THE LEXICOGRAPHY OF THE HSI HSIA
(TANGUT) LANGUAGE

Formed around the year 982 on the northwestern border of the Sung state (960-1272), the state of Hsi Hsia lasted for nearly 300 years and developed its own unique cultural tradition; a tradition that remains a puzzle still today. On the basis of its occurrence in the *Secret History of the Mongols* (1), the language and the people of the state are most frequently referred to as Tangyud. This name is usually explained as being a Mongol plural of the first part of the Chinese name of the main ethnic group within that state, the Tang-hsiang. Although the etymology of the name has not yet been established, the Mongol explanation cannot be accepted. The name Tangyud first occurs in the Turkic Orkhon inscriptions of the eight century and, in the eleventh century in Mahmud al-Kašārī's *Diwan Luqat at-Turk*. In fact, al-Kašārī refers to the Tangyud as "a tribe of Türks, they live near China" (2).

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From its inception, the Hsi Hsia state maintained very close ties with the Ch'i-tan state to the north of the Sung. It was under Ch'i-tan influence that the second ruler of Hsi Hsia, Li Te-ming (1004–1032), apparently the most scholarly of the Hsi Hsia rulers, began to develop a complex script, apparently using both the Ch'i-tan and the Chinese script as his models. During the reign of his son Li Yuan-hao (1032–1048), the developing script was standardized in a manner reminiscent of Li Ssu's actions on the Chinese script during the Ch'in dynasty (B.C. 221–207)(3).

Unlike many of the so-called invented scripts such as, for example, Ch'i-tan and 'Phags-pa, the Tangut script was in active use until at least the second decade of the fourteenth century. A voluminous literature developed which included Buddhist, historical, legal and economic texts. Many Chinese, and possibly also Uighur texts were translated and written down in a script that can be easily be termed the most complex ever developed in East or Central Asia.

Of all the destruction wrought upon civilization by the Mongol onslaught, the annihilation of the Hsi Hsia state and its culture was the most thorough. A limited knowledge of the language remained until at least the beginning of the fourteenth century. In 1307, the Yuan dynasty, for reasons that still remain to be investigated, published an edition in some 3,620 chapters of the Buddhist Tripitaka in the Tangut script(4). By the late 1330's, however, it had become, for all practical purposes a dead language. There is no indication in the contemporary sources that the few Yuan officials of Tangut origin were capable of reading the Tangut script. By the time of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the language was not only a dead one but also a forgotten one. Ming and Ch'ing scholars remembered the existence of a Hsi Hsia state and compiled several works on its history; the language and the script, however, had fallen into oblivion.

It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that the language was rediscovered. In 1870, A. Wylie undertook a study of the unknown script on the multilingual inscription of the Chu-yung-kuan(5), an inscription dated 1345. Although Wylie


(5) The best study of the Chu-yung-kuan is provided by Murata Jiro, Kyoyokan, 2 vols., Kyoto, 1955-1958. The facsimile of the inscription has been provided by R. Bonaparte, Documents de l'époque mongole du XIIIe et XIVe siècles, Paris, 1885 and in which Tangut has been identified with a question mark. A. Wylie, "On an Ancient Buddhist Inscription at Keu-yung-kwan", Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1870, pp. 14-44.