

Introduction

The Yellow River, China's second longest river, rises in the Kunlun Mountains of Qinghai Province, then heads east across the Tibetan Plateau into which it has cut deep gorges. After Lanzhou, in the province of Gansu, it describes a vast curve in the desert plateau of Ordos. Here, along this loop, and before reaching Inner Mongolia, lies the autonomous region of Ningxia, one of the smallest and most sparsely populated in China. The soil is arid and the climate extreme, with temperatures ranging from -30°C in winter to $+39^{\circ}\text{C}$ in summer. The topography is rugged, with mountains, prairie-steppe, oases, and continuously advancing deserts. Earthquakes regularly shake the region.

About 1,000 years ago, however, a people of shepherds settled in this region (which was part of the Chinese empire),¹ at the invitation of the emperor of the Tang (618–907). This people was later called Tangut by the Mongols, a name also commonly used by modern Western scholars, whereas Chinese scholars tend to call them Xixia. Following the initiative of Ksenia Kepping,² I will designate this people by their self-appellation of 'Mi-Nia', though I will also use 'Tangut', especially as an adjective, since 'Mi-Nia' is a noun.

In 1038, the Mi-Nia founded a state whose capital was the present-day city of Yinchuan 银川, on the banks of the Yellow River, ruled by a succession of 10 sovereigns (see the appendix for a summary table of these rulers, accompanied by short biographies). This autonomous political entity created by the Mi-Nia is sometimes called an empire, sometimes a state, sometimes a kingdom in Western and Eastern academic literature. There are various explanations and justifications for these different names.

As early as 986, the Tangut ruler Li Jiqian was called 'king' of the Xia state by the Khitan of the Liao dynasty (916–1125), after his marriage to a Khitan princess, according to the *History of Song* (*Songshi*).³ His son, $\text{yu}^1 \text{wa}^2$ (Yuanhao⁴), gave himself the title of $\text{ŋwər}^1 \text{dzjw}^1$, which can be translated as 'heavenly lord',⁵ and proclaimed the birth of an empire in 1032. In native Tangut texts, the official name of the state can be translated as 'The Great Kingdom of the White and Lofty', according to the work of Ksenia Kepping.⁶ The *History of Song* suggests that the

Mi-Nia presented their new state as the 'Great Xia' (*Da Xia* or *Daxia* 大夏).

However, the Chinese of the Song dynasty (960–1279) would choose to call it the 'Xia State' (*Xia guo* 夏國), and used the word *zhu* 主 (sovereign), not emperor, to refer to Yuanhao. In later Chinese dynastic histories like the *History of Liao* and *History of Jin*, the Tangut state would be designated as 'Western Xia' (Xi Xia or Xixia 西夏). The choice of term by the nearby peoples was not insignificant: by creating their own state with an emperor at its head, the Mi-Nia claimed to be on a par with the Chinese empire and the Khitan empire, while the Chinese and the Khitan were careful not to use the term 'empire' for this new state, which they did not consider to be their equal.

If we refer to Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper,⁷ the building of an empire by tribes or peoples responds to a political dynamic, and tribal chiefs increase their power through territorial expansion, by accumulating resources and wealth outside their domain. Although they did not embark on major territorial conquests, at least initially, Tangut tribal chiefs increased their power by migrating within China's borders, which brought them new resources, knowledge, and means of subsistence that can be considered equivalent to the benefits of territorial conquest. This process also gradually enabled the Mi-Nia to gather the conditions for the creation of a state, which they proclaimed an empire.

According to Burbank and Cooper,⁸ empires are also characterized by being vast expansionist political units which dominate new populations that are incorporated by force and governed in a differentiated and hierarchical manner. In the case of the Mi-Nia, the most significant territorial expansion took place between 1028 and 1050, including the annexation of vast territories to the west and the conquest of Dunhuang 敦煌.⁹ While it is impossible to state that this derived from an imperialist policy, the fact is that the area controlled by the Mi-Nia more than doubled, although it did not reach the size of the Liao or the Chinese empires. On the other hand, one can hardly pretend that the Tangut state set up a specific and differentiated system of government to control the conquered populations. One explanation might be that many minorities were already living on its territory when the state was founded, even before any effective imperial policy materialized. In fact, while preference was given to the *pan*¹⁰ (the term used to designate the ethnic Tangut majority and their ancestors), minorities were not particularly oppressed

¹ Shi 2007, p. 2.

² Ksenia Kepping chose the Tangut self-appellation *mi-niau* over *mi* because it is a noun, and it is close to the well-known ethnonym *mi-nyag* used in Tibetan texts. Because of the difficulties connected with the rendering of the symbol *u* in publications, it is indeed more convenient to write it in the simpler form of *mi-nia*.

³ *Songshi*, Liezhuan 244, Waiguo 1, 22.

⁴ For the sake of simplicity, we will use 'Yuanhao' to identify $\text{yu}^1 \text{wa}^2$.

⁵ Jacques 2010.

⁶ Kepping 1995.

⁷ Burbank and Cooper 2011, p. 25.

⁸ Ibid. 23.

⁹ Li 2005, pp. 147–218.

¹⁰ *Fan-Han heshi zhangzhongzhu* (Pearl in the Palm) 1989.

nor differentiated. They were eligible for civil service positions, although in the event of a tie, the *fan* candidate was chosen.¹¹ It should nevertheless be emphasized that Yuanhao drew inspiration from the Chinese administration to build his own¹²—in other words, a political organization designed to control an empire.

Without meeting all the criteria of an ‘empire’ (although a strict definition of this term remains elusive), it does not seem absurd to follow the Mi-Nia and describe their political regime as an empire, though it also makes sense to use a neutral term such as ‘state’, or a general designation such as ‘kingdom’ (the difference between an emperor and a king is tenuous, as the sovereign can embody either). For my part, I will mainly be using the terms ‘empire’ and ‘emperor’, not least because the Tangut rulers considered themselves as such and called themselves that. However, I do not rule out the use of the terms state or kingdom, as I don’t think they mislead the reader. For example, it makes sense to refer to the ‘Tangut kingdom’ as a territorial and political unit founded by the Mi-Nia, and to speak of the ‘Tangut empire’ when referring to the state led by the line of Tangut rulers, which included many minorities and developed a specific culture of which the Tangut dimension gradually became one element among others, even if the geographical borders or the rulers of the kingdom and the empire were identical. Furthermore, since this empire was given many names, by the Mi-Nia themselves or by the Chinese, I elected to use the official name chosen by the Mi-Nia, ‘The Great Kingdom of the White and Lofty’.¹³

Over almost two centuries, this new empire underwent considerable economic, territorial, and cultural development. Irrigation techniques made it possible to cultivate the land in this inhospitable region.¹⁴ Traditional livestock farming, maintained by the Mi-Nia, became a field of excellence: Tangut horses, whose reputation extended far beyond the borders of the kingdom, were sold at a premium throughout the region.¹⁵ The Tangut army, retaining the cavalry practices typical of nomadic peoples and adopting the weapons developed by the Chinese, conquered new territories, pushing the borders as far as Dunhuang in the west and Lanzhou in the south. Last but not least, this empire was crossed by the routes used by merchants and pilgrims travelling between China and the rest of Central Asia, sometimes as far as Europe. The presence of these routes, commonly referred to as the ‘Silk Road’, enabled the Tangut empire to benefit from intense commercial activity and ongoing cultural exchanges.

However, building and consolidating a vast and powerful empire was not the only objective of the Tangut rulers. On the cultural and symbolic level, they invented their

own complex script,¹⁶ which they used to draft their laws (notably the *Revised and Newly Enacted Laws of the Heavenly Prosperity Era*¹⁷) and official documents, but also to translate the Buddhist canon. Their mastery of printing techniques contributed to the spread of written works.¹⁸

Fervent Buddhists from the earliest days of the empire thanks to the impetus given by the imperial family, the Tangut elite never ceased to demonstrate their devotion by financing the construction of monasteries and pagodas and commissioning the translation of numerous Buddhist texts.¹⁹ The artistic output that resulted from this devotion gave rise to a style that is still very much in evidence today. Examples include the Tangut wall paintings in the caves of Mogao 莫高 and Yulin 榆林 in Gansu province, the paintings and *thangkas* (Buddhist religious images, usually executed on a textile banner) of Khara-Khoto in Inner Mongolia, and the architectural art of the Ningxia region. These different types of artistic creation undeniably demonstrate the existence of an original and fertile Tangut culture. The coherence, interweaving, dissemination, and specificities of these cultural dimensions (political, artistic, and religious) regularly lead me to speak of a Tangut civilization (despite its brevity, the causes of this unusual cultural vitality will be discussed later on), in the Braudelian sense of the term.²⁰

The Tangut empire lasted 189 years, from 1038 to 1227. This was 22 years less than the Liao dynasty of the Khitan (916–1125), 22 years longer than the Northern Song dynasty in China (960–1127), and 70 years longer than the Jin dynasty of the Jurchen (1115–1234). In 1227, the Mongol army of Genghis Khan (1155/62–1227), after repeated offensives, finally decimated the Tangut people and systematically destroyed their cultural heritage. In a short space of time, despite having existed for two centuries, the Tangut civilization fell into oblivion, and the Tangut script became indecipherable. As for later Chinese historical annals, they recount the history of the Song, Liao or Jin, but there is no ‘History of the Xixia’. The Mi-Nia are only mentioned in a chapter that forms part of a section devoted to ‘foreign countries and peoples’. This

¹⁶ The Tangut script is a logographic script that resembles the Chinese script. However, the characters in the two scripts are constructed differently, with a much higher number of strokes in the Tangut characters.

¹⁷ Kychanov 1987–9. In this book, I will use the Chinese translation, *Tiansheng gajiu xinding luling* 天盛改舊新定律令, by Shi, Nie, and Bai 1999, and translate from it.

¹⁸ Shi 2007, pp. 489–523.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 546–60.

²⁰ I am thinking in particular of this passage by Braudel in *Écrits sur l'histoire*: ‘A civilisation is first and foremost a space, a “cultural area”, as anthropologists say, a dwelling. Within this dwelling, more or less vast but never very narrow, imagine a very diverse mass of “goods”, of cultural traits, whether it be the shape, the material of the houses, their roofs, the art of the gybed arrow, a dialect or a group of dialects, culinary tastes, a particular technique, a way of believing, a way of loving, or even the compass, the paper, the printer’s press. It is the regular grouping, the frequency of certain traits, the ubiquity of these traits in a specific area, that are the first signs of cultural coherence. If this coherence in space is combined with permanence in time, I call civilisation or culture the whole, the “total” of the repertoire. This “total” is the “form” of the civilisation thus recognised’ (Braudel 1985, p. 292).

¹¹ *Tiansheng gajiu xinding luling* (Revised and Newly Enacted Laws of the Heavenly Prosperity Era) 1999, pp. 378–9.

¹² Li 2005, p. 149.

¹³ Kepping 1995.

¹⁴ Li 2005, pp. 53–60.

¹⁵ *Jiu Wudai shi* (Book of the Five Dynasties), *juan* 138.

‘oversight’ obviously added to the mystery surrounding this vanished Silk Road empire until the discovery of the Liangzhou stele²¹ (Liangzhoubei 涼州碑—unearthed in Wuwei 武威 in Gansu—and bearing a bilingual inscription in Chinese and Tangut)²² gave rise to Tangut studies in the 19th century.²³

Let us now take a brief but more detailed look at the history of the Tangut people, to put our study in its historical context. The Mi-Nia were nomadic herders living in north-west China on the borders of Sichuan, in the present-day provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, and Ningxia. Their existence is mentioned as early as the Tang period in Chinese historical annals, notably the *History of the Northern Dynasties* (*Beishi* 北史),²⁴ which states that the Mi-Nia (Dangxiang 黨項 in Chinese) settled permanently in the Yinchuan region in the 8th century. According to the *Book of the Tang* (*Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書), the Mi-Nia lived off breeding: their animals provided meat and material for clothes and houses. Divided into tribes, they moved as they changed grazing land.

During the Sui dynasty (581–618), the Mi-Nia joined forces with the Tuyuhuns²⁵ to launch incursions into Chinese territory. Thanks to this alliance, which continued into the early Tang dynasty, they extended their territory by occupying the plains corresponding to the intersection between the present-day provinces of Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai. Around 631, they agreed to submit to the authority of the Tang, who were then pursuing a policy of pacification towards border populations. Tangut chiefs were given official positions, like Tuobachici, who became prefect of Xirong 西戎 (in present-day Shaanxi) and was given the surname Li²⁶ by the Tang emperor Li Shimin 李世民 (598–649).

In the middle of the Tang dynasty, the gradual advance of the Tibetans to the north and east was beginning to threaten the Mi-Nia. Tuobachici therefore asked the Tang emperor to allow his people to move within the borders of the Tang empire.²⁷ This is how the Mi-Nia settled permanently around Yinchuan.

China under the Tang dynasty was living through what many describe as the golden age of Chinese civilization.²⁸ A major military expansion led the Tang to inflict decisive defeats on the Eastern Turks in the Orkhon Valley and the Western Turks in the Ili Valley. The alliance with the Uighur Turks in eastern Mongolia, the Tuyuhuns and Mi-Nia in the north-west, and finally the domination of Turfan

enabled the Tang to control the oasis routes,²⁹ securing commercial operations as far as the capital, Chang’an 長安, as well as contributing to the development of Buddhism, which benefited from multiple influences from Taxila, Mathurā, or the oases of Khotan and Kucha. It was therefore an empire at the height of its military power, whose sphere of cultural exchange extended as far as India, Iran, and Central Asia, which agreed to welcome the Mi-Nia.

Some of the Tangut tribes thus migrated within the borders of the Chinese empire, while others remained in territories under Tibetan control, sometimes helping the Tibetans in their war against the Tang. As for the Mi-Nia living within Chinese territory, the Tang intended to neutralize them by strengthening their control over this population and granting administrative functions to some of them.³⁰ At the same time, as they settled with the Tang, the Mi-Nia developed trade links with other peoples from the region.³¹ By this time, for example, the famous Tangut horse was already becoming a valuable currency.³² The Mi-Nia also sold other livestock and cultivated many agricultural products. They were able to buy jewellery, silk, bronze objects, and silverware.

At the end of the Tang dynasty, the strengthening of Chinese authority led to tensions. The prosperity of this ancient nomadic people worried the Chinese imperial power, which decided to impose numerous trade restrictions. Conflicts and battles multiplied, though the Tang finally opted for a more accommodating policy. They lifted the trade restrictions, except for weapons.³³

Relations between the two peoples improved. In 881, the Tangut chiefs even took part in the repression of peasant revolts. In return, they received honours and rewards.³⁴ They intensified trade with the Han populations and rapidly developed agriculture, craft, and trade. During the Five Dynasties (907–960), the Mi-Nia remained vassals under protection, but enjoyed growing authority of their own. It was during this period that they developed their administration and set up an autonomous taxation system.³⁵

At the beginning of the Northern Song dynasty, faced with internal struggles, the Tangut chief Li Jiqian 李繼遷 pledged allegiance to the Liao and entered into a marriage with one of their princesses.³⁶ In 986, he obtained invaluable military assistance, which ensured his dominance among the Tangut clans and enabled him to challenge the Song, even receiving the title of ‘King of the Xia’ from the Liao.³⁷

²¹ Also known as the Xixia Stele (*Xixiabei* 西夏碑).

²² Luo 1981, pp. 4–5.

²³ From 2005.

²⁴ *Beishi*, *juan* 84.

²⁵ The Tuyuhun kingdom was established by a branch of the nomadic Xianbei tribe in the 4th century in the Qinghai region, then spread to Gansu. It was wiped out by the Tibetan empire in 663.

²⁶ *Xin Tang shu*, *juan* 43.

²⁷ Shi 2007, p. 2.

²⁸ Gernet 1972, p. 325.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 303.

³⁰ *Quan Tang wen*, 1990.

³¹ Li 2005, p. 92.

³² *Jiu Wu dai shi* 2015, *juan* 138.

³³ *Jiu Tang Shu*, *juan* 198.

³⁴ *Songshi*, *juan* 485.

³⁵ Ningxia, Xu and Du 1995, p. 2.

³⁶ *Songshi*, *juan* 485.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Liezhuan 244, Waiguo 1, 22.

Faced with this increase in power, Song emperor Taizong 太宗 offered Li Jiqian the patronymic Zhao 趙 (the surname of the emperors of the Northern Song dynasty), as well as titles and functions. But Li Jiqian did not submit. In 1002, he conquered the Song city of Lingzhou 靈州 (present-day Lingwu 灵武, in Ningxia),³⁸ turning it into his capital, and renaming it Xipingfu 西平府. In 1020, his son Deming 德明 settled in Xingzhou 興州 (present-day Yinchuan) and, thanks to a truce signed with the Song, was able to increase the prosperity of his people. Twelve years later, in 1032, Yuanhao, Deming's son, gave up the patronymic Zhao and adopted a new Tangut name: 𐰇𐰺𐰍 𐰇𐰺² mji¹³⁹ (Weiming⁴⁰). He also called himself 𐰇𐰺𐰍 𐰇𐰺𐰍¹ dzjw¹, which can be translated as 'heavenly lord'. By doing so, he symbolically began preparations for the creation of an empire.

He chose Yinchuan to be the capital of his state under the name of Xingqingfu 興慶府. He built palaces and temples there, but above all developed the first major institutions and administrations, based on the Tang and Song model.⁴¹ He also introduced a dress colour code to distinguish between the various official functions and ordinary people,⁴² ordered the population to standardize their hairstyles by shaving their hair,⁴³ and reintroduced Tangut rites into a ritual system that was becoming sinicized.⁴⁴

In 1036, Yuanhao also set about creating a Tangut script, in which all official documents were subsequently recorded.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, he also promoted Chinese studies alongside general education. Finally, religion was essential to him: initiated into Buddhism as a child, he made several requests to the Song to obtain a set of Buddhist canonical texts as well as the right to visit the temples of Mount Wutai 五臺山⁴⁶ In 1038, after six years of wide-ranging reforms, during which Yuanhao was already calling himself emperor, he proclaimed the foundation of the Great Kingdom of the White and Lofty.

The population of the new empire was heterogeneous. It was mainly made up of Uyghurs, Tibetans, Khitan,⁴⁷ Chinese and Mi-Nia, but other ethnic groups—long established in the region—were also present. Communities of Sogdians and Sogdo-Turks,⁴⁸

Xiongnu,⁴⁹ and Yuezhi⁵⁰ populated present-day Gansu and Ningxia, creating a complex and fertile ethnic mix. Furthermore, the Tangut territory was continually crossed by travellers from a variety of backgrounds: merchants, caravanners, pilgrims, monks, nomads, etc., who engaged in a wide range of commercial and cultural activities. This mix of extremely varied populations and cultures was decisive in the birth and development of a genuine Tangut identity.

Buddhism became the state religion in the sense that it was adopted by the imperial family and the elite, undergoing rapid and intense development. After the conquest of Dunhuang in 1036, the Mi-Nia renovated caves and built new ones, both in Mogao and Yulin. Indian monks stayed with the Mi-Nia before continuing their journey to Kaifeng 開封, the capital of the Northern Song, offering their translator skills. In 1072, a complete version of the *Tripitaka* (all the texts of the Buddhist canon) in the Tangut language was completed. The Buddhism of the Mi-Nia reflects many influences inherited from cultural exchanges within and outside their territory, such as the iconography of Khara-Khoto, in which the Chinese style is regularly represented along with Tibetan and Indian styles, and where certain *thangkas* bear inscriptions in Tangut, Tibetan, and Chinese.⁵¹ Commercially, their strategic location enabled the Mi-Nia to control trade between the Song empire and Central Asia, as well as between Mongolia, Gansu, Qinghai, and Tibet.⁵²

Internationally, relations with the neighbouring Liao, Northern Song then Jin fluctuated with wars and truces. Numerous incursions by the Mi-Nia, accompanied by a few major victories, forced the Song to sign a peace treaty in 1044, obliging them to pay an annual tribute to the new empire.⁵³ Although there were many conflicts with the Liao, the Mi-Nia generally regarded them as allies in their fight against the Song. It was also with the help of the Liao court that Emperor Qianshun 乾順 (r. 1086–1139) regained power, which had been usurped by the empress dowager. However, when the Jin subdued the Liao, Qianshun pledged allegiance to them, thus consolidating and even expanding his empire.⁵⁴

The two long reigns of Qianshun and Renxiao 仁孝 (r. 1140–93) marked the apogee of the Tangut empire. Both emperors were admirers of Han culture and fervent Buddhists.⁵⁵ Qianshun introduced the study of Confucianism.⁵⁶ Renxiao promoted the arts, established imperial examinations, and overhauled the judicial system.⁵⁷ During this period, the Tangut empire enjoyed great political stability, fostering economic prosperity and

³⁸ *Xixia Shushi*, *juan* 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ As a simpler form for publications, we will use *Weiming* as transcription of 𐰇𐰺𐰍 𐰇𐰺² mji¹, the Tangut name of the founding ruler of the Tangut empire.

⁴¹ *Xu Zizhi Tongjian Changbian*, *juan* 120.

⁴² Li 2005, p. 149. Dress codes have been introduced to define the attire of senior civil servants, army officers, lower-ranking officials, and ordinary members of the population. The latter may only wear green or blue clothing.

⁴³ Li 2005, p. 149.

⁴⁴ *Xixia shushi*, *juan* 11.

⁴⁵ *Songshi*, *juan* 485.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ The Khitan were a nomadic people from the regions of present-day Inner Mongolia. In 907, they founded an empire considered in Chinese historiography as the Liao dynasty.

⁴⁸ Trombert 2003, pp. 231–41.

⁴⁹ Di Cosmo 2002.

⁵⁰ Lin 1998.

⁵¹ Piotrovsky 1993.

⁵² Gernet 1972, p. 313.

⁵³ *Songshi*, *juan* 485.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, *juan* 486.

⁵⁵ Shi 1988.

⁵⁶ Li 2005, p. 278.

⁵⁷ *Xixia shushi*, *juan* 36.

the spread of Buddhism. These two rulers also succeeded in preserving the territory and containing internal struggles.⁵⁸

From the beginning of the 13th century, the Mongol army launched repeated attacks against the Mi-Nia. Worse still, the relationship between the Mi-Nia and the Jin rapidly deteriorated, putting an end to their long-term alliance and weakening them both in the fight against the Mongols.⁵⁹ Five emperors succeeded one another over a period of 20 years, unable to improve a situation that soon turned desperate. In 1227, the capital was besieged. An earthquake added to the ravages of the fighting.⁶⁰ Emperor Li Xian 李暉 (r. 1226–7) offered surrender and asked for the lives of the population to be spared, a condition that Genghis Khan accepted. However, on his deathbed, Genghis Khan gave the order to annihilate the Mi-Nia.⁶¹ The ensuing destruction marked the end of their empire.⁶²

The fall of the Tangut empire was accompanied by the dispersal of the Mi-Nia, who were threatened with being hunted down or killed by the Mongol army. In the *History of the Yuan* (*Yuanshi* 元史),⁶³ for example, there is mention of Mi-Nia taking refuge in Shanxi 山西 and Xinjiang. There is also evidence of Tangut refugees in many other areas, including Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, Shandong, Hubei, Jiangxi, Jiangsu, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Liaoning.⁶⁴ Some went back the way their ancestors came, and settled in Tibet. This is how the Mi-Nia gradually blended in with the local population.

Why did the Yuan not compile a history of the Tangut, as they did for contemporaneous ‘peripheral dynasties’ (as they are called in China), notably the Liao and the Jin? One of the hypotheses put forward is that Genghis Khan, wounded during the campaign against the Mi-Nia and exasperated by their resistance, ordered such methodical destruction that little or nothing remained of the archives after the passage of the Mongol troops, destroying the foundations on which the Yuan historians could have built a ‘History of the Xixia’. Li Fanwen explains this lack of sources in a different way. He considers that the Mi-Nia attached more importance to religion than to history, and did not write annals, thus depriving later historians of direct sources.⁶⁵ As a matter of fact, among the Tangut documents discovered so far, historical annals are lacking; but this does not prove that they never existed. I am not

convinced by the simple ‘absence of sources’ explanation. Indeed, Shi Jinbo has pointed out that there were several works on Tangut history, society, and military events during the Song period, which have since been lost.⁶⁶ Perhaps were they still available in the Yuan period? If so, the Yuan historians may have deliberately chosen *not to* write a history of the Tangut.

In any case, I side with historians who argue that the Mi-Nia were never considered by the Song, Liao, Jin, and then the Yuan as their equals (as I have already mentioned, the Tangut empire had indeed always been considered a mere state or at best a kingdom). For them, the Mi-Nia remained an ethnic minority who had created an independent state, worthy of no more than a chapter or two in annals, whatever the nature and extent of the sources available.

Anyhow, the destruction of their cities, the dispersal of their population and the lack of historical documents jointly contributed to the Mi-Nia being forgotten. From the Ming period (1368–1644) onwards, traces of their language were lost until the beginning of the 19th century. As for the script, the lack of users combined with its complexity probably also contributed to its disappearance.

It was not until 1803 that the Tangut script was rediscovered and identified on the Liangzhou stele, found in present-day Wuwei in Gansu province. The stele, which was erected in 1094 to celebrate the completion of the restoration of the Gantong pagoda of the Huguo Temple, contains inscriptions in Tangut and in Chinese. The texts praise the Buddhist faith of the imperial family, who sponsored the repairs, and gives important insights about Tangut politics, beliefs, and culture. But the main impact of this stele was to generate academic interest in the Tangut language. Other inscriptions, dating from the Yuan period and written in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Phags-Pa, Chinese, Uyghur, and Tangut on the inside walls of the Cloud Platform at Juyongguan, near Beijing, had attracted the attention of scholars in the second half of the 19th century.⁶⁷ However, the identification of the Tangut script in these texts caused trouble, and gave birth to 30 years of controversy. Finally, based on a study of the Liangzhou stele, a French scholar, Gabriel Devéria (1844–99),⁶⁸ was able to prove in 1898 that it was indeed in Tangut script.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Tangut studies gained new momentum with major archaeological discoveries. A Russian mission led by Pyotr Kuzmich Kozlov (1863–1935) visited the ruins of the fortress of Khara-Khoto, a Tangut outpost in an Inner Mongolia oasis. Under a *stūpa* outside the fortress, the explorers found several thousand texts, paintings, and objects dating from the Tangut period.⁶⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid. *juan* 23.

⁵⁹ Li 2005, pp. 332–4.

⁶⁰ *Xixia shushi*, *juan* 42.

⁶¹ Li 2005, p. 338.

⁶² *Yuanshi*, *juan* 120. This episode is recounted in a chapter devoted to a man called Chahan 察罕. Of Tangut origin and the son of a Tangut minister and his concubine, Chahan was rejected by his father’s first wife and became a shepherd. Taken in by Genghis Khan during a hunting party, he took a Mongol name and married a Mongol woman. Close to Genghis Khan, he is said to have saved a large part of the population of the Tangut capital during the Mongol army’s final offensive. This story may be romanticized or even legendary, but it illustrates the way in which the Yuan remembered the end of the Mi-Nia, in the form of destruction and massacres, but not systematic extermination.

⁶³ Ibid. *juan* 5, 10, and 18.

⁶⁴ Li 2005, p. 367.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Interview with Shi Jinbo: https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1313935?commTag=true

⁶⁷ Bonaparte 1895.

⁶⁸ Deveria 1896.

⁶⁹ Samosyuk 1993.

This event encouraged other archaeologists such as Sergei d'Oldenburg (1863–1934) and Aurel Stein (1862–1943) to explore Khara-Khoto in the following years. Interest in the Mi-Nia grew, and the greatest sinologists of the time, including Aleksei Ivanovich Ivanov (1878–1937), Nikolai Aleksandrovich Nevsky (1892–1937), Stephen Wootton Bushell (1844–1908), Henri Maspero (1883–1945), and Paul Pelliot (1878–1945),⁷⁰ took part in the study of the Khara-Khoto documents. The Kozlov collection formed an essential basis for Tangut studies. These studies continued throughout the century, enriched by new archaeological discoveries, particularly from the 1970s onwards. Russian researchers such as Evgenij Ivanovich Kychanov and Chinese scholars such as Shi Jinbo and Li Fanwen continued to study the Tangut language, translating numerous works and documents, while also focusing on Tangut history and civilization.

In this context, a curious fact is worth mentioning: until 1938, none of the many travellers, merchants, explorers, and archaeologists—from Marco Polo to Stein, not forgetting Kozlov, d'Oldenburg and Pelliot—who had criss-crossed Central Asia and China, even reaching lost ruins such as Khara-Khoto, had ever explored the area around Yinchuan, the ancient capital of the Mi-Nia. They all missed a huge burial ground located some 35km west of the city, on a plain at the foot of the Helan Mountains 贺兰山. This vast funerary zone, covering an area of 50km², is home to the necropolis of the Tangut emperors. Around these imperial tombs—of which there are nine—more than 200 ancillary tombs have also been unearthed, all containing the remains of buildings.

A first identification of this site came in 1938 through an aerial photograph taken by Wulf-Diether Graf zu Castell-Rüdenhausen and published in a book entitled *Chinaflug (Flight to China)*.⁷¹ This photograph shows a tomb in the foreground and the Helan Mountains in the background. The caption printed below the photograph reads, 'Mongolian tombs near Ningxia'. However, a more comprehensive caption at the end of the book describes 'strange earthen mounds called Hsia-Ling, located at the foot of the Alashan Mountains (3,600m) in northern Ningxia'. Castell-Rüdenhausen estimated the height of these mounds at around 25–30m. He added that, from the plane, he had noticed that they must have been covered with tiles or bricks, which were now scattered all over the ground. The photographer was convinced that these mounds had been built by the Mongols a very long time ago: 'These are gigantic monuments,' he wrote, 'the mystery of which will not be solved for a long time.'⁷²

It is a pity that Castell-Rüdenhausen does not cite the source of his information, as the modern name he uses, Hsia-Ling, is phonetically reminiscent of *Xialing* 夏陵, which means 'mausoleum of the Xia'. He was indeed the first to correctly

identify the cemetery, though unknowingly. On the other hand, the information provided by the aviator is false since these tombs were not built by Mongols.

The fact remains that Castell-Rüdenhausen was right about the time it would take to 'unravel the mystery' surrounding these gigantic monuments: it took another 35 years for these tombs to be formally identified as Tangut tombs, when Chinese archaeologists from Ningxia excavated the site in 1972. A further 23 years passed before the results of the excavations were published⁷³ in 1995. This cemetery thus provided the first known funerary remains of the Mi-Nia. I will henceforth call it the 'Xixia imperial cemetery' to avoid any confusion, since the place has become famous under this contemporary Chinese name (西夏陵) after it was excavated and open to visitors.

The first phase of archaeological operations was carried out between 1972 and 1977. It included the following work.⁷⁴

1. 1972–5: excavation of imperial tomb no. 6.
2. 1972–5: excavation of ancillary tombs M78 and M79.
3. 1972–5: cleaning of the two stela pavilions of imperial tomb no. 7.
4. 1975: excavation of ancillary tomb M182.
5. 1976: excavation of three kilns.
6. 1977: excavation of ancillary tomb M177.
7. 1977: cleaning of the stela pavilions and ceremonial hall of imperial tomb no. 5.

During this period, a survey estimated the total number of tombs at 70, then around 100.

The second phase of work, carried out in the 1980s and early 1990s, was devoted to prospecting, analysis, and surveys, as well as several additional excavations.⁷⁵

1. Research carried out on the entire site in 1987, 1990, and 1991 identified a total of nine imperial tombs and 206 ancillary tombs. The researchers carried out surveys for the entire site and for the different zones. A new numbering system for the tombs was adopted during this phase.⁷⁶
2. In 1986 and 1987, the remains of buildings located to the north of the cemetery were prospected and excavated twice, uncovering a total surface area of 4,400m².
3. The east stela pavilion of tomb no. 3 was excavated in 1987.

In 2000, a new team was formed to undertake surface excavations at the site of imperial tomb 3, the report

⁷³ Ningxia, Xu and Du 1995.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 5.

⁷⁵ Ningxia, Xu and Du 1995, pp. 5–6.

⁷⁶ An initial numbering of the ancillary tombs was carried out during the excavations of the 1970s, but a new numbering system was adopted during the excavations undertaken in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is this new numbering system that is used in this book.

⁷⁰ Pelliot 1914.

⁷¹ Castell 1938, p. 114.

⁷² Ibid. 184.

of which was published in 2007.⁷⁷ Finally, in 2007, the Ningxia Institute of Archaeology resumed cleaning work on imperial tomb 6, in order to gather more data, published in 2013.⁷⁸ Of the nine Tangut imperial tombs, tomb 6 is the only one to have been excavated underground, between 1972 and 1975.

Although the Yinchuan site has been formally recognized as the burial place of the Tangut emperors, the identity of the occupants of each imperial tomb remains a matter of debate. In fact, only the occupant of tomb 7 has been identified, as the fifth emperor, Renxiao (r. 1140–93). A stele from this tomb has been partially reconstructed by archaeologists. It bears an inscription in Tangut dedicated to Emperor Renxiao, and mentions the name of his tomb.⁷⁹

Future excavation campaigns will probably not be able to answer all the questions, given that the Xixia imperial cemetery was ransacked by the Mongol army after the invasion, and then looted on several occasions. Craters over 10m in diameter dug by looters can be seen on the ground. Moreover, under the Ming, Hu Ruli 胡汝砺 mentioned these tombs and already stated that ‘those who excavate them find nothing’.⁸⁰ Archaeological excavations have nonetheless uncovered elements, particularly architectural ones (which were of no interest to grave robbers, or were inaccessible to them), whose importance is crucial to the study of the Tangut civilisation. Most of this data has yet to be fully exploited.

Thanks to continuing archaeological excavations in the Ningxia, Gansu, and Inner Mongolia regions, further funerary remains have been discovered.⁸¹ Although limited in number and often severely looted, these sites (which include the tombs of Tangut nobility⁸² (in Minningcun 闽宁村), Han Chinese holding positions in the Tangut administration⁸³ (in the suburbs of Wuwei), and religious figures⁸⁴ (in the Helan Mountains) complement the results of the excavations conducted in the imperial cemetery and offer a more varied picture of Tangut burial culture.

Nevertheless, unlike the rigorous and detailed research carried out in other areas of Tangut studies, in archaeology, apart from excavation reports, articles, and books devoted to the tombs remain overall very general: they quote abundantly from the excavation reports but remain fundamentally descriptive. Little research has been done on any precise aspect in depth, or using archaeological data for a better understanding of Tangut funerary culture. Above all, authors tend to rely on Chinese historical texts to draw hasty conclusions, rather than using contemporary archaeological discoveries to develop new interpretations.

Finally, a comprehensive overview of Tangut funerary remains, treated as such, has almost never been undertaken. The only exception is the *Xixia yiji* 西夏遗迹 (Xixia remains) by Niu Dasheng 牛達生,⁸⁵ published in 2007, which is essentially a descriptive rather than analytical survey of the remains.

All this can probably be explained by the fact that archaeological excavations were carried out in a piecemeal fashion by various heritage and archaeology offices in the regions, provinces, or towns where the remains are located, sometimes at a time when freedom of thought, critical thinking, methodology, and resources were lacking (during the years of the Cultural Revolution, for example). Similarly, artefact conservation has not always been carried out in the best possible conditions, with some objects having disappeared in more than dubious circumstances: reputed to have been present at the time of the excavations, they have not been found since. The scattered nature of the sites also makes it more difficult to carry out truly exhaustive work. For a long time, this must have been a major obstacle for Chinese researchers. For my part, four field missions (in 2011, 2012, and 2019, lasting a total of four months) have enabled me to visit all the sites where the remains are located, even when their traces have disappeared after the excavations. Even before these missions, the diversity in terms of social groups, religion, architecture, artefacts, and artistic choices observed among Tangut funerary remains had convinced me that an exhaustive study of this ensemble, made possible by the limited number of sites recorded, would make it possible to develop a first genuine interpretation of Tangut funerary culture.

Moreover, by cross-referencing archaeological, iconographic, and textual sources, studying funerary culture led me to a better understanding of the genesis, development, and challenges of Tangut art and architecture, but also enabled me to raise questions about the meaning and transformation of rites (essentially those concerning the treatment of the body of the deceased), as well as to propose hypotheses about beliefs in the afterlife (the spread and evolution of Buddhism playing a decisive role here). Therefore, starting with an exhaustive analysis of funerary remains, this book will gradually develop the foundations of a Tangut funerary anthropology.

To achieve this, I will begin with a detailed description of the remains, starting with the specific features observed in the tombs at the various sites. Examination of ancient Chinese and Tangut texts on funerary matters during the Tangut period will then provide an opportunity to compare them with the archaeological data, leading to reflections on the reality of the facts mentioned in the texts, on actual compliance with the legal codes, and on the possible sources of inspiration from which the Mi-Nia drew. A comparative study will then highlight peculiarities linked to specific ethnic groups, religions, or strata of the population. It will

⁷⁷ Ningxia and Yinchuan 2007.

⁷⁸ Ningxia and Yinchuan 2013.

⁷⁹ Ningxia, Xu and Du 1995, p. 148.

⁸⁰ *Jiajing Ningxia xinzhi*, *juan 2*.

⁸¹ Niu 2007.

⁸² Ningxia 2004.

⁸³ Wuwei 2001.

⁸⁴ Ningxia 2002.

⁸⁵ Niu 2007.

also look at possible evolutions over time. Interpretive work will then demonstrate that, contrary to the academic vulgate that has been widespread in China since 1501,⁸⁶ Tangut architecture and burial methods are not a pale imitation of Chinese practices, leading us to wonder to what extent they may have been influenced by nearby peoples, and how they actually express a Tangut identity. I will also examine the significance of certain features of the Tangut tombs, and what these singularities suggest in terms of beliefs, political and religious aspirations, and even individual choices among the Mi-Nia.

This comprehensive study of the Tangut funerary remains in the current state of excavations is intended to form an initial basis for future work, when new archaeological discoveries will enable us to deepen our knowledge of the funerary culture of the Mi-Nia, their practices, their beliefs, their sources of inspiration, their art, and their originality—in other words, their civilization.

⁸⁶ *Jiajing Ningxia xinzhi*.