THE FAMOUS LIANGZHOU BILINGUAL STELE:
A NEW STUDY*

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This book was long awaited. Being the first volume on Tangut matters written in English by an experienced scholar,¹ not an outsider drawn to an exotic object (cf. Miller 1983), it not only shapes our notions about the mysterious Tangut Empire, but, due to the author’s passion for her subject and vivid style, it will be attractive both to the general reader and to the specialist. There is no doubt that all those involved in Tangut studies—recent publications show that their numbers have significantly increased—will be truly excited by the appearance of Dunnell’s book.

The book grew, Dunnell states (p. IX), out of an appendix to her doctoral dissertation, “Tanguts and the Tangut State of Ta Hsia” (1983). This appendix contained her translation of the Chinese part of the famous Liangzhou 涼州 bilingual (Tangut-Chinese) stele erected in 1094 in Wuwei 武威, Gansu, to celebrate the completion of repairs on the Cantong stūpa 普通塔 at the Huguo (Dayun 大雲) Temple 護國寺. In the present case the Liangzhou stele, the principal Xia source for the eleventh century, is, says the author, “the piece around which this book is organized” (p. 5).

Dunnell has done a tremendous work piecing together all the available materials, among which the Tangut prefaces and epi-

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¹ Dunnell is the author of the Cambridge history of China section on the Tangut state (1994); for a bibliography of her works see p. 255 in the book under review.

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logues to Tangut translations of Buddhist and other works assembled by Shi Jinbo 史金波 in his Xi Xia fojiao shilüe 西夏佛教史略 (1988), and supplied by him with Chinese translations (see pp. 230-333 of his book), are her main source. But she does not confine herself to such native sources: she makes amazing use of what she calls (p. 4) “secondary” (that is, contemporary Song, Liao and Jin records) and “tertiary” (that is, later Chinese chronicles) sources.

It should be remembered that, so far, all our knowledge about the Tangut state was restricted to Chinese dynastic histories compiled during the reign of the last Yuan emperor in the fourteenth century. As a result, we had at our disposal only the facts preserved in those histories compiled by the people who destroyed the Tangut state. This is why Tangut written materials such as the Liangzhou stele are invaluable, providing as they do information on many otherwise obscure aspects of Tangut history and culture. A good example is the indigenous name of the Tangut state, viz. “The Great State of White and Lofty”, which never occurs in the Chinese dynastic histories. Studying the indigenous Tangut name for the state has revealed new data concerning Tangut culture (see Kepping 1994).

The book under review consists of two parts, on “Buddhism in Eleventh-Century Xia” (pp. 1-83), and “The 1094 Stele Inscription from Liangzhou” (pp. 85-156), respectively. It also includes two appendices: A. Photoreproductions of Rubbings of the 1094 Gantong Stûpa Stele Inscriptions, and B. Chronology of Sources Recording or Discussing the Inscriptions on the Gantong Stûpa Stele (pp. 161-178); to which are added the Notes (pp. 181-241), Select Glossary of Chinese Names and Terms (pp. 243-252), Bibliography (pp. 253-270), and Index (pp. 271-278).

Dunnell claims that Shi Jinbo’s “vast corpus of published works forms a critical foundation for my own research” (p. X). It would seem, however, that she tends to follow too faithfully Shi’s translations and interpretations of Tangut written materials. As a result, she repeats his errors and, as she sometimes reproduces Tangut collocations in the Chinese word order (which in Shi’s translations intended for Chinese readers is quite natural), she confuses her Western readers supplying them with an irritating mixture of Tangut-Chinese “hybrid” language. I will come back to this problem below.

Dunnell uses my initial translation of the name of the Tangut state: “The Great State of White and High”. As it happens, I now prefer the name suggested by G. van Driem of Leiden University: “The Great State of White and Lofty”.

One may regret that this pioneering book, which presents a quantity of new