

Bounded Empires: Ecological and Geographic Implications in Sino-Tangut Relations, 960-1127

By Rocco Bowman

The Tangut Western Xia empire, a state built by semi-nomadic migrants, and the Northern Song (960-1127) shared a dynamic century upon the stage of northwest China.* Though major war broke out in 1038 and 1069, organized military conflict was only one way in which either side jockeyed for power, economic advantage, and loyalty; empire building resulted from carefully planned statecraft. However, both empires found expansion upon or beyond the crumbling, eroding Loess Plateau and the harsh Ordos Desert to be extremely difficult. Winning territory and subjects in the region became a quagmire, forcing the empires not only to defensively adapt internal state institutions in significant ways but to realize the bounds of their respective imperiums.¹

The politically savvy Tang Dynasty helped create the circumstances for the consolidation of nomadic power in the north, but one dynasty's successful policies are another's "nomad problem." Tang emperors ameliorated mounted incursions from the Mongolian steppe by allying with peoples who could fight on equal terms, creating a military buffer; however, the rise of the centralized, Confucian Song state engendered antagonisms between these two previously cooperative regions. Here, Sino-Tangut history enters an era of frantic activity. This dynamic interaction was not so much the result of a shared border in which culturally distinct populations vied for supremacy but quite the opposite—an unsettled, ecologically vague borderland with equally diverse populations embracing competing loyalties.

Imperial logic and prerogative were clear motivators in the conquest of cities and trade routes; however, the ecology and geography of the Loess Plateau within the Yellow River (hereafter referred to as the Ordos Loop, consisting of the land circumscribed by the Yellow and Wei Rivers) presented particularly unique advantages, disadvantages, and cultural perceptions which aided and fettered imperial projects. The Ordos Loop is an anomaly on the otherwise linear West-East natural boundary between agrarian China and the northern steppe.² Within the bounds of the river, no clear ecological boundary existed as a natural way to separate political bodies and the balance between agrarian and nomadic economies³ became a political and cultural struggle. During the 11th and 12th centuries, the Western Xia and Song empires attempted to establish control over the region for various economic and political reasons, but the nature of the stage on which they interacted challenged traditions, subverted treaty making, and generated new

* Dr. Ruth Mostern aided my efforts with this paper from beginning to end with unwavering support and advice. It would neither have been as enjoyable nor as informative without her generous comments and resource tips. Any errors within the paper are, of course, my responsibility.

¹ Michael C. McGrath, "Frustrated Empires: The Song-Tangut Xia War of 1038-44," in *Battlefronts Real and Imagined: War, Border, and Identity in the Chinese Middle Period*, ed. Don J. Wyatt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 151. "Both emperors had to accept narrower conception of empire than the ones they had dreamed of having."

² Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 17.

³ Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (Clinton: The Colonial Press, 1940), 23.

state imperatives in the Western Xia.⁴

The Natural History of the Loess Plateau and the Ordos

A summary of the natural history of the Loess Plateau and the Ordos are necessary in order to explain the effects it had on human history in the 11th and 12th centuries. The most important transformations—accumulation of loess, movement and melting of glaciers—occurred before the end of the Pleistocene Era (from 2,558,000-11,700 years ago). The greatest accumulation of loess (a fine, rich soil of a pale yellow color) in the region began about 2.5 million years ago and greatly accelerating about 1.2 million years ago.⁵ The region has experienced an oscillating climate between warm/wet and cold/dry; the latter variation contributed to significant displacements of non-glacial loess from north and western deserts via wind action.⁶ Due to these developments, the Loess Plateau contains the most abundant sources of loess on Earth, covering an area up to 640,000km² and reaching an average thickness of 50-80m. Climactic variation has contributed to further loess deposition during the Holocene Era (the period in which human civilization began and our current climatological period) as witnessed and recorded by Chinese officials.⁷

The Swedish explorer, Sven Hedin provides an account of how the Loess Plateau appeared in 1935 as he led a motor-car caravan from Gansu to Changan in the shadow of the Great Wall.⁸ The road was not yet paved for motor vehicles “with dales on either side” and “surrounded in every direction by wide spaces, yellow, rounded loess hills with no solid rock.”⁹ Everything was remarkably mono-toned as well. “Everything was yellow,” he writes, “the loess cliffs had assumed picturesque shapes – houses, walls, fortresses and towers.”¹⁰ The fortifications belonged to many successive Chinese dynasties, but the yellow, dusty loess soil has been a permanent resident. The caked loess on structures built in the 14th century reveal loess

⁴ Compared to the Song Dynasty, Western Xia has received little attention by scholars for obvious reasons. Modern scholarship regarding the Tangut state and society began in the early 20th century with the discovery and exploration of the Khara Koto ruins on the edge of the Gobi Desert by Russian, German, and Chinese archaeologists. Subsequent Chinese discoveries followed in Ningxia. Thus most of the primary documents related directly to the Tanguts were collected and studied by those who had both a more relevant interest in Western Xia history as well as a more favorable geographic proximity. Some Anglophone scholars had access to documents from Khara-Khoto but translation did not follow until later still. Due to the complications of World War II, the Cold War, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, scholarship was difficult and the texts that were recovered were fragmentary. It was not until Nikolai Aleksandrovich Nevsky's (1892–1937) posthumously published Tangut dictionary that a new generation of scholars could study Tangut texts and history. Still, Anglophone scholars did not flock to the esoteric field of Tangutology. Most translation of Tangut documents was done in the 1970s and 1980s. Ruth W. Dunnell has become an expert in the West writing the only full-length monograph on Tangut history, *The Great State of White and High: Buddhism and State Formation in Eleventh-Century Xia*.⁴ While Dunnell provides an effective overview of Xia history and most scholars likewise give a general overview, little has been written synthesizing geographic, ecological, and interstate factors into Xia history let alone a monograph on Xia-Song relations.

⁵ David Anderson, Andrew Goudie, and Adrian Parker, *Global Environments Through the Quaternary: Exploring Environmental Change*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 95.

⁶ Pi-Ting Ho, “Loess and the Origins of Chinese Agriculture,” *The American Historical Review* 75, no. 1 (October 1969), 4.

⁷ Pi-Ting Ho, “Origins of Chinese Agriculture”, 4.

⁸ At the very end of Sven Hedin's Sino-Swedish Expedition, he traversed what would become a highway between Beijing and Xinjiang. He suggested the project would connect peoples as the ancient Silk Road did centuries before. However, the project also contributed to Beijing's repression efforts in Xinjiang.

⁹ Hedin, *Through Asia* vol. 2 (London: Methuen & Co., 1898), 290.

¹⁰ Hedin, *Through Asia*, 291, 295.

deposition during recorded history.

The Ordos in the northwest corner of the plateau followed the same climactic variation as the Loess Plateau, trending more arid. During drier times, the Ordos was experienced significant desertification with moving sand predominant while in warmer, wetter times the region resembled a steppe grassland.¹¹ Since this region is also part of the Loess Plateau, concentrations of loess is common. During the Holocene Era, the bounds of desert in the Ordos have waxed and waned due to climate variation.



Figure 1: A map of relevant geographic features, cities, and places of interest around the epicenter of the Tangut state. (Source: Google Earth)

Another European has provided a description of the Ordos in the early 20th century. Major George Pereira, a British military officer, made a southwesterly journey across the Ordos from Inner Mongolia in 1910. He describes the northern boundary is a tall sandy ridge, “running roughly parallel to the Yellow river.”¹² Moving further away from the river, “it is a desolate waste of dry grass and weeds, with dwarf scrub 2 or 3 inches high” and “very thinly inhabited,” as water is scarce.¹³ Though the Major complains that the trip is not worth making twice, the land is not as desolate as the stereotypical desert—wild flowers, lizards, brown rats, deer, hares, and several types of birds can live in the area.¹⁴ Pereira also found loess the further south he traveled,

¹¹ Jeanne X. Kasperson, Roger E. Kasperson, and B.L. Turner II, eds., *Regions at Risk: Comparisons of Threatened Environments* (New York: United Nations University Press, 1995).

¹² George Pereira, “A Journey Across the Ordos,” *The Geographical Journal* 37, no. 3 (March 1911), 261.

¹³ Pereira, “A Journey,” 262.

¹⁴ Pereira, “A Journey,” 263.

capturing a photo of loess cave dwellings carved into the sides of hills.¹⁵ Pereira's observations illustrate the harsh but still inhabited Ordos region, bounded on the north and west by fertile Yellow River plains.¹⁶

The natural evolution of the Loess Plateau and Ordos created a set of conditions that existed even before significant human settlement as well as characteristics that are being discovered today. Modern environmental knowledge and consciousness has become part of historical methodology whether sea or land and, in this case, the Loess Plateau. Donald Hughes, professor emeritus at University of Denver and environmental historian, defines an ideal method as one that uses ecological analysis as a means of understanding human history: an account "that seeks understanding of human beings as they have lived, worked and thought in relationship to the rest of nature through the changes brought by time."¹⁷ Though environmental cycles are long—comprising of 10,000 years at a time—"the causes of environmental change that stretch back in time may be dealt with socially over a comparatively brief period" says Stephen Dover, another prominent environmental historian. Therefore, applying this framework, historians are able to place environmental factors in the forefront of historical studies. Specifically, the Ordos Loop has had considerable historical importance for the peoples living in and adjacent to it, necessitating a new perspective beyond just the political one.

Chinese and Nomadic Ecology in the Ordos Loop and the Nomadic Advantage

Given the environmental profile, human societies used the land of the Ordos Loop in the Mid-Holocene as agrarians and nomadic pastoralists. The loosely compacted loess in the south allowed early farmers to plough with basic wooden implements and the Yellow River floodplain naturally irrigated crops. Loess was also beneficial for the arid northwest due to its porousness, absorbing necessary moisture. Its alkaline chemical profile made it particularly fertile as well. These characteristics were not only foundational for a birth of agriculture in East Asia, but a second after that of the Yangtze River valley.¹⁸

The Ordos was intimately connected to climatological changes of the south, and had repercussions for human land use. For example, the Mid-Holocene Climactic Optimum, a time of unusually warm and wet conditions occurring some 5000-7000 years ago, pushed the bounds of agricultural sustainability north, subsuming the Ordos desert. During this time, before true nomadism developed, humans practiced agriculture in what is today the Ordos desert. Eventually, the cold, dry climate became dominant and steppe gave way to recognizable desert conditions more amenable to emergent nomadic societies. However, the Ordos Loop was split between agrarians and nomads and thus an ecological borderland.

The tension of competing human ecologies became more acute as the societies of the steppe embraced their specialized brand of nomadism and agrarians developed technologies to farm previously uncultivated areas. Steppe economies rely not on the land directly, but on the animals herded which convert grass into animal products such as milk, meat, hides, and furs. Pastoral nomadism is an extensive economy with poorer iterations (e.g. those subsisting on

¹⁵ Pereira, "A Journey," 264. Humans have carved dwellings into loess caves for centuries as they continue to do today. The structure of loess particles allows caves to be carved but erosion imperils those who live in them.

¹⁶ The plain to the west, bounded on its west by the Helan Mountains, was the seat of the Xi Xia Empire.

¹⁷ J. Donald Hughes. *What is Environmental History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 1.

¹⁸ Pi-Ting Ho, "Origins of Chinese Agriculture," 28.

poorer grasses) needing even more space.¹⁹ Animal husbandry requires far more space than plant agriculture in which crops can be manipulated to produce more per year and produce more times each season. Thus, while the Ordos generally has poor grasses at the best of times, nomadic tribes and confederations such as the Xiongnu and Eastern Turks moved into the area as a matter of necessity and political expansion.

Nomadic chieftains, and especially those originating outside the Ordos, mostly valued the region for its human value—trade. The Ordos is the doorstep into the greater Loess Plateau and an insertion point into China proper but, equally important, the Gansu corridor was the main artery of trade to and from the West. In fact, nomadic “states” including the Xi Xia may have arose simply to extort or trade more effectively the goods passing through sedentary civilizations.²⁰ By taking advantage of the Ordos and by extension the Gansu corridor, the Tanguts could trade abundant livestock for otherwise unobtainable items such as grain and metal required for warfare. The Ordos formed one node in a geographic triad which included the Ordos, Tarim Basin, and Liao Valley. This trio of important areas rewarded that nomadic empires that controlled them an edge on their nomadic neighbors and leverage against the powerful sedentary civilizations of the lower latitudes.²¹

The Song, and for the most part dynasties and kingdoms before them, struggled to control or in the least suppress the Ordos. To the Chinese, the Ordos represented a geopolitical, not an economic, imperative. The Ordos and the bend in the Yellow River, in general, presented a historic vulnerability. The weak ecological boundary meant nomads, with their ability to leverage their small numbers, could frequently raid with relative ease. The Tanguts were semi-nomadic and successfully employed swift cavalry,²² a foe that the Chinese could not always fight on equal terms.

Sometimes settling with the nomads meant simply paying them off, but sometimes the Chinese created new iterations of defensive walls (from the Qin to the Ming Great Wall) in order to create a clear boundary between the agrarian and nomadic ecological-cultural zones. Chinese cultural universalism was established in the centuries before true mounted nomadic warriors rode up to China's northern reaches. When nomads finally began pressing their advantage (such as the Xiongnu in Han times) they upset an otherwise well-formed Chinese identity, forcing politicians and philosophers (such as Confucius) to either rethink their cosmology or find new ethics in the new, threatening epoch.²³ Walls were one solution to the problem but they were neither the

¹⁹ Lattimore, *Frontiers*, 67.

²⁰ Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press), 36; Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 7,9. According to Barfield, because nomadic states were created on the basis of taking advantage of sedentary wealth, as the sedentary Chinese dynasties fell so did the nomadic states that depended on them.

²¹ Waldron, *The Great Wall*, 61-62; Michael C. McGrath, “Frustrated Empires: The Song-Tangut Xia War of 1038-44,” in *Battlefronts Real and Imagined: War, Border, and Identity in the Chinese Middle Period*, ed. Don. J. Wyatt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 151. McGrath explains that controlling at least two of the three regions was requisite for establishing a successful nomadic state. The Tarim Basin provided trade wealth, the Ordos geopolitical power, and the Liao Valley agricultural surpluses.

²² Michael C. McGrath, “Frustrated Empires,” 153.

²³ Waldron, *The Great Wall*, 33. This period of time is also called the “Axial Age” by Karl Jaspers due to an explosion of innovative thinkers across Eurasia that laid the foundations for current intellectual, cultural, and spiritual thought. Waldron argues that invading nomads, armed with bows and adequate saddle technology, became a significant threat around this time, thus shocking the sedentary world into reformulating their intellectual cultures. While the Axial Age is an elegant idea, and nomads *did* affect state development, I believe Jaspers’ original idea is too broad.

cheapest nor most effective.²⁴ The Song managed to build effective barriers between themselves and the Khitan Liao in the early 11th century by creating a system of water obstacles, “The Great Ditch,” between the Taihang Mountains and the coast in Hebei province. The tactic served a greater strategy unlike the Great Wall which simply excluded. The water obstacle changed the psychological game more than grand strategy, leading to a diplomatic peace.²⁵ However, in the Ordos Loop, bottlenecks are nonexistent to make a water obstacle feasible nor an abundant supply of water. In addition, loess soil is highly erodible, and such an effort might have simply crumbled and washed away.

Chinese history makes clear the anxieties arising in the Ordos Loop, the most open incursion route into China and also the most problematic for a terrestrial, agrarian empire to defend. Further, the north was firmly the domain of nomadic peoples who sought to raid the frontier and control valuable oasis trade. Nomadic empires, like their agrarian counterparts, were vulnerable to decline and other nomadic, or semi-nomadic, peoples could take their place. The Tangut Xi Xia was one such state which arose to challenge Chinese supremacy in the Ordos, wielding their nomadic advantage with considerable, if limited, success.

The Xi Xia From Early Times to the Song

The state that came to be known to the Chinese as Xi Xia (西夏) or Western Xia, Great Xia (大夏) as declared by Tangut Emperor Yuanhao, or the Great State of White and Lofty (𐽀𐽁𐽂𐽃𐽄𐽅𐽆𐽇) to the Tangut, was the creation of a diverse group of people ruled by a Tangut majority. The Tanguts, or Mi-ñag in Tangut, appeared in history as a distinct people as early as the seventh century friendly to the Tuyühan Kingdom, a relatively powerful confederation of nomadic peoples, based in the Kokonor region. The kingdom was vulnerable by the 7th century as the first Turkic Empire crumbled and became prey to the Chinese Tang and Tibetan empires. Naturally, the rising empires vied for dominance in the primary vein of trade—Hexi (modern Gansu). The Tibetans attacked Tuyühan from the southwest scattering the various peoples and forcing the Tanguts, among others, to flee east.²⁶ From this point onwards, several waves of migration displaced Tangut populations into the southern Loess Plateau and Ordos region. While Tangut chieftains were generally unwilling to submit to Tang authority, they reluctantly agreed to submit in 635 CE.²⁷ The Tang then organized the Tanguts into special tribal prefectures in the Loess Plateau region. Owing their stability to the Tang, these peoples became semi-autonomous allies of the Tang and a buffer between the core Chinese lands and the Mongolian steppe—home to several potentially hostile nomadic peoples.²⁸ Another 200,000 Tanguts migrated into the Southern Ordos in 692 and 340,000 were settled in Hexi.

Migrations and competing loyalties resulted in a nation divided; some Tanguts were absorbed by the Tibetans; some sided with the Tibetans in war, raiding the Tang where it was

²⁴ Waldron, *The Great Wall*, 33.

²⁵ Peter Lorge, “The Great Ditch of China and the Song-Liao Border,” in Wyatt, 72. According to Lorge, the Great Ditch provided a defense zone which turned the war into a battle of attrition but more importantly created the psychological (indeed a geographic perception of separation or boundary) which was useful in settling on recognizable borders.

²⁶ Ruth W. Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 6: Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368*, ed. by Herbert Frank and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157. Dr. Dunnell’s entry into this volume informs much of my knowledge on Tangut chronology and events.

²⁷ Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia,” 158.

²⁸ Herbert Frank and Denis Twitchett, “Introduction,” in Frank and Twitchett, 8.

weak (such as during An Lushan Rebellion of 755); and still others, the a group identifying under the title of Tuoba, petitioned to be absorbed into the Chinese Sui empire in 680. When a Sogdian-funded Turkic revolt erupted in the Ordos (where 100,000 eastern Turks had been resettled by the Tang), the Tanguts helped the Chinese quell the rebellion and were rewarded. The Sogdians and Turks were subsequently weakened in the Ordos allowing the Tanguts to claim more authority in the region. In 880, when Chang'an fell to Huang Chao, Tuoba Sigong led a Sino-Tangut coalition army to help Tang forces in driving out the rebels.²⁹ Tuoba Sigong was promoted as the acting military governor of the Xia, Sui, Yin, and Yu prefectures and given the Tang imperial surname Li (李) thus beginning a close, reciprocal relationship between this influential Tangut group and the Tang. Sogdian, Turkic, and Tibetan influence waned, giving the Tanguts the ability to organize themselves more successfully. Only the Uighurs were left to rival the Tanguts in the Central Asian horse trade along the Gansu corridor.

The Ordos Tanguts prospered as allies of the Tang but the rebellions forever weakened the Chinese dynasty until it eventually collapsed in the 10th century, bringing an end to the inclusive, open empire. The Tang system largely ameliorated the northern nomad “problem” by not only voluntarily settling and incorporating nomadic and semi-nomadic people in into the imperial fold, but also recruited tribal auxiliaries to fight hostile nomads on their own terms.³⁰ After the fall of the Tang, the Tanguts found security in the northern states of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, especially the Liang against the Later Han and aligning with the Later Han once they had conquered territory on the China plain.³¹

Although the Song paradigm and policy for the northern frontier would become a radical departure from the Tang, Sino-Tangut relations were relatively peaceful in the late 10th century. The centralization and territorial aspects characteristic of Song administration had not yet been established, especially in the North. In 967, when the Tangut military governor of Xiazhou died, he was posthumously awarded the title of Wang (王), or king, of Xia and his son, Li Guangrui, stepped into office, despite the court's decision not to award garrison commanderies to non-Chinese along the northwestern border of Shanxi.³² In 962, The Tangut chieftain sent 300 horses to the Song capital, Kaifeng, in order to defeat the Northern Han; the latter kingdom fell in 979.³³

Tangut leaders, whether legitimate or not, continued to submit to the Song court but not without internal friction. Though at peace, the Song attempted to settle the Tanguts in the Chinese interior, but Li Jiqian, a Tangut chieftan, and his followers fled north while Song loyalists moved into China.³⁴ Again, like the 7th Century split between Chinese and Tibetan loyalties, the Tanguts were split again now with a new core population settling in the Ordos—a schism made possible by moving outside of Chinese reach. A move towards the steppes and away from China culturally and politically reintroduced this faction of Tanguts to nomadic, tribal priorities and created a foundational separation which necessitated a separate state.

²⁹ Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia,” 163.

³⁰ Waldron, *The Great Wall*, 47.

³¹ Ouyang Xiu, *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, trans. Richard L. Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), lxvii.

³² Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia,” 167.

³³ Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia,” 167.

³⁴ Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia,” 168.

Beginning of the Xia State in the Ordos

The Song court became better established by the end of the 10th century and sought to redefine its relationship with the Tangut tribes on its own terms. The Tangut schism formed the foundational imperative for the creation of a state to protect power and cultural identity. In addition, Song encroachment (fueled by imperial aims informed by low opinion of nomads) provided the opportunity for Li Jiqian (963-1004) to capitalize on nomadic heritage, claiming that it was in danger of Song oppression.³⁵ Just as the relationship with the Tang state allowed the Tanguts to claim a niche in the Sinocentric world order, the young Tangut state further defined itself in relation to the Song state—one polity among many.³⁶

Loyalty was not a simple problem for the Ordos Tanguts; ethnicity and language, let alone nationality, were not enough to secure political cooperation or warriors. Loyalty was based on, quite practically, wants and needs.³⁷ The nomadic Tanguts had relied on trading their abundant horse stocks for Chinese tea or silk, supplementing their otherwise meager resources on the steppe. Although purely nomadic Tanguts were the furthest away from the agrarian Chinese culturally, they had as much to gain for economic cooperation. To stop trading horses was contrary to their own interests economically³⁸ as well as politically; precedent had more or less taught those dwelling in the Ordos that good relations with China was favorable as in Tang times. Tangut chieftains residing closer to the Chinese in the southern Loess Plateau still provided tribal auxiliaries to the Chinese armies.

Beginning in the 980s, the Song began restricting the horse trade and only buying horses in cash to reduce the amount of metal (in coins) that entered the Ordos.³⁹ Coins were melted down by the Tanguts to provide material for weapons, otherwise difficult to make with steppe resources. Salt, the Tangut's other large export and unique to the Ordos, was outright banned; however, the policy was extremely unpopular. Becoming untenable, the policy was effectively abandoned. The situation became increasingly politicized; the Tanguts, caught between their Ordos siblings demanding loyalty and the Chinese demanding submission within their unique cosmology, likely found themselves pushed to make a decision.

Li Jiqian proclaimed himself and his nascent state as a protector of the Tangut people and other peoples in the region, even frontier Chinese farmers. The Ordos elite had their own motives as well; they needed to maintain their economic advantages gained over the years which could no longer be secure in the new climate.⁴⁰ Guardianship meant more than just defining human institutions: “protecting themselves meant not only resisting Chinese pressures, but, more important, stabilizing the ecological frontier where the two societies, Han and Inner Asian, agrarian and herding, overlapped.”⁴¹ Without a border to denote loyalty or political stability,

³⁵ Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia,” 169. Naomi Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty: Frontier Crossings in Liao and China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 175. Standen asserts that “when the explicitly territorial revanchism of the Song produced a need for a more sharply defined Other that could justify military aggression post-Shanyuan [the 1005 peace treaty between the Liao and Song], conditions were ripe for the conversion of cultural identity into something much more politicized.” I believe this also applies in the Tangut Xia case at the moment of Li Jiqian's departure.

³⁶ Ruth W. Dunnell, *The Great State of White and High: Buddhism and State Formation in Eleventh-Century Xia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 5.

³⁷ Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty*, 173.

³⁸ Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia,” 169.

³⁹ Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia,” 170.

⁴⁰ Dunnell, *White and High*, 12.

⁴¹ Dunnell, *White and High*, 13.

these tactics curried favor with nomadic peoples in a non-hegemonic state environment. New claims to nationhood intensified the difference between the Chinese world and the nomadic world as well as between the Song state and nascent Tangut nation, sparking rounds of skirmishes.

As the Tangut leaders began to assert their control and ethnic peculiarities, a once loose confederation of competing tribes now had the necessity to unite. This was not new to the Tanguts; when premodern Inner Asian nomads settled on a region to establish hegemonic rule (as opposed to seasonal migration), inevitably the social structure changed concurrently to accommodate the new demands of a state and its subjects.⁴²

Emperor Yuanhao, War, and Attrition

The 11th Century experienced the most military conflicts, especially the 1038 Sino-Tangut War, and had far-reaching consequences for both empires for the next century. While Xia expansion was a continual project (often moving west) the open Ordos frontier provided the conditions for almost perennial raids and skirmishes. Geography and ecology did not cause war and conflict alone, but Song anxieties mounted as increasingly organized Tanguts with superior mobility and supply lines could force financial concessions relatively easily. However, war in the Ordos Loop yielded only ephemeral rewards due to strong Song defensive strategy.

Li Deming (r. 1005-1032), eldest son of Li Jiqian, was an influential Xia ruler who espoused policy much like early Tangut rulers. The use of limited force to antagonize the Chinese dynasty into economic and political concessions, such as the opening of border markets, payment of indemnities, or recognition of the strength of the Tangut state without utterly jeopardizing Sino-Tangut relations, were the order of the day. Just after the 1005 Song-Khitan peace agreement, Li Deming sought to gain similarly beneficial terms for his own empire.⁴³ Border clashes backed by negotiation spanned two years, netting the Tangut state silk, cash, tea, and annual donation of winter clothing, as well as the investiture of Deming as the military governor of Ting-nan, entitled Prince of Xiping (Shaanxi) and de facto sovereign of the Chinese-acknowledged Tanguts.⁴⁴ After the compromise was reached, three decades free of significant antagonisms ensued as Xia borders stretched wide to the west.

Deming appointed his son, Li Yuanhao, to lead the Tangut armies against the Uighur and Tibetan armies during these campaigns – the battles that would cut his teeth for the largest war the Tanguts would face before the Mongol invasions. By the time Li Deming died in 1032, Li Yuanhao had been well educated and had become an experienced military leader having just captured Liangzhou (modern Wuwei in the Gansu corridor). Yuanhao succeeded his father in 1032 and became the Xia's most well-known and provocative ruler. He broke with his father's policies, instead reflecting his grandfather's policies. Intensively independent and militarily confident, Yuanhao embraced a pride in the Tangut identity like none had done before him, which eventually led to the Sino-Tangut War of 1038.

Yuanhao's cultural and political policies that followed his inauguration are in clear defiance to the Song court's wishes. Early in his reign, Yuanhao changed the royal surname of the Xia from Li (and Zhou, which was the Song title) to Weiming (嵬名),⁴⁵ reflecting not only

⁴² Lattimore, *Frontiers*, 333.

⁴³ McGrath, "Frustrated Empires, 152.

⁴⁴ Dunnell, "The Hsi Hsi," 177.

⁴⁵ Dunnell, "The Hsi Hsi," 181.

nativism but a uniquely Tangut imperial prerogative. Also appended to his name was the title of Wuzu, the Tangut's equivalent to “khan,” and thus obvious alignment to Inner Asian forms of political legitimacy. New policies also included a mandatory hairstyle to be worn by all men that purposefully differentiated not only Tanguts from all of their neighbors, but all Xia subjects in the realm whatever their ethnicity.⁴⁶ Dress was also prescribed for officials and civilians to follow completing the aesthetic vision. Under the reign of Weiming Yuanhao, the Tangut script was developed to translate and disseminate Buddhist texts.

The Xia state also reached an unprecedented level of sophistication during Weiming Yuanhao's reign while retaining tribal customs of deliberation. The state became more centralized, necessitating the creation of a structural bureaucracy more reminiscent of Chinese organization with complementary military districts akin to Chinese commanders. Several offices were created to administer the business of the state, again taking Chinese names. Tanguts and Chinese individuals were viable candidates for these positions. The army was also divided and subdivided and garrisoned along the frontier which cut across tribal lines, a policy regularly espoused by sedentary, not nomadic, states.



Figure 2: Relative political boundaries of the Xi Xia and its neighbors in the 11th century. (Source: Google Earth)

In the same vein, tribal customs such as consultation *primus inter pares*, beginning with a hunt and evolving into a council with chieftains, characterized strategic decision-making.⁴⁷ The army was mostly made up of cavalry as it had been for centuries and not unlike other Inner Asian powers. The Xia army consisted of 150,000-300,000 soldiers drawn from the 3 million total population of the state.⁴⁸ The disproportionately large military force, supported by taxation of trade, agriculture, and animal husbandry, was well-adapted to outmaneuver Chinese infantry-

⁴⁶ Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsi,” 182.

⁴⁷ Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsi,” 183.

⁴⁸ McGrath, “Frustrated Empires,” 153.

based armies and seize economic assets or harass frontier towns to force concession. In sum, the government and military had a mix of influences much like many other aspects of Xia society but borrowed primarily from their adversary in the Ordos—the Song Chinese.

In 1038, Weiming Yuanhao declared himself emperor of *Da Xia* (Great Xia), changed his reign title from a Song to a Tangut one, and sent an official embassy to the Song court requesting they recognize such changes in the geopolitical landscape. His letter to Song Renzong, the Chinese emperor, is a work of subtlety; on its face, the letter seems to be convivial but softly asserts Tangut independence and strength. Yuanhao recounts the cooperative history of Sino-Tangut relations. He cites the bestowal of the “Li” imperial name to the Tuoba (despite his recent change to Weiming), the Tangut’s aid in defeating the Northern Han, and even calling himself a servant of the Song court.⁴⁹ Emperor Yuanhao implies that he can rule the Ordos and Gansu better than the Chinese can by stating that “not pleased with the titles of king, [they] would follow only that of emperor. Concerning without end until the mountains rang with their assembly.”⁵⁰ Defraying direct responsibility while also illustrating his many subjects and territory, Yuanhao asserts his political dominance.

Most important about his request for acknowledgement is the supposed collective desire for a clear border separating the Chinese and Xia empires. The Xia subjects “begged for a land of one border” and Yuanhao himself asks that he be invested as “the ruler facing south,” to “subdue disturbances along the border.” Twice a border is invoked, a border that did not yet exist and would never officially exist. Yuanhao uses the frontier problem (that is, nebulous ecological and geographical realities coupled with Chinese disadvantage) to legitimize the creation of a separate state.⁵¹

But perhaps the letter was less diplomatic, and more antagonistic, than it appears. Dr. Ruth Dunnell interprets the many allusions to kingship as blatant subversions of the Confucian world order; only one man could be ruler of All Under Heaven. Yuanhao’s submissive language could also be read as mocking especially in light of his recent cultural reforms and military mobilization. Cosmologies clash (one multivalent Buddhist and one monolithic Confucian), creating a thoroughly insulting spectacle for the Song emperor.

In any case, Yuanhao was likely not instigating outright war and the Song were hardly prepared for a war themselves. The Song court wished the Tanguts to remain in the same capacity they occupied under the Tang—tribal auxiliaries—which explains why the court rejected but did not punish Tangut offenses. After rejection, Yuanhao purged his court of Song paraphernalia, further estranging his kingship from Chinese precedent. Yet again, there was no significant Chinese reaction.

Tensions escalated to military conflict in 1038-39 when Emperor Yuanhao attacked the Song frontier settlements and the Song retaliated. However, the war was a slight deviation on the usual model. Both sides evaded large, pitched battles; the Tanguts pressed their advantage with superior mobility when they could. Though the Tanguts were victorious more often by larger margins against the Song in three major battles, more time was spent in negotiation than in the war room.

The Xia army, though largely superior in almost every way, was not equipped for the conquest of walled cities. Ultimately the Song brought armed conflict to a stalemate much as they had with the Khitan Liao—static defenses. Chinese strategists pulled on past experience

⁴⁹ Dunnell, *White and High*, 40-41.

⁵⁰ Dunnell, *White and High*, 41.

⁵¹ Dunnell, *White and High*, 41-42.

with the Liao, attempting to artificially establish a border where none existed. Song commanders garrisoning as many as 500,000 soldiers on the edge of the Ordos.⁵²

Despite Tangut victories, the Chinese army's losses were relatively minimal in the aggregate. Song losses were constituted by massive expenditures of money. Millions of strings were appropriated to the defensive forces in Shaanxi via the treasury as well as the emperor's private purse.⁵³ Secondary losses also took the form of political and economic concessions to the Khitan. The Song, fearing further attacks from Liao and thus a two front war, increased payments and changed the act of indemnity payment from "gift-giving" to the more humiliating "presenting an offering."⁵⁴ Conversely, Tangut victories eventually amounted to a Pyrrhic campaign; every loss made replacement difficult for Yuanhao who levied much of the empire's able-bodied men at the beginning of the war.

After six years of war, Yuanhao's military and economic losses had become too acute to continue his efforts while the Song had become too strongly entrenched and well-adapted to defeat tactically or strategically. In 1044, Yuanhao was forced to concede his ideal position, submitting to the title of "subject" when addressing the Song emperor. The conflict cost the Xia favorable trade relations with the Song who instead bought horses from the Tibetans and salt from elsewhere. The Song suffered greater financial impact, increasing annual gifts (255,000 units of silver, tea, and silk) to assuage the Tanguts and keep the frontier secure from large scale warfare.

Cartographic Diplomacy

More time was expended in negotiations during the Sino-Tangut wars than in actual combat and, following its inception as a territorial empire, the Song engaged in a spatial project where maps became the leading tools of diplomacy. The Song dynasty sought to reorganize its political and fiscal units at the local and prefectural levels in order to stabilize loyalty, increase bureaucratic efficiency, and increase tax revenue.⁵⁵ The war and its own imperatives coupled with the Ordos frontier blended to justify radical changes in Song internal organization during conflicts with the Tanguts. In 1040, Ouyang Xiu critiqued Song frontier defenses; circumscription of 24 prefectures in 5 circuits increased the breadth of the defense line but left military units with too few soldiers with too few resources.⁵⁶ Prefectures in the frontier area were not financially autonomous in wartime and could not properly defend against the agile Tangut cavalry.

After the war, an intense cartographic initiative was ordered to reorganize the northwest frontier. The court wanted to make sense of the border, restructure the economy there, and attempt to assert control over territory by asserting their spatial visions by marking Xia controlled or contested areas as Song-controlled.⁵⁷ Since no Tangut maps survive, it's impossible for us to compare how symmetrical the Song maps were in comparison or to what extent the short distances claimed by the Song were contested by Xia cartography. In any case, the Song

⁵² McGrath, "Frustrated Empires," 153.

⁵³ McGrath, "Frustrated Empires," 156, 163.

⁵⁴ McGrath, "Frustrated Empires," 167.

⁵⁵ Ruth Mostern, *"Dividing the Realm in Order to Govern: The Spatial Organization of the Song State (960-1276 CE)"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

⁵⁶ Mostern, *"Dividing the Realm,"* 172-173.

⁵⁷ Ruth Mostern, "Cartography on the Song Frontier: Making and Using Maps in the Song-Xia Conflict, Evidence from Changbian and Song huiyao," *Proceedings of the Third International Symposium on Ancient Chinese Books and Records of Science and Technology* (Beijing: Daxiang chubanshe, 2004), 148-149.

court seemed to assert more than negotiate. One diplomat complained in 1057, “[the court] did not want to clearly define the border with the enemy.”⁵⁸ The Song court, though disadvantaged by the confusing border, attempted to use confusion in their favor and gain control of territory otherwise difficult to conquer and secure.

One map, the *Western Xia Topographic Map* originally created by Zhang Qian around 1108 is instructive in how the Chinese imagined and plotted the frontier. The map is included in Zhang Qian’s 1895 *Chronological History of the Western Xia* and includes the northwest territory of the Northern Song. The map reveals a premodern depiction of boundaries, represented by geographical features such as rivers and mountain passes, not lines. The Northwest section of the map, around the “Black River,” denotes Xia controlled passes in the East Gansu area with the direct West marked as “Western Barbarians.”⁵⁹ The Khitans occupy the Northeast with the very busy Chinese dominion south of what is likely the Yellow River.

Clearly, negotiating an agreeable “border” was difficult on this model. In 1108, the Chinese did not have a comprehensive understanding of the Xia territory beyond its edges. The map does not extend past the Southwest edge of the Tangut Empire and the Xi Xia seems to disappear amidst mountains in the distance. Xia maps may have aided the Song but none of them survive to confirm this. Also, the use of perceived geographic features would likely make changing the boundary difficult as there were no naturally defensible features the northern edge of this map, thus necessitated the construction of fortresses during the war. Intense reorganization of the northwest frontier happened again between 1068 and 1073, right around the time of a failed offensive by the Tanguts; still, no border materialized. Short of a mutually acknowledged border, (if a peaceful border was ever the object of either party) Song internal organization attempted to compensate for interstate complications.

Both empires met their economic and political limits and in the process redefined themselves and the multi-state order that became the paradigm for the next two centuries. This redefinition was largely a result of the unique nature of the Ordos frontier and the eclectic culture and administration of the Xia state not shared on the Hebei-Liao frontier just to the east. Though internal logics (Yuanhao’s rise to power and the Song’s reluctance to acknowledge Xi Xia as a legitimate power) played a pivotal role in the road to war, the geographic and ecological peculiarities engendered conditions that supported and propelled violent policies. War, diplomacy, and cartography failed to determine a border in the Ordos Loop, and religion was an arena in which power and legitimacy could be asserted by remote.

Adopting Buddhism and Proxy Ordos Politics

The Tangut state, positioned on the primary artery of religious travel, adopted Buddhism as an imperial institution. Tangut elites filled the void of patronage left by the Tang Dynasty, taking advantage of Buddhism’s legitimizing power and positioning the Ordos state in a pan-Asian, not sinocentric, world order.⁶⁰ Religion, specifically the heterogeneous Buddhism located in temples and practiced by lay people in the Kokonor region in Gansu, became a site of political and cultural contest between the Chinese and Tanguts intimately linked with the imperial projects

⁵⁸ Mostern, “Cartography,” 149.

⁵⁹ Dr. Ruth Mostern kindly helped me with translating river and prefecture names. The map provided was gleaned from <http://babelstone.blogspot.com/2013/04/a-fragment-of-tangut-geography.html>

⁶⁰ Ruth Dunnell’s *White and High* informs this section as a comprehensive source on Xia Buddhism and state building.

in the Ordos (insofar as a state was necessary for protection against the Song) and the creation of the Tangut script.

Tangut rulers participated in Buddhist rituals as early as the beginning of the 11th century, requesting to give offerings in Song controlled areas. Li Deming is the first recorded Tangut leader to have practiced Buddhist ritual, already bearing political motivations. At the death of his mother (possibly one of his father's wives), Li Deming requested offerings be given at temples on Mount Wutai in Shanxi—an important foundational step to receive the state protecting benefits from the bodhisattva Manjusri or at least creating the image of a patron state. The offerings were allowed by the Song but a Tangut could not physically visit Mount Wutai, instead, a nun from that Tangut's economic rivals, the Ganzhou Uighurs, was escorted to the holy site. The Song deliberately nurtured relations with Tangut enemies including the Kokonor Tibetans in 1072. Weiming Yuanhao was denied even remote access to Mount Wutai under suspicion that the Tanguts were really just interested in reconnoitering Shanxi.⁶¹

Weiming Yuanhao waged a military and ideological war with the Song supported Tibetan regime in Kokonor, established the native script required to translate Buddhist sutras into Tangut, and used Buddhist ritual to legitimate his coronation. Yuanhao attempted to establish a shared political and cosmological context between the Xia and Song while also asserting enough power to prove that the Tangut state could hold its own.

This is most clearly seen in the Buddhist Temple at Liangzhou. Originally built by the regional governor of Liangzhou under the Eastern Jin in the 4th Century, the Hongzang Temple or Huguo Temple⁶² under the Tanguts is located in the Kokonor region. The temple's name ("State Protecting") denotes its importance as a site of cultural and spiritual defense. Huguo temple was not located directly in the Ordos but, even so, acted as a proxy to a direct frontier interaction. Much like a modern embassy today, "Liangzhou served Inner Asian interests in confronting or mediating with China, culturally, politically, economically, and militarily."⁶³

Few written records remain from the temple, but a 1094 bilingual stele dedicated to the restoration has been recovered and translated by Ruth W. Dunnell.⁶⁴ Her translation reveals a lofty, metaphorical tone conveyed by the Tanguts, maximizing the Buddhist identity, ingratiation of traditionally Buddhist locals, spiritual power, and differentiation from the Chinese. The Han inscription is decidedly more secular, reading much more like a traditional Chinese historical compendium. A focus on local history in relation to Song history is aimed at retaining local Han loyalties.

Though the stele is bilingual, with each passage – Tangut and Chinese – back to back, the inscriptions contained nothing necessarily critical of the other people or state. Most Tanguts could not read Chinese let alone their own language (though perhaps multilingual monks could), But more importantly the Chinese could not read the encoded Tangut script. Though the temple was a site of political legitimation and religious dialogue, any attempt to curry advantage was wholly defensive in nature much like how Buddhism was used in the Ordos to help establish a state with more inertia to stop Chinese advances (culturally and militarily), not to provide the

⁶¹ Dunnell, *White and High*, 35, 192.

⁶² Dunnell, *White and High*, 87. The temple received many names over the centuries. "Huguo" was the name it received from the Tanguts but was called the Dayun ("Great Cloud") temple after coming under Chinese influence by decree from Empress Wu and later after Tangut influence.

⁶³ Dunnell, *White and High*, 87.

⁶⁴ This small section is based entirely on the second part of Dunnell's *The Great State of White and High*. I do not quote directly from the fairly long stele inscriptions simply in the interest of concision. Please consult (pg. 120-132) for the full translation.

means for conquest.

Conclusion

Perhaps the worst diplomatic failure of the debacle was the inability – militarily and cooperatively – to demarcate a stable border.⁶⁵ Although a war may imply an Other (a person or persons perceived to be culturally or racially distinct), it did not mean that the Song court acknowledged the Xi Xia as a legitimate state worthy of sharing a border. And without one, the Tanguts continued policies (despite a greater degree of internal strife between centralists and tribalists, Fanness and Hanness) that aimed at trade, economic monopoly, and extortion. The Song dynasty, or rather semi-independent frontier governors and military generals seeking status, began launching revanchist attacks in the northwest, reclaiming some territory. New cycles of Tangut offensives, Song fortification, and uneasy peace treaties characterized Sino-Tangut relations until the conquest of north China by the invading Jurchens.

Studying the interaction of the Xi Xia and Song on the stage of the Loess Plateau, it becomes clear that the ecology, geography, and geo-political value created the conditions for trade, cultural borrowing, conflict, and diplomacy. The precariousness of the weak ecological boundary and perceived value of this shared space resulted in gradual, sometimes frantic changes in the relationship between the semi-nomadic Tanguts and Chinese. Internal imperial logic made historically practical policies (such as the introduction of border markets) a more complex issue than the use of stamp and ink.

Political and economic factors contributed to how and why the two cultures interacted the way they did but the imperative produced (and in response to all decisions were made) by the Ordos Loop's anomalous characteristics is not to be ignored but, in fact placed in full focus. Scholars can broaden and deepen our understanding of historical events by treating the Earth and its systems – biological and geological – as active factors (not static, blank constants) in how human cultures sustain, expand, and interact. In a way, the Xia conflict represented a traditional nomad-agrarian dynamic but in other ways, because of nature of the Ordos, it diverged from narratives of successful diplomacy and sinicization. The Xi Xia could not establish relations like the Liao had done by way of a natural border or the Jin with outright conquest and thus both the Xia and Chinese scrambled for alternatives until the Mongols settled the issue for centuries to come.

⁶⁵ Dunnell, "The Hsi Hsia," 189.

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