THE TANGUT ROYAL TOMBS NEAR YINCHUAN

It was Oleg Grabar who first introduced me to the people known as Tangut, to their city Kharra-Khoto, to Russian explorer-archaeologist P. K. Kozlov, and to Soviet scholar E. I. Lubo-Lesnichenko. From the world of Chinese texts and archaeology, however, I learned of Da Xia (Great Xia), the Chinese name by which the Tanguts referred to their empire; of Xi Xia (Western Xia), an alternate Chinese name for the Tangut empire that recognized its geographic position in relation to contemporary Song (960–1279) China; of the city Hei[shui]cheng (literally “black [water] city,” which translates into Mongolian as Kharra-Khoto; and of the Tangut capital and cities beyond the sphere of Soviet archaeology, including those that cluster around the modern Chinese city of Yinchuan.

As Inner Asian sites go, the documentation for Kharra-Khoto is relatively abundant and accessible. Chinese dynastic histories of the Eastern Han (8–220 A.D.), (Western) Jin (265–314), and Tang (618–906) provide a chronology of the city’s occupation and confirm its primary functions as a military outpost and oasis.1 The period of Kharra-Khoto’s history which has attracted the most attention is the period of interest here: the two centuries before its gruesome destruction in 1227 by Genghis Khan, from which the city would never recover. It was in the aftermath of Genghis’s devastation earlier that century that Marco Polo saw the “black city,” which he described under the alternate name, Eqina (Stein’s Ertina);2 Rashid al-Din made reference to the Tanguts in his Jam’ al-Tawārikh in the fourteenth century.3 Piotr Kozlov saw the city six centuries later, and aware that neither the city nor the region had recovered from its Mongolian period, he gave it the label “dead city.”4 Sergei D’Oldenburg and M. Aurel Stein visited Kharra-Khoto within a decade of Kozlov, and a group of the most eminent scholars of Asia, including Ivanov, Bushell, Maspero, and Pelliot, studied the documents and Buddhist treasures gleaned from their colleagues’ expeditions.5

Yet in spite of the boundless energy, will, and daring of the traffickers of Central Asia, the imperial capital of the Tanguts, Xingqing fu or Xingqing (today Yinchuan, capital of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region), seems to have eluded Polo, Kozlov, D’Oldenburg, and Stein. So did the spectacular architectural complex about 40 km. to its west (fig. 1). What is shown in figure 1 seems first to have been recorded in an air survey by Wulf Diether Graf zu Castell which he published in Chinesflug in 1938. The brief plate caption in Castell’s book says merely that his is a photograph of “strange earthen mounds” that lie at the foot of the Alashan mountain range, some 3,600 m. north of Ningxia. He estimates their height at 25–30 m., and from the air he could see they were faced with brick or tile. “It is,” Castell wrote, “a gigantic monument whose mysteries would not be lifted away for a long time to come.” The photographer identified the scene as the Hsia (Xia) royal tombs, but he does not tell the reader the source of this accurate information.6

Indeed, until the 1970’s it remained unknown to scholars of Khara-Khoto that more than 500 km. northwest across desert and mountains was the Tangut capital; and some tens of kilometers beyond, the royal tomb complex where nine of the eleven Western Xia royalty were laid to rest.7 It was another forty-five years before photographs of what Castell saw were published and properly identified again.8

The royal Tanguts who built the tombs shown in figure 1 are generally traced to an Ordos tribe at least as old as the Tang dynasty (618–906) known in Chinese as Dangxiang. One of several contesting tribes in the Ordos at this time, the fall of the Tibetan and Uygar empires in the 840’s and survival through fifty years of power struggles after the demise of the Tang left the semi-independent state poised to assert itself as an empire on China’s northern frontier that could not be ignored. Da Xia officially proclaimed its independence in 1038 under the ruler Li Yuanhao (r. 1032–48). In that year Yuanhao changed the imperial surname from Li, the family name of the Tang royal household which had been bestowed upon his ancestors by the Tang, to Weining, and commenced the construction of royal tombs for his grandfather and father, whose status he thereupon elevated with the names employed by the Tang and other Chinese dynasties for their founder and his son, Taizu and Taizong, respectively. At its zenith the Da Xia
empire stretched precariously between the empires of Song China to its south and east, Liao to its northeast, Tibet to its southwest, and semi-nomadic tribes and confederations to its north and west. These lands are now within the borders of the Chinese provinces of Gansu and Shanxi, the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and Qinghai.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ROYAL TOMBS

The imperial tombs of Da Xia are nestled in the eastern slope of the Helan Mountains. As Castell noted, the most striking feature, even more noticeable than the walls which set one tomb apart from the next, are the many, many mounds. Even this year a journalist writing for Renmin ribao (People's Daily) described the royal tombs as the "Chinese Pyramids."9

If one can believe local history of the sixteenth century, then at one time there should have been some 360 mounds. According to jiajing Ningxia xin zhi (New record of Ningxia from the Jiajing reign [1522–1567]), after ascending the throne, Yuanhao ordered a myriad of laborers to construct tombs for his father, grandfather, and himself. Fearing that these tombs would be plundered, he daily had them erect a mound (so that in the course of a year there were some 360) with the purpose of confusing would-be grave robbers. As further insurance, Yuanhao had all the workers commit suicide. When it came time to inter Yuanhao, the text says simply that he was buried under one of the mounds.10

The tomb area stretches over 10 km. south to north and 5 km. east to west. No photograph can capture the expanse of the site. The imperial tombs seem to divide themselves into two groups, one of six and the second of three. When excavation began in the 1970's, the tombs were arbitrarily numbered north to south, beginning with no. 1. It is now believed that construction began at the south, and the two southernmost tombs, shown in

Fig. 1. Great Xia royal tombs 1 and 2. (Photo: from Xi Xia wenwu, pl. 23)