THE STRUCTURE OF THE
TANGUT [HSI HSIA]
CHARACTERS*

BY

LUC KWANTEN

It is well-known that the use of Chinese characters spread quickly to those countries that were in prolonged contact with China. Thus, for example, it was adopted to write down Japanese and Korean, languages that are genetically unrelated to Chinese, as well as Vietnamese, a genetically related language. Still today, it remains the preferred writing form of the majority of people in East Asia. But this cultural influence appears to have been limited to China's eastern and southern neighbors. The states of Central Asia, whose relations with China antedate those of Japan and Korea by several hundred years, did not adopt the Chinese script. Eventually, and at about the time China's eastern neighbors adopted the Chinese script, they adopted the writing of the Sogdians, hence a script of Aramaic origins. The exception to this rule were the Ch'i-tan, a Turkic people; the Jurchen, a Tungusic people, and the Tangut, commonly assumed to be of Tibetan origins but probably a Turkic people. Even though all three laid political claim to China, they

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1 The use of Chinese characters is still common in Japan. The adoption of the Chinese script in Japan has been described in R.A. Miller, *The Japanese Language*, Chicago, 1967, pp. 97–140. In Korea, the Han'gül or the so-called Korean syllabary has replaced Chinese characters in daily life although they are still commonly used in books. In Vietnam, Chinese characters were abandoned during the 19th century on orders of the French colonial administration.

2 R.A. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 93 points to this difference, but does not provide any explanations. To my knowledge, no research has been undertaken to explain the different responses throughout East and Central Asia to Chinese cultural influences. The adoption of the Sogdian script led to the formation of the Uighur script which, in turn, led to the Mongol script and ultimately culminated into the Manchu script.

3 Two of these people, the Ch'i-tan and the Jurchen conquered portions of
did not adopt the Chinese writing system as such, but created their own writing systems merely using the Chinese script as a model.

The Tangut script, promulgated as the official script of the Hsi Hsia state [986-1227] around 1033 and standardized around 1036, was in common use within the Tangut state for slightly more than 200 years. A superficial glance at a Tangut character, especially a superficial glance at a text in Tangut script, gives the impression that there does exist a great deal of similarity between it and a Chinese character. However, the Tangut character has substantially more strokes than the average Chinese character and the stroke sequence, or arrangement, seems random and exceedingly complicated. The two examples below illustrate the graphic difference between a Tangut character (on the left) and a Chinese character (on the right).

a. 濃 火
   露 星
b. 延 皇
   晴 天

The Tangut script has all the appearances of being one of the most difficult and complicated writing systems ever devised. The fact that Tangut is a dead language, that it has not been used for nearly 750 years and was rediscovered only at the beginning of the present century as well as the absence of Tangut primers, renders the analysis of the character structure all the more difficult. In the absence of any obvious clues, the difficulties seem to be such that the efforts made by a number of scholars have failed to provide, as yet, an acceptable analysis of the Tangut writing system.

China proper and set up states which, by the end of the 14th century, were considered legitimate Chinese dynasties, respectively the Liao (907–1125) and the Chin (1115–1235). On the problems concerning their legitimation see Richard L. Davis, “Historiography as Politics in Yang Wei-chen’s ‘Polemic on Legitimate Succession’,” T’oung Pao, vol. LXIX, nos. 1–3, 1983, pp. 33–72.
