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Tangut Studies in the Soviet Union: State of the Field (1981)

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The archives of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Leningrad house a rare collection of Chinese and Tangut books and manuscripts, discovered by Colonel P.K. Kozlov in the ruins of Khara Khoto (Edzina, Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region).<sup>1</sup> Kozlov's precious finds were first scrutinized by A.I. Ivanov and V.L. Kotvich. Other scholars contributed to the inventory of the Tangut archives, but the real founder of Soviet Tangut studies was N.A. Nevskii. Nevskii developed an interest in the Tangut texts while he was working with the sinological community in Osaka in the 1920s. Later he returned to Leningrad and devoted most of his energies to the compilation of a Tangut dictionary, based on native dictionaries, phonetic tables and translations of secular and Buddhist texts from Chinese and Tibetan.

Nevskii's fruitful labors ended in 1937, when he became a victim of Stalin's purges (his official date of death is given as February 14, 1945). In 1960 his essays and manuscript dictionary were published as Tangutskaya Filologiya (2 vols.) for which he was posthumously awarded the Lenin Prize. Tangut studies revived in 1959, and since then a talented group of specialists has emerged in Leningrad, led by E.I. Kychanov.

A student of T'ang legal history, Kychanov made Hsi-hsia the subject of his doctoral dissertation, and absorbed into it the initial fruits of his own and his predecessors' labors with Tangut sources. His Outline History of the Tangut State (1968) presents a lucid narrative of Tangut history from tribal genesis to the post-conquest Yüan period. In the conclusion he assesses the nature of Chinese, Tibetan and Uighur influence on the evolution of Tangut culture and government. Further, he enumerates real and possible channels of Tangut influence on the Mongols.<sup>2</sup>

1. E.I. Kychanov vividly relates the history of Tangut studies in Zvuchat lish' pis'mena (Only the Writing Resounds) (Moscow, 1965), 81-131; and more summarily in a short essay, "Tangut Studies," in A.N. Konorov et al., eds. Aziatskii Muzei (The Asiatic Museum) (1972), 171-185. My account draws upon these two sources. E.I. Lubo-Lesnichenko and T.K. Shafranovskaia supply a popular account of the discoveries at Khara Khoto and a history of the city itself in Mertvyi gorod Khara-khoto (The Dead city of Khara Khoto) (1968). Buddhist literature comprises more than 80% of the approximately 8000 documents in the Tangut collection. See the catalogue compiled by Kychanov and Z.I. Gorbacheva, Tangutskie rukopisi i ksilografii (Tangut manuscripts and xylographs) (1963), 22.

2. Regarding the Mongols, see also "The Tanguts and the West," Strany i Narody



Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Kychanov published descriptions, translations and analyses of diverse Tangut documents. These include legal, military and economic sources as well as specimens of poetry and folklore.<sup>3</sup> An early 12th century military code, a table of official ranks, and an almost complete text of a mid-12th century law code provide abundant data on Tangut administrative, legal and social organization. They also reveal areas of Chinese, Tibetan and other influence, native innovation, and similarity with Ch'i-tan, Jurchen and Mongolian practices.

In 1978 Kychanov finished the enormous and often tedious task of translating the above-mentioned Tangut law code. This document consists of 20 chapters in 1460 articles, of which only chapter 16, parts of chapter 14 and a few scattered articles are missing. His translation exceeds a thousand pages, and is accompanied by a lengthy (nearly 900 pages) commentary and analysis. The sheer volume of this stupendous labor unavoidably raises obstacles in the path of its publication, which, however desirable, remains only a distant prospect. Most of Kychanov's publications of the last 15 years, happily, introduce information contained in the code.

Of considerable interest for cultural history are Kychanov's renderings (albeit tentative) of Tangut proverbs, odes and a rhymed encyclopedia modelled roughly on the *Ch'ien-tz'u wen* and used as a language textbook.<sup>4</sup> The latter work consists of 21 verses; the first three constitute an introduction, while the remaining eighteen treat various subjects ranging from the origin of the world to Chinese and Tangut clan names, weights and measures. Regarding a late 12th century compilation of Tangut proverbs, Kychanov suggests, citing F.W. Thomas, that this genre of writing belongs to an Eastern Tibetan and Central Asian tradition.<sup>5</sup> These aphorisms consist of two lines whose rhythm

- ... Vostoka 10 (1971), 157-162. Kychanov believes that Mongol contacts with and initial adoption of Tibetan Buddhism owed much to the Tanguts. The Russian title of his *Outline History* is *Ocherk Istorii Tangutskogo Gosudarstva*.
3. For a preliminary survey of these materials, see "Tangut written monuments from Khara-khoto as historical sources," *Istoriografiia i istochnikovedenie istorii stran Azii 1* (1965), 44-49. In English, a more detailed description and analysis of these sources appears in "Monuments of Tangut Legislation (12-13th Centuries)," *Études Tibétaines*, Actes du XXIXe Congrès international des Orientalistes (Paris, 1976), 29-42.
  4. "'Grains of gold in the palm' - an aide in the study of the Tangut written language," *Zhanry i stili literatur Kitaia i Korei* (Genres and Styles in the Literature of China and Korea) (1969), 213-222.
  5. F.W. Thomas, *Ancient Folk-literature from North-eastern Tibet* (Berlin, 1957), 108. The extant block-print is in poor condition, but has recently been published in facsimile, with a translation, commentary, and English summary: Kychanov, *Vnov' Sobrannye Dragotsennye Parnye Izrecheniia* (Newly Assembled Precious Dual Maxims) (1974). According to Kychanov, the



derives from parallel construction. Kychanov compares Tangut examples with those from Turkish, Manchu, Chinese, Buriat and Mongolian folklore (in Russian translation). Confucian and Buddhist motifs are absent; prosaic images and themes predominate.

From an untitled block print dated ca. 1186, Kychanov has translated a long ode of 46 lines in the parallel style, entitled "Hymn to the Revered Ancestors of the Tanguts."<sup>6</sup> This poem recounts the genealogy and exploits of the legendary (or real) predecessors of the Tangut ruling house, much like the Secret History of the Mongols. Though the rendering is still uncertain in places, due to the poor condition of the block print, the content unmistakably affirms the important role played by Tibetans in early Tangut history. Buddhist motifs here abound. Later Tibetan and Mongolian sources preserve three versions of mi-nag (Tang-hsiang) ancestral legends, which can now be studied along with the earlier Tangut ode.

Lastly, Kychanov has written a particularly interesting article on Tangut attitudes toward China.<sup>7</sup> While the Tanguts esteemed Chinese culture and borrowed liberally from it, they ascribed no innate superiority to either the culture or its carriers, whom they thought could learn a thing or two from other people. In the 12th century they sought to foster mutual understanding between the two peoples, as stated in the preface to one Tangut-Chinese dictionary. But in the 11th century relations were never very warm, especially in the 1030s when the Tangut script was devised. The characteristic Tangut sense of humour can be detected in the ideograph used to refer to the Chinese: reconstructed by M.V. Sofronov (see below) as ža-nia (Tib. rgya-nag), in which the second component (nia) conveys the meaning "black," the ideograph for ža (Chin. tsan) combines two independent graphs meaning "small" (on the left) and "insect" (on the right).

M.V. Sofronov has made outstanding contributions to the decipherment and linguistic analysis of the Tangut language.<sup>8</sup> In 1968 his researches were

- ... compiler was probably the scion of a venerable Tangut family, as Liang had been the name of a leading Tang-hsiang clan since the 6th century.
6. "Hymn to the Revered Ancestors of the Tanguts," Pis'mennye pamiatniki Vostoka, 1968 (1970), 217-231. The Tanguts most commonly referred to themselves as mi or mi-nag, names of probable Tibetan origin (233).
  7. "The Tanguts on China," in V.E. Larichev, ed., Istoriia i Kul'tura Vostoka Azii (History and Culture of East Asia) (Novosibirsk, 1975), 143-147.
  8. Sofronov is the only Tangut specialist who works in Moscow rather than Leningrad. Three articles by him have appeared in English: "Researches concerning the phonetics of the Tangut Language," Acta Orientalia Hungarica 18 (1965), 353-354; "The Tangut text of the Chü-yung-kuan polyglot inscription," AOH 28:3 (1970), 297-326; "The decipherment and analysis of the Tangut phonemes," Études Tibétaines, Actes XXIXe Congrès international des Orientalistes (Paris, 1976), 65-74.



published in a two-volume text, A Grammar of the Tangut Language. Volume II contains a list of approximately 6000 Tangut characters, arranged according to the top of left-hand component of the ideograph, and accompanied by tentative phonetic reconstructions. In Volume I Sofronov discusses the method by which he derived his phonetic values (using "inner" or native phonological and lexical treatises along with Tangut translations of sutras, etc., from Chinese and Tibetan), and presents an outline of Tangut morphology and syntax.

Like others before him, Sofronov characterizes the Tangut script as uniquely complex and historically significant in being the sole ideographic script deliberately created from scratch in a short period of time, and hence not subjected to a long and gradual evolution.<sup>9</sup> Each ideograph represents a separate semantic structure, the meaning of which derives from the combination of distinct and classifiable graphic units. These graphic units can be reduced to eight basic linear or right-angled strokes, and combine into progressively more complex structures, in a limited number of discernable configurations.<sup>10</sup> Some Tangut ideographs serve only to transcribe foreign pronunciations and possess no semantic value of their own. Although the principles guiding the construction of Tangut ideographs have not yet been fully illuminated, Sofronov cautions against overstating the degree of similarity between Tangut and Chinese.

K.B. Kepping has addressed many problems in Tangut grammar since the publication of Sofronov's text. She has identified six verbal prefixes that function as indicators of time and aspect; she has also analyzed agreement of verbs with subject and object, the formation of substantive plurals, and other related matters. Her studies confirm Nishida Tatsuo's identification of Tangut as a Tibeto-Burman language.<sup>11</sup> In a recent private communication (July, 1981), she announced that she had finally determined the meaning of the last two auxiliary morphemes (verbal), which had long eluded definition. The manuscript of Kepping's latest work, The Tangut Language (Morphology), went to press in August of 1981. Kepping has also studied Tangut translations of Chinese texts,

9. A Grammar of the Tangut Language, I, 43-68. Sofronov takes into full account the contemporary researches of Nishida Tatsuo, which he reviews on pp.27-28, and cites throughout Grammar.
10. See also Kychanov, "On the Study of the Structure of the Tangut Written Language," Kratkie soobshcheniia Instituta Narodov Azii 68 (1964), 126-150.
11. For example, see the article in English by Kepping, "Subject and Object Agreement in the Tangut Verb," Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area 2.2 (1976), 219-231; "A category of aspect in Tangut," Acta Orientalia 33 (1976), 283-294; and "Elements of Ergativity and Nominativity in Tangut," in Frans Plank, ed., Ergativity, Toward a Theory of Grammatical Relations (London & New York: Academic Press, 1979), 263-277.



some of which may survive only in their Tangut version.<sup>12</sup>

Thousands of manuscript and block-printed books in the Khara Khoto collection add a new dimension to research in the history and art of book-printing. High-quality book-printing flourished in Hsi-hsia, a subject investigated by A.P. Terent'ev-Katanskii. This scholar has examined the structure and dating of books, artistic format, binding, paper, illustrations, writing styles, and the persons connected with the production and publication of books in Hsi-hsia. His monograph on this subject, Books in the Tangut State, appeared in 1981.<sup>13</sup> Kychanov has written a piece on Tangut manuscripts as well, and L.N. Men'shikov has described the history and production of Chinese block-prints and block-printed engravings found in the Khara Khoto collection. These essays are scheduled for future publication along with others in a cooperative volume devoted to this collection.

The staff of the Far Eastern Section of the State Hermitage Museum also plays an important role in the cataloguing, study and publication of Khara Khoto materials. Involved in this endeavor are E.I. Lubo-Lesnichenko, the curator of the Far Eastern Section, M.L. Rudova (Chinese art history), N.V. D'iakonova (Central Asian art history), and T.V. Grek (Indian art). Among the artifacts from Khara Khoto housed in the Hermitage is a stunning collection of Tangut Buddhist icons and paintings. A catalogue of these items is in preparation, and its publication will bring some exciting new material to the study of the history of Buddhism and Buddhist art in China and Central Asia.

12. For example, see "A lost Chinese leishu in Tangut translation," Narody Azii i Afriki 1(1974), 152-157; "the Twenty Kingdoms a Chinese composition preserved in Tangut translation," Pis'mennye Pamyatniki i Problemy Istorii Kul'tury Narodov Vostoka (1974), 63-66.
13. Knizhnoe delo v gosudarstve tangutov (Moscow, 1981). Terent'ev-Katanskii also has an article in an English edition of a collection of Soviet essays: "The Appearance, Clothes and Utensils of the Tanguts," in The Countries and Peoples of the East (Moscow, 1974), 215-224.