang, Gansu), terrorising a large number of Guanfu populations into the mountains.³⁵ All three campaigns ended with resounding Song defeat. Ever more hubristic, Yuanhao posted public notices to the people announcing his imperial majesty's desire "to arrive myself at the Wei River, and

34 TN: Jingyuanlu (涇原路): a politico-military district under Song and Jin rule, which lasted from 1041–1142 AD. The territory included modern-day Longde, Guyuan, Jingyuan and Xiji.

35 TN: Guanfu: Guanzhong and Sanfu, refers to the area surrounding Chang'an.

march straight into Chang'an."³⁶ Moreover, inscription fragments unearthed in the Tangut Mausoleum provide corroborating evidence with such lines as "... could launch straight into the Central Plains."³⁷

The ensuing years were punctuated by intermittent offensive and defensive moves, as well as bargains and negotiations. Wars and diplomatic contentions revealed the weaknesses of Song armies, from their overly stretched supply lines to suboptimal military leadership. Losses on the battlefield also led to repercussions in the Chinese economy, "trapping the impoverished and infirm in tax and debt."³⁸ The imperial exchequer, emptied over time, proved the root cause of rampant peasant rebellions, which shook the foundation of the Song Empire. The Tanguts, however, benefited less than expected from the Song-Xia wars. Farmlands lied in waste, agriculture suffered losses, tea evaporated from the market, and cattle and sheep were sold en masse at low prices to the Khitans in exchange for cash to fund the war effort. Adding to the plight of the poor peasants was the compulsory military draft, which gave rise to public complaints against the imperial policy. This is evident in the folk ballad chanted in protest of the war: *Shi Buru*, or *The Ten Ways it is Worse*.³⁹ A slightly subdued Yuanhao eventually agreed to come back to the negotiating table. Besides the principle issues of title and territory, most of the eleven items of memoranda raised by the Tangut envoys to the Song emperor concern economic interests. The most important ones are a proposed increase in Song's annual monetary reward to the Tanguts, an expansion of trade zones, and an additional Tangut export of 'dark and white salt' to the Central Plains.⁴⁰ Both sides reached an agreement in the fourth year of Song's Qingli reign (1044), by which "Yuanhao finally submitted himself to Song as an imperial subject, and entitled himself the king of his regime."⁴¹ With an annual gift of 255,000 *liang*, *pi* and *jin* of silver, fine silk, and tea lavished on the Tanguts, the Song Dynasty recognised the *de facto* independent status of the Tangut Empire. This peace settlement, commonly referred to as the Qingli Treaty, proved yet another

36 Wang, Gong (Song Dynasty). *Wen Jian Jin Lu* [聞見近錄]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1984.

37 Li, Fanwen and Museum of Ningxia (eds.). *Xixia Lingmu Chutu Canbei Subian* [西夏陵墓出土殘碑粹編]: *Inscription Fragments Excavated in the Tangut Tombs*. Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1984. See image 98, M108H:145.

38 TN: Fan Zhongyan, "Da Shou Zhao Tiao Chen Shi Shi" (答手詔條陳十事): "Statement of Ten Affairs in Response to the Emperor's Hand-written Edict."

39 *History of Song*. Book 486. "State of Xia" Part 1.

40 *Zizhi Tongjian*. Book 163. Eighth Year of Qingli in Emperor Renzong's Reign (1048). Second Month, Xinhai. History of Song, Book 330. "Biography of Renzhuang."

41 *Zizhi Tongjian*. Book 149. Fourth Year of Qingli in Emperor Renzong's Reign (1044). Fifth Month, Jiashen.

monumental diplomatic feat some 40 years after the Liao-Song Chanyuan Treaty of 1005 AD. Thereafter, the extended Song-Xia frontiers finally breathed the air of peace, and in the midst of recuperated bilateral relations, flourished in trade at least for a period of time. Two years after the treaty was signed, Song and Xia reached the decision to re-establish trade posts out of their own economic interests and considerations.

In the sixth year of Qingli, trade markets were restored in the two districts of Bao'an and Zhenrong. Since there was a lack of pasture land for horses and sheep driven to the area near the markets, an additional trade post was established at the Shunning fort.⁴²

Historically, Tangut rulers placed great emphasis on economic production within their realm. With a solid base of the livestock industry, the Tanguts profited mainly from exporting extra animal products to Song merchants in the trade markets. The Song Dynasty, on the other hand, relied heavily on Tangut horses and sheep, to the point that the court would designate specific quotas at which local markets should import them. For example, in December of the sixth year of Renzong's Qingli reign (1046):

In the Jiyou month, [the emperor] issued an edict, by which he orders the markets at Bao'an and Zhenrong to each exchange for 2,000 horses and to purchase 10,000 sheep.⁴³

Although in name, Western Xia was a tributary state of the Khitan Liao Empire, serious conflicts emerged between the two sides over time as Yuanhao painstakingly maneuvered to pit the two other empires against each other in a strategy of self-protection. He even rallied the support of ethnic Tangut tribes living within the Khitan border, inciting them to resist the Liao order and providing them with critical aid in their rebellion. Consequently, in the thirteenth year of Chongxi (1044 AD), not long after Song and Xia reached a peace treaty, the Xingzong Emperor of Liao, Yelü Zongzhen (personal name: Zhigu) (1016–1055 AD) himself led an army 100,000 strong and divided into three legions, crossed the Yellow River, and invaded the newly founded Western Xia. In response, Yuanhao applied a mixed strategy: he deceived the enemy with feigned signs of weaknesses, fortified the walls, cleared the fields of any

⁴² *History of Song*. Book 186. Eighth Section on Food and Goods, Laws of Mutual Trade.

⁴³ *Zizhi Tongjian*. Book 159. Sixth Year of Qingli in Emperor Renzong's Reign (1046). Twelfth Month, Jiyou.

resources, and surprised the Khitan camps with strikes at night. The Liao army suffered inestimable casualties and a complete rout. The Tanguts captured dozens of illustrious Khitan officials, including the escort-commandant (*fuma duwei*) Xiao Hudu. In a frenzied hurry, Zongzhen managed to escape the battlefield. However, as soon as Yuanhao turned the initial defeat into an ultimate victory, he pressured Liao into a peace agreement on the best terms. Because the main battle was fought in Hequ (within the modern-day city of Ordos, Inner Mongolia), it is also known as the Battle of Hequ.

Yuanhao spent almost the entirety of his life in the midst of wars. For this reason, he won a great name for himself in written history. In his late years of indulgence in pleasure, he was assassinated in a palace coup. His reign lasted for a total of 11 years. He is known as the Jingzong Emperor of Western Xia.

After the death of Yuanhao, his young son inherited the throne while literally still 'in swaddling,' at the age of only one. Western Xia at the time found itself in a precarious situation. With the emperor infantile and ineffectual, political power fell into the hands of the maternal clan. The Mozang family, with lady empress Mozang and her brother Mozang Epang in command, tended to both administrative and military affairs. The duo of the Empress and the 'imperial maternal uncle' calmed and coordinated the numerous Dangxiang tribes, amassed soldiers and trained the forces regularly in preparation for war. During this period of regency, the Tanguts embarked on a series of campaigns against both the Liao and Song with advances and setbacks on all sides.⁴⁴

Within two years of Yuanhao's death and in the first year of Yansi Ningguo (1049 AD), Xingzong Emperor of Liao seized the moment to dispatch three armies against Xia. The southern and middle crusades proved unavailing, whereas the northern campaign sent to the Helan mountains successfully trounced a cavalry force of three thousand led by Mozang Epang himself and thus captured the wives of Yuanhao, families of Tangut nobles, as well as a large sum of livestock.

Fully aware of the strategic and economic importance of farmlands, the imperial minister Mozang Epang launched repeated incursions into heavily cultivated agricultural zones on the other side of the border. Territorial disputes over the fertile fields of Quyehe⁴⁵ caused major rifts between the two sides, and bilateral relations steadily deteriorated. According to the *Zizhi Tongjian*:

44 *Zizhi Tongjian*. Book 162. Eighth Year of Qingli in Emperor Renzong's Reign (1048). First Month in the Spring, Xinwei.

45 TN: Quyehe (屈野河), historically known as a fertile territory near present-day Shenmu, Shaanxi. Its ownership was the cause of much dispute within Song and between Song and Xia.

The Regulatory Commission (*jingluesi*) then reported to the emperor, that the palace-attendant officer (*dianzhi*) Zhang Anshi and Jia En be appointed as special inspectors, in order to thwart [the incursion]. However, by then the enemies had occupied and cultivated the lands for an extended period of time, pretending as if the territory were their own. Furthermore, all the economic benefits of agricultural production were reaped by their chief, Mozang Epang. As a result, the invaders would resort to fighting if Anshi and others forced their case, but when the officers adopted a softer approach, they would simply refuse to leave. The Regulatory Commission repeatedly demonstrated records of past territorial boundaries and ordered the Tanguts to return the farmlands. The sister of Mozang Epang sent her confidant *Buqu* Jiayike to inspect the fields, who returned and reported [to the Empress] that the concerned territories were originally owned by the Han. [She] then ordered Epang to return, with the intention to give the encroached lands back [to their proper owners]. But it fell upon the occasion that the Empress died in a civil strife of Jiayike. And thereafter, Epang indulged even more in his misdeeds.⁴⁶

The Song court, on its part, adopted the policy of economic sanctions to curb Tangut encroachments:

The Regulatory Commissioner Pang Ji commented, “For the westerners (Tanguts) to trespass on Quyehe and to cultivate the fields illegally was originally the scheme of Mozang Epang. Unless the markets are closed down [in retaliation], I fear that the incursion into our interior lands shall never end. [I therefore] beseech [your Imperial Majesty] to temporarily halt the trade posts along the Shaanxi borders, in order that the Tanguts lay blame on Epang. If so, then negotiation may be again on the table within years.” [The Emperor] thus issued an edict whereby he orders punishment to all in the four districts of Shaanxi who dare to engage in private trade with the westerners.⁴⁷

46 *Zizhi Tongjian*, Book 185, Second Year of Jiayou in Emperor Renzong's Reign (1057). Second Month, Renxu.

47 *Zizhi Tongjian*, Book 185, Second year of Jiayou in Emperor Renzong's Reign (1057), Second Month, Jiaxu. See also *History of Song*. Book 186, On Food and Goods, Laws on Mutual Trade.

When at last the two sides opted for peace, they established the border line, restored the markets, and resumed trade. At that time, the Tanguts vied with the Tibetans for control over Qingtang (Xining, Qinghai), and successfully subdued the areas encompassing the cities of Xishi (Dingxi county, Gansu) and Qingtang. As a result, Tangut power extended all the way to Hezhou (today the city of Linxia, Gansu).

At the impressive age of fourteen, Liangzuo rallied support from his court officials to quell the rebellion of Mozang Epang, whose execution marked the beginning of the young emperor's sovereign rule. However, he was fatally wounded in the Fourth Year of Gonghua (1066 AD) during a siege of Song's Qingzhou. Pining away in anguish in the following year, Liangzuo ended his nineteen years of reign as the Emperor Yizong.

As the economy of Western Xia grew over time, the role of currency proved more salient in the hustles of trade activities. Ever since Deming's reign, coins had been on the list of annual imperial gifts from the Song Dynasty. Song coins were the most highly circulated currency within the territories of Western Xia. According to the author's own field research, Song coins are unearthed on a massive scale, not only along the Song-Xia frontiers in northern Shaanxi and southern Ningxia, but also in the Tangut hinterlands and even remote areas of the Hexi corridor never reached by Song power. Most of these excavations date to Northern Song, representing nearly every reign period of the dynasty. It is worth mentioning that in the discovery of depositories of coin hoards, the vast majority were Song coins, whereas Tangut mints only constituted a minority. Such a proportion further illustrates the wide circulation and employment of Song currency in Western Xia. For a while, when copper coins were temporarily placed on prohibition in Wang Anshi's economic reforms, they flooded on an even greater scale and sped into western territories of the Tanguts.⁴⁸ Although the Tanguts also regularly exchanged goods with their own currency, exactly when they minted coins is nowhere to be found in written records available today. Amongst excavations dated to the early imperial period, archaeologists have found coins with the inscription, "Treasured Coins of Divine Fortune," (*Fusheng Baoqian*) which echoes the reign title, "the legacy of the true way by divine fortune" (*Fusheng Chengdao*) in the time of Yizong (1053–1056 AD). In context, the significance of claiming a separate coinage unable to replace the Song currency was perhaps more political and economic. For the Tanguts

48 Su Shi. *Dongpo Quanji* [東坡全集]: *Complete Works of Su Dongpo*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1987. Book 88. *Memorial Inscription for Sir Zhang Wending* (TN: canonized name of Zhang Fangping, 1007–1091).

to mint their own coins was a symbol of imperial independence more than a spontaneous sign of economic expansion.

At the demise of Yizong, his son Bingchang inherited the throne, again at an infantile age. This time, Empress Liang and her own brother Liang Yimai assumed the highest command of the empire. They devised a policy of rapprochement with the Khitans and contended with the Song over the border towns of Suide and Luowu (to the west of modern-day Mizhi, Shaanxi), where the Tanguts erected new boundary stones to mark the border. At the time, the Tibetan Qingtang regime fell into factions. Empress Liang took the opportunity to revise her foreign policy by entertaining a new diplomatic alliance with Tibet. In the third year of Tianci Lisheng ('Divinely Endowed Prosperity of Customs': 1072 AD), the regentess married her own daughter to Lin Bibu, son of the Tibetan chief Dong Zhan.⁴⁹ With Tibetan-Tangut relations improved, the Empress imprisoned Bingchang when the sixteen-year-old young emperor assumed the throne and proceeded immediately to sue for peace with Song. Under the pretext of succouring the Tangut emperor unjustly detained, Song launched five large legions to Western Xia, none of which won a decisive battle due to ineffective command and defective coordination. The Tanguts again resorted to fortifying their strongholds and razing the field so that no provision was left to the enemies. For this reason, the Song army was unable to retain cities in preparation for further advances.

Along the seven to eight hundred *li* of lands in the Hengshan area, in at least more than two hundred, peasants feared too much to farm. As the annual gifts ceased, trade also came to an end. Silk and cloth amongst the barbarians dwindle to little more than fifty thousand. The elderly and infirm are relocated, cattle and sheep ruined, and the total losses are innumerable.⁵⁰

The text shows that the Song-Xia wars wreaked havoc on the economy of the Hengshan areas. Commodity prices flared up, and local residents had no choice but to leave their homeland. Then in the eighth year of Xia's Da'an reign (1081 AD), the battle of Yongle (to the west of Mizhi, Shaanxi) witnessed yet another miserable defeat of Song at the hands of the Tangut army.

49 TN: Dong Zhan (1032–1083), son of Gusiluo (997–1065), second Khotan Tsenpo of the Tibetan Tsongkha regime (997–1099).

50 Su Shi. *Dongpo Quanjì*, vol. 54. "Eighteen Verses of expostulation" [奏議十八首], "Comments on the Affairs concerning the Xia People of Western Qiang on the Occasion of the Capturing of Guizhang" (因擒鬼章論西羌夏人事宜劄子).

There is no doubt, however, that decades of settled cultivation furnished Western Xia with a booming agriculture. Some areas of the Tangut empire even managed to maintain large storages of grains. The prosperity of Tangut agriculture finds its most convincing record in Song archives that document the seizure of Tangut provisions. In the eighth month of 1081, the Song general Li Xian conquered Kangu.⁵¹

Our great army passed by the valley of Kangu, which Bingchang unduly refers to as the 'imperial manor.' It houses an exceedingly large storage ... [I have] already dispatched my lieutenants to each lead a force to seize the grains, as well as bows and arrows for the defence of the city.⁵²

In the tenth month of the same year, "In the tenth month of the year *bingyin*, the [surrendered] Fan (Tangut) official Maye Eshang and others seized more than a hundred of the westerners' (Tanguts') large and small granaries on a hill seven *li* from the town of Jingde along the western borders. The 80,000 or so *dan* of grains are transferred to the Commission of Transport and the Commission in Hedong." When Chong E captured Mizhi,⁵³ "he also claimed that he seized more than 19,500 *dan* of grains."⁵⁴ Indeed, as Tangut food supplies accumulated over time, the more fertile lands were able to bring relief to the more barren in events of natural disasters. In the eleventh year of Da'an (1084), for example, when Yinzhou and Xiazhou suffered severe droughts, Emperor Huizong ordered the transportation of grains from the western areas of Ganzhou and Lingzhou to the east in order to manage the crisis.⁵⁵

In terms of coinage, archaeological finds reveal that the Tanguts minted coins inscribed in both Tangut and Chinese characters. The Tangut reads, "Treasured coins of Great Peace" (which corresponds to the Chinese *Da'an Baoqian*), and the Chinese reads, "Circulated Treasure of Great Peace" (*Da'an Tongbao*). Bingchang reigned as Emperor Huizong for a total of 18 years.

The story seems to repeat itself. Bingchang's son Qianshun assumed the throne at the age of three. His own mother, Empress Liang—the niece of

51 TN: Kangu (龕谷), a fortress south of present-day Yuzhong county, Gansu, near the city of Lanzhou.

52 *Zizhi Tongjian* Book 316, Fourth Year of Yuanfeng in Shenzong's Reign (1082), Yiwei in the Ninth Month.

53 TN: Chong E (种諤, 1017–1083), a major general of Northern Song, known for his 1081 victory in Mizhi.

54 *Zizhi Tongjian* Book 318, Fourth Year of Yuanfeng in Emperor Shenzong's Reign (1082), Bingzi & Yimao, Tenth Month.

55 Wu, *Xixia Shushi*, Ch. 27.

the elder Empress Liang—and her brother Liang Qibu—son of the aforementioned Liang Yimai—proclaimed themselves as regents. It is no surprise that the maternal clan continued the policy that favoured the Tangut-Khitan alliance. And as in the time of the elder Liangs, the imperial minister Liang Qibu arranged a marriage for his son with the family of Aliqu, then chief of the Tibetans.⁵⁶ The fifth Tsenpo, Longzan,⁵⁷ arranged another marriage with the Tanguts. It may be said that towards the middle and later periods of Western Xia, Tibetan-Tangut relations improved slowly and steadily. In the tenth year of 1092 AD, the third year of Tianyou Min'an ("Divinely-blessed peace for the people") period, Empress Liang herself led 100,000 men to besiege Huanzhou for seven days without success. She then turned to the Hongde fort and suffered tremendous losses at the fierce resistance of the ethnic-Tangut Song general, Zhe Keshi.⁵⁸ When friction arose between Empress Liang and Liang Qibu, the lady ordered royal officials to arrest and execute the minister in 1094, the fiftieth year of Tianyou Min'an. Since then, she presided over both civil and military affairs of the state. Remembered as a heroine figure, Empress Liang not only held the supreme command of a formidable army but also presented herself at the front lines of the battlefield. In the seventh year of Tianyou Min'an (1096), Qianshun and his mother led an alleged army of 500,000 to the walls of Yanzhou, battered through the Jinming fort, and seized 50,000 *dan* of grains stored in the city and tens of thousands bundles of forage. Then in the first year of Yong'an (1098), she again spearheaded a campaign of supposedly 400,000 men to contest domination in Pingxia. Song and Xia armies fired missiles against each other's fortresses in a war of attrition until a strong wind blew in the unfavourable direction and disbanded the Tanguts.⁵⁹

The empress died in the second year of Yong'an (1099), paving the way for Emperor Qianshun to finally assume official duties of the crown. Three dynasties of regency and hegemony left the Tangut elites embattled in a civil strife between the aristocracies and the maternal clans. Conflicts within the ruling class between the two camps at times translated into a struggle between Fan (Tangut) and Han (Chinese) customs. During the same time, the Tangut economy was further entangled with its surrounding neighbours. For one, the exchange of goods and cultures was booming along the Song-Xia borders.

56 TN: Aliqu (1040–1096), foster son of Dong Zhan, third Khotan Tsenpo of the Tibetan Tsongkha regime.

57 TN: Longzan, son of Xibawen, fifth Tsenpo. After a rebellion of Tibetan nobilities, he succeeded Xiazheng (or Bangbiaojian) as Tsenpo in 1099 AD.

58 *Zizhi Tongjian* Book 478, Seventh Year of Yuanyou in Emperor Zhezong's Reign (1092), Tenth Month, Xinyou in the Winter.

59 *Zizhi Tongjian* Book 503, First Year of Yuanfu, Emperor Zhezong's Reign (1098), Tenth Month, Yihai in the Winter.

Whenever the Tanguts initiated military conflicts, Song always countered with various measures of economic sanctions, ranging from cutting the supply of coins to the halting of markets, which invariably affected the quotidian lives of local residents. Insofar as this is true, the efficacy of such punitive sanctions speaks to imbalances of economic productions in Western Xia, hence its reliance on the Song economy.

5 Tangut Politics and Economy in the Middle Period of Western Xia

When Qianshun assumed imperial command at the age of fifteen, Liao sent a delegation to Song to request peace on behalf of the Tanguts. Xia emissaries also arrived in the imperial capital to report public mourning for the deceased empress and to express gratitude for the Song emperor's generosity. The Tangut emperor also appointed his trusted official, Weiming Jijin, as an envoy, to explain the tyranny of the maternal clans and to apologise for border conflicts:

Our country, your client state, has suffered misfortunes for too long. While it endured through the two tyrannies of maternal clans, and that treacherous officials usurp power regularly from the crown, the kingdom has met many dangers and atrocities. During this time, the border areas often plunged into perils, which further exacerbated our hot temper. As a result, the discord between us has run so deep, that my words of plea and argument appear insufficient. Fortunately, the vicious clan has died out, and my humble and youthful self has been able to restore justice.

The Song Emperor, on his part, also assumed a tone of reconciliation:

It is due to the conspiracies of vicious factions, that your country has repeatedly disturbed our borders. Fortunately, you now regret the past, apologise for the harm, and restore our previous oath of alliance. Considering that all your people are also my good-natured subjects, your settlement in peace accords best with my intention. I commend your effort to correct yourselves and to turn over a new leaf. Let us follow our faithful purpose: so long as you do not violate the terms, I shall never renege my words. From now on, the annual imperial gifts shall resume.⁶⁰

60 *Zizhi Tongjian* Book 519, Second Year of Yuanfu in Emperor Zhezong's Reign (1099), Renyin Twelfth Month; *History of Song* Book 485. "On the State of Xia" Part 1.

The new foreign policy placed equal emphasis on Tangut-Khitan ties, for after all, the Tanguts often counted on Liao deterrence, if not interventions, in its conflicts with Song. As mentioned, Liao envoys proposed a truce on behalf of the Tanguts. Qianshun followed up the friendly gesture with a proposal of marital alliance. In the third year of Zhenguan (1103), the Liao princess Cheng'an married the young Tangut emperor, an arrangement which further bonded the two peoples.

But when Cai Jing dominated Song politics, he lured the Tangut general and then supervisory commander of the right-wing Zhuoluo army, Renduo Baozhong, into defection. Tong Guan, the Hedong Jiedushi of the Song Dynasty at that time, intruded several times into Tangut territories, which caused tensions to flare again along the frontiers. In the first year of Yuande (1119), Tong Guan again forced Liu Fa, regulatory commander of Xihe, to invade Western Xia. Unable to refuse the order, Liu Fa assembled an army and marched to the Tong'an city (to the west of Yongdeng county, Gansu), where he met a combined force of infantry and cavalry at the command of Chage Langjun, brother of the Chongzong emperor of Xia. As the two armies clashed, an elite Tangut cavalry mounted the hills, blocked the Song army, and attacked from behind. In the span of an entire horrid day, many men and horses in the Song army starved and thirsted to death. Song casualties are calculated to have reached 100,000.

In the beginning of the 12th century, the Jurchens in the far north rose to establish the Jin Empire. As Liao and Jin doubly plunged into war, Western Xia first threw its weight behind its Khitan patrons. When the Liao Empire spiralled into the abyss of destruction, the Khitan emperor hurried to bestow Qianshun with an imperial title. In the sixth year of Yuande (1124), however, as it became clear that Liao was on the verge of final collapse, the Tangut emperor abandoned his old patron and submitted instead to the Jin Empire. By expanding its territories further to the northwest, the Tanguts also schemed and laboured to profit from the Jin-Liao wars. A new tripartite balance of power of Jin, Song, and Xia gradually emerged, took shape, and consolidated. At first, when Southern Song still actively sought to recover northern China, Wu Jie, then associate Commissioner of Pacification (*Xuanfushi*) of Sichuan and Shaanxi, was regularly in touch with the Tanguts to coordinate a joint campaign against the Jin Dynasty.

Emperor Qianshun appointed his half-brother Chage as the commander-in-chief, honoured him as the King of the Jin estate, and stationed him in the empire's general headquarter (*yatou*). Chage's proposal to collect elite conscripts trained in both high-range crossbows and rattan shield won the approval of the Emperor.⁶¹

61 Wu, *Xixia Shushi*, Ch. 31.

FIGURE 10 Western Xia in the era of Southern Song

The Tangut economy progressed in the reign of Chongzong. Archaeological finds show that Tangut coins *Zhenguan Baoqian* were circulated alongside the Chinese *Yuande Zhongbao* and *Yuande Tongbao*. Tangut mints increased in number. The government also undertook a project to renovate the capital city Zhongxing. According to Chinese inscriptions excavated in the Tangut Mausoleum, “Chongzong ascended the throne and ruled the world ... capital Zhongxing ... changed the reign title to Zhenguan, in the fourth year ...”⁶² Such a large project speaks to the economic prowess of the empire.

Highly reverential of literary education, Chongzong established in the first year of Zhenguan (1101) an imperial academy that hosted three hundred students and a state-sponsored bureau of civil service in support of the talented. ‘State academies’ had existed long ago in Chinese dynastic empires, where the highest academic institutions of the country were known as the ‘School

62 Shi, Jinbo and Chen, Yuning (eds.). Centre for Tangut Studies at Ningxia University, National Library of China & Gansu-Wuliang Centre for the Compilation of Historical Manuscripts (五凉古籍整理研究中心). *Zhongguo cang Xixia Wenxian* (中國藏西夏文獻), hereafter *Chinese Collection of Tangut Manuscripts* vol. 19. Lanzhou: Gansu People’s Press & Dunhuang Wenyi Press, 2005, p. 321.

of the Greatest Studies' (*Taixue*) or 'Imperial College of the State' (*Guozijian*). Both spaces were designated for the preservation and promotion of Confucian teachings. Founded in western territories under ethnic Tanguts, Western Xia's 'national' academy devoted to Sinology was by all measures a revolutionary event in the cultural history of Western Xia. Politically, it represented a policy change aimed at reordering Fan-Han relations within the bounds of the empire. Thereafter, prospective state officials prepared for civil duties by trainings in both Tangut and Chinese traditions. At the same time, it is worth noting that Qianshun did not neglect Buddhism, either. In the third year of Zhenguan (1103), he ordered the construction of a new Temple of the Recumbent Buddha in the western prefecture of Ganzhou.

Because the eastern and southern borders of Western Xia were enveloped by Jurchen territories, the Tangut-Song frontiers were barely existent. The Tanguts had no choice but to depend on the Jurchen economy for trade. At the request of the Xia emperor, Jin opened markets along the frontiers and relaxed the prohibition of iron sales to Western Xia.⁶³ During the twelfth year of Dading (1172), the Shizong emperor of Jin had a conversation with his minister that had lasting impact on Jurchen-Tangut trade:

Twelfth year (of Dading), the Emperor speaks to his minister, "Xia exchanges its jewels and jade for our silk and cloth: this is to trade their useless for our useful." He thus reduced and abolished the trade markets in Bao'an and Lanzhou.⁶⁴

However, the Tangut economy gained considerable strength over the years despite the vicissitudes of imperial geopolitics. When natural disasters ruined the crops, for example, the Tanguts relied mainly on themselves. In the tenth year of Zhenguan (1110), when large Tangut populations dispersed in exile to escape severe draughts in Guazhou and Shazhou, Chongzong ordered disaster relief from Lingzhou and Xiazhou:

Historically, lands in prefectures such as Guazhou and Shazhou are rarely cultivated for agriculture, but are mainly used for raising livestock. Since March, there has been no rain. Till this present month, the pasture has withered away, and barren lands now stretch to hundreds of *li*. Cattle and sheep are left with nothing to feed on, and a vast number of the Tanguts are forced into exile. When the news reaches the supervisory military

63 *History of Jin*, Book 4. "Biography of Xizong Emperor."

64 *History of Jin*, Book 134, "Western Xia."

commission, Qianshun issues an edict requiring that officials release grains from Ling and Xia prefectures to alleviate the famine.⁶⁵

Qianshun's 54 years on the throne were passed down as the reign of Chongzong. The early phase of this reign is marked by the supreme command of the empress's regency, followed by nearly 40 years of Qianshun's own imperial rule. Although these years were not free of wars, military operations were not so frequent. Moreover, the emperor placed literature and education as his priorities, and his promotion of Chinese classical culture laid the foundation for the extensive development of Tangut Confucianism in the reign of his son Renxiao.

Renxiao's reign was marred, however, by the internal chaos in a succession of political incidents. The Khitan defect, Xiao Heda, roused an insurrection within Tangut territories. As the economy suffered losses, a severe famine plagued the empire. Rice prices skyrocketed to hundreds per *sheng*, further straining the destitute lives of the common folk. Even worse was the earthquake in capital Xingqing; the loss of human and animal lives was in the tens of thousands. In the fourth year of Daqing (1143), Renzong issued the following edict after the earthquake in Xiazhou,

In the two prefectures, in cases where lives are lost to the earthquake, two are compensated with exemption of taxes for three years, and one with waiver of taxes for two years; the injured are exempt from taxes for two years; let collapsed houses and walls be repaired by the relevant commission.⁶⁶

Tax exemptions alone, however, could not have reversed the dire situation of food shortage. Starvation was one of the root causes of the large-scale peasant uprising led by Duo'e. In quelling the rebellion, the maternal-clansman Ren Dejing seized political power and rose to the position of imperial minister.

Notwithstanding economic downturns and social unrests, Renxiao's reign witnessed improved means of production in both pasturing and farming. Renxiao followed his father's legacy to advocate for classical education. He promoted the system of civil examination, oversaw the revision of imperial laws by able officers, and patronised the printing of emended sutras in Buddhist temples. During this period, scholars enjoyed a high rate of publication,

65 Wu, *Xixia Shushi*, Vol. 32.

66 Wu, *Xixia Shushi*, Ch. 35.

and the cultural industry reached its greatest height in the imperial ages of Western Xia.

Renxiao's achievements lied more in the cultural sphere than in the military realm. Unobservant of the unfolding crises, Renxiao was late to check the hubris of his once trusted officer. Honoured as the king of Chu and Qin-Jin, Ren Dejing schemed to secede from Western Xia to establish an independent kingdom. With support from the Jurchens, Renxiao executed Ren and his clans, temporarily reining back a simmering calamity. The emperor then appointed the renowned scholar Wo Daochong as minister, who led the empire onto the course of recovery.

Although official archives record that the Tanguts "first established the Commission of Exchange (*Tongqijian*) to mint coins" in the tenth year of Tiansheng (1158) during Renzong's reign,⁶⁷ archaeologists have discovered Tanguts coins that date back to the second emperor Yizong, which precedes the Tiansheng period by almost a century. Evidence then points to long-time establishment of governmental institutions in charge of minting and regulating the circulation of coins. The Tangut legal codex, the *Laws of Heavenly Prosperity* (or the *Tiansheng Laws*), mentions a 'Supervisory House of Currency' which could have been another name for the Commission of Exchange.⁶⁸ Since Southern Song and Western Xia territories barely shared a border during the reign of Renzong, being cut off by the vast Jin Empire, it was impossible to obtain large quantities of Song coins. It is also worth noting that, with the Jurchen occupation of the Guanyou area and establishment of markets in Lanzhou and other cities, the Tanguts would have suffered to pay higher real prices, had they insisted on trading goods with Song currency. As a result, the Tanguts casted cash coins at a significantly larger scale. For a while, the Tangut "Tiansheng" was circulated simultaneously as the Jurchen "Zhenglong" coins. At first, the Jin emperor grudging the Tangut currency. But at the repeated entreaty of Renxiao, he at last granted permission.⁶⁹ Recent archaeological discoveries of Tangut coin hoards, some of them containing more than a hundred thousand (around 600 *jin*) of coins, reveal that Song, Jin, and Tangut coins circulated at the same time.⁷⁰ However, it is also right to point out that the Tanguts first relied on

67 *History of Song* vol. 486, *On the State of Xia*, Part II.

68 *Revised Laws of Heavenly Prosperity*. No. 5: "On the Supply of Weaponries," p. 224.

69 Wu, *Xixia Shushi*, Ch. 36.

70 Niu, Dasheng. "Yizuo Zhongyao de Xixia Qianbi Jiaocang—Neimenggu Wushenqi Taoli Jiaocang" [一座重要的西夏錢幣窖藏—內蒙古烏審旗陶利窖藏]: "An Important Tangut Coin Hoard: Depository of Tangut Coins in Uxin Banner, Inner Mongolia" in *Gansu Jinrong Qianbi Zhuanji* (甘肅金融錢幣專輯), 1989. See also, Niu, Dasheng. "Xixia

Song coins, and then depended on Jurchen cash. Therefore, the Tanguts lacked real autonomy in currency.

Although the diplomacy of Western Xia in this period was largely defined by a foreign policy of self-protection, the Tanguts fell short of faithful allies and subjects. Although nominally, the Tanguts submitted to Jin paramountcy, sending one delegation after another to proclaim friendship and alliance, Renxiao responded positively and enthusiastically to Song requests of an anti-Jurchen alliance by writing a letter featuring the gravest insults to the Jin Empire and vows to 'dutifully follow the heavenly order to combat the infidels.'⁷¹ And yet, before the ink had barely dried, he ordered skirmishes against Song territories. Two months later, when a new Jin emperor succeeded the throne, Renxiao first attacked Jin and then pledged the most solemn oath to pronounce Jin and Xia as brotherly kingdoms. The fickle emperor's inconstant geopolitical strategy served particular interests. Although the illustrious minister Wo Daochong remained in command of administrative duties, the empire by that time had for too long neglected its defence capability. Signs of a spent force appeared increasingly evident. Renxiao remained in throne for 54 years, known as the Emperor Renzong of Xia.

6 Tangut Politics and Economy in the Late Period of Western Xia

After Renxiao's decease, the once mighty empire of Western Xia was plagued by both internal crises and external threats. In the late period of Xia, the Mongols rose as a formidable foe from the north of the Gobi Desert and repeatedly raided into Tangut territories. In the last thirty years of Western Xia, the imperial authority also weakened significantly. Five emperors ascended the throne in rapid succession: Emperor Huanzong, Chunyou ruled for 13 years; Emperor Xiangzong, Anquan, 4 years; Emperor Shenzong, Zunxu, 13 years; Emperor Xianzong, Dewang, 3 years; and Emperor Mo, Xian, for only one year. The entire length of this time was enveloped by the smokes of war amidst six Mongol invasions. Although the Mongols assailed both Tangut and Jurchen walls, Xia and Jin squandered their resources and energy in a war of attrition against each other. In the fourth year of Yingtian (1209), when capital Zhongxing fell under siege, Emperor Xiangzong finally arranged to marry his daughter away in exchange for peace and alliance with the Jurchens.

Qianbi Lunji" [西夏錢幣論集]: *Collected Essays on Tangut Coins. Ningxia Jinrong* [宁夏金融]: Ningxia Finance, Supplementary Issue, 2007.

71 Wu, *Xixia Shushi*, Ch. 36.

Both the political unrests at home and the wars abroad exacerbated the economic decline of Western Xia. According to the narrative of then imperial censor-in-chief Liang Deyi,

The country has plunged in war for more than a decade, the fields are bleak and desolate, human lives are ruined and lost, even women and maidens know that the fate of the country is in grave peril, but the officials in the Court sing light-hearted songs, feast joyfully at night, and have nothing to say.⁷²

In the second year of Qianding (1225), imperial censor-in-chief Zhang Gongfu submitted a proposal to revitalise the country in seven ways. His economic policy states the following,

In the flames the war, human lives are reduced to destitution. In the absence of farming and weaving, wealth and resources are in dire shortage. With regard to wasteful practices in the palaces and offices, let meritorious statesmen and royal clansmen be rewarded justly so that they abandon luxury in favour of simplicity, and wait to be assigned their duties. In these ways, the grains will be sufficient, and the army will regain its strengths.⁷³

The emperor himself testifies to the depletion of imperial treasury and the general paucity of resources across the empire. In an illustrated Tangut edition of the *Supreme Sovereign Sutra of Golden Light* (*Suvarṇaprabhāsa-uttamarāja-sūtra*) curated in the Institute of Cultural Relics in Xi'an, the sutra ends with the prayer of Emperor Shenzong dated to the fourth year of Guangding (1214), thirteen years prior to the fall of the empire. The text mentions that the emperor felt "as if standing on the brink of an abyss, and as if walking on a thin layer of ice," and prays that "the people and the state may enjoy peace and prosperity."

Although the late period of Western Xia proved short-lived, Tangut currency still enjoyed a steady rate of production and circulation. Excavated coins dating back to this period include the Chinese *Tianqing Yuanbao*, *Huangjian Yuanbao*, and *Guangding Yuanbao*, minted during the reigns of Huanzong, Xiangzong, and Shenzong, respectively.

When finally, Jin and Xia were on the verge of mortal danger, the two sides arranged for a *détente*, reaching a peace agreement in the first year of Xia's

72 Wu, *Xixia Shushi*, Ch. 41.

73 Wu, *Xixia Shushi*, Ch. 42.

Qianding (1224). By this treaty, the Tanguts and Jurchens vowed (again) to be brothers, in coordinated defence against the Mongols. The alliance, however, came only too late.

The last Mongol campaign against the Tanguts took place in 1226, when Genghis Khan himself led the army south to conquer Western Xia. With a dual strategy of launching siege operations and inciting defections, the Mongols quickly captured a number of cities and prefectures, from Khara-Khoto to Shazhou, Suzhou (present-day Jiuquan city, Gansu), Ganzhou, and Xiliangfu, effectively bringing the entire Hexi corridor under their control. By this time, vast territories of Western Xia had been lost. The Mongol army then besieged the imperial capital Zhongxing. Seeing that his fortune had come to an end, Emperor Mo, Li Xian, surrendered to the Mongols. Although Genghis Khan passed away on the eve of the final victory, the Mongols followed his will to execute the Tangut emperor. The once great power of Western Xia came to its end.