

The Guanyin Icon (Chinggis Khan's Last Campaign)

P.K. Kozlov's excavations in 1909 revealed that the suburgan (Mongolian for stupa) outside the city walls of Khara Khoto contained both Tangut written material and Tangut art objects¹. It goes without saying that these two parts of the Tangut heritage, originating from the same site, represent a single source of information on the Tanguts and, as such, should be studied in their unity. However, to the best of our knowledge, no such study has been made so far.

This is partly due to the fact that from the very beginning in 1909, when the Tangut treasure was transferred from Khara Khoto to St.-Petersburg, the written material and the artistic and archaeological material were separated and given to different institutions: the Asiatic Museum (now the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences) and the Ethnographic Department of the Alexander III Russian Museum. In 1933, the artistic and archaeological items were given to the Oriental Department of the State Hermitage Museum.

The Guanyin Moon in Water painting held in the State Hermitage Museum (X-2439) was first published in the well-known catalogue, *Lost Empire of the Silk Road: Buddhist art from Khara Khoto* in 1993. Since then it has twice been described by K.F. Samosyuk³.

Her approach is that of an art historian. Our description differs in that it is not an iconographical study but rather an attempt to connect the scenes depicted in the painting and to put the scenes into an historical context.

Despite the fact that the «Great Conqueror», Chinggis Khan, lived nearly eight hundred years ago, his personality still attracts a lot of attention. So far the main source materials used for reconstructing the life and military success of Chinggis Khan are the «Secret History of the Mongols», Chinese dynastic histories compiled in the mid-fourteenth century, and the writings of Persian historians such as Rashid al-Din and Juvaini. Indeed all the books on Chinggis Khan repeat the same facts which are known mainly from the above mentioned sources.

There is only one exception – the last period in Chinggis Khan's life, which includes his final campaign against the Tanguts (1226–1227) and his death in course of the campaign, which appears to be rather obscure. In different sources conflicting reports are given. It is said that he was wounded in the knee, that he

succumbed to an unknown illness, that he was killed by a lightning strike, and that he died after he was thrown from his horse. There also exists a legend that he was emasculated by a Tangut Empress but, since it was not corroborated by any written sources, this oral tradition was not taken seriously.

The last period of Chinggis Khan's life is intimately connected with the Tangut (Xi Xia) Empire (1032–1227), since the aim of his final campaign was the annihilation of the Tangut state itself; and the mystery of his death, which,



The Guanin icon.
The State Hermitage Museum

according to historical sources occurred on the territory of the Tangut state, is closely associated with the mystery of the fall of the Tangut Empire. But never before has any Tangut written source been used to reconstruct Chinggis Khan's last campaign. This is partly because of the widely held belief that all Tangut historical records which certainly must have existed in the Tangut court, perished in the flames of the Mongolian invasion. And thus far we have discovered no traces of any historical records written in Tangut script.

There are, however, some Tangut indigenous texts, which though not historical records, show how the Tanguts themselves saw the dramatic events which had preceded the 1226–1227 Mongolian campaign. These are reports by officials and poetry. It is precisely these Tangut texts that provided the starting point for this research.

All the Tangut sources, whether artistic or literary, came from a single site. They were hidden in a suburgan, outside the walls of the city of Khara Khoto, half buried in the sands of the Gobi⁴.

For a long time it was assumed that the Tangut treasure was hidden to save it from Chinggis Khan's troops and therefore it was supposed that everything in the suburgan dated from before 1227, i.e. before the fall of the Tangut State. It was widely believed that Khara Khoto ceased to exist in 1227, despite the fact that Stein plainly stated, «Amongst the miscellaneous fragmentary documents in Chinese which were picked up from refuse heaps within the ruined town [there were] nine bearing exact dates. These dates all fall within the period of the Yuan or Mongol dynasty and extend from AD 1290 (or possibly 1266) to 1366».

Subsequently, L.N. Menshikov revealed that the latest date in documents from Khara Khoto (now in the Institute of Oriental Studies, St Petersburg) was AD 1371⁵. In the *Lost Empire* catalogue, there is a painting of a crowned Buddha (pl. 59) with a Chinese coin dated 1378–1387 in his right hand, which was found in the suburgan.

And when the text of a Tangut ritual song was discovered which mentions Chinggis Khan, the Tangut heir and the Thags-pa Lama's death (which occurred in 1280), this was further confirmation of the fact that the second loading of the suburgan was made much later than 1227.

Today it is quite clear that the suburgan, which held such unique material, was loaded twice. It was first built, in the normal way, as a burial place for a high-ranking nun, a poet who compiled Tangut ritual songs and lived sometime at the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries. It was later broached because of the need to put the Tangut treasure inside, in the face of apparently inevitable destruction by Chinese troops when the Yuan dynasty was falling to the Ming.

We suggest that the second loading of the suburgan was made in the last decades of the 14th century. Thus about 150 years passed between 1227 and the second loading of the suburgan. In the course of these long years, the Tanguts had been compiling ritual songs and making pictures about what had really happened in the Tangut State: telling their own history in writings and art objects. These materials put into the suburgan represent their message to posterity. They wanted

us to know what really brought their State to an end.

Chinese sources claim that Chinggis Khan led his last campaign against the Tanguts because they had not fulfilled their promise to send the Emperor's son and heir as a hostage to the Mongols. However, in the St. Petersburg collection there are some indigenous Tangut texts which, though not historical records, show how the Tanguts themselves saw the dramatic events which preceded the 1226–1227 Mongolian campaign. These texts include a report by the military commander of the Khara Khoto garrison dated to the 2nd moon, 1225, and the ritual song mentioned above.

The information contained in these Tangut texts is surprising. They state that a hostage was indeed sent to the Mongols: a little boy, the Tangut heir, son of the last-but-one Tangut Emperor Dewang (1223–1226). The child was less than ten years old at the time. He was ruthlessly killed by the Mongols, and the ritual song states that his body was stripped by carrion and his bones «are still lying there». These reports stand in complete contrast to the Chinese dynastic histories which covered up this murder. Thus as far as Tangut history is concerned, Chinese dynastic histories must be used with care, and in conjunction with other sources. In the light of this, it is interesting to note that the Chinese never compiled a dynastic history for the Tangut, as they did for other non-Chinese regimes such as the Liao and the Jin.

By the beginning of Chinggis Khan's campaign, the Tangut heir had been killed and his father, Dewang, died of fear in 1226. According to the Tangut world view reflected in their indigenous name for their state, «The Great State of White and Lofty» which stands for the great union of female and male principles, personified respectively by the Tangut Empress and Emperor⁶, with no Emperor and no heir, in the eyes of the Tanguts, their State ceased to exist. But the Tangut Empress was alive and the revenge she undertook was also in keeping with the Tangut world view. Having been taken by Chinggis Khan into his harem, she emasculated him. This act was more terrible than mere murder. It was a ritual act to ruin his empire.

In Far Eastern cultures, the state of health of the Emperors was crucial to the prosperity of the State, especially where his masculine potential was concerned. The health of the Emperor was believed to provide a good crop and ensure harmony amongst the people. Perhaps in order to demonstrate his virility, Chinggis Khan always took one of his Empresses with him on his campaigns. Being emasculated, Chinggis Khan lost his right to rule. He had been seen as the original Cakravartin with supernatural powers; his charisma originated from the light of the sun and moon and a woman took it all away.

The story of the emasculation of Chinggis Khan by the Tangut empress is widely known in Mongolia. Russian travellers at the end of the 19th century have written down many variations of the story and today it is common knowledge.

Now let us turn to the Tangut painting from the suburgan in Khara Koto. The image of Guanyin occupies the centre of the painting, slightly to the left. The Bodhisattva sits in the well-known posture of *lalitasana* (or «royal ease»). As

H.A. van Ort states, «In early Buddhism the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was represented as a man. Under the influence of Chinese legends and as his main function was to show universal piety, the conception of Guanyin in China became more or less that of a female deity. The typical female forms, however, are never clearly defined except in the soft lines of the whole figure and the feminine-shaped lines of the face»⁷. When we look at the Moon in Water Guanyin, we see a beautiful feminine face, with no moustache, and a clearly-defined right breast. Her hands are soft, her arms are plump: all these are feminine attributes and the overall impression conveyed is that of a beautiful woman. She is looking downward, with an emotion-less expression.

According to Tangut legends collected by Russian travellers, the Tangut Empress who in these legends was connected with Chinggis Khan's death, was regarded by the Tanguts as the embodiment of Guanyin and we suppose that the Tangut empress is shown here as Guanyin.

Above, to her left, standing on a cloud in the heavens, his head surrounded by a halo, is a little boy with the characteristic tufted hairstyle of a child. He is certainly not the boy Sudhana (Shangcai tongzi)⁸ who frequently accompanies Guanyin, because of his elevated position. Here, he is in the sky, not, as normally depicted, beneath the Guanyin. His position, the cloud and the halo all indicate that he has passed away. He stretches his hands towards Guanyin. We suggest that here we see the Tangut heir, «a boy under ten» who was sent as a hostage to the Mongols who ruthlessly killed him. We may suppose that the Tangut Empress, here embodied as Guanyin, is his mother.

There are two scenes in the lowest register of the painting. We will begin with that on the right, a characteristic starting point⁹. We see here a pair of horses and a group of people beside a freshly-dug, open grave. In our opinion, this pair of horses (a pale coloured mare and a black stallion) is an allegorical depiction of Chinggis Khan and the Tangut Empress. Behind the stallion is an unusually large banner. According to Samosuyk, «Bunchuk [banners] from ancient times were an attribute of military power in the steppes»¹⁰. She has already noted the disproportionate height of this banner. Assuming that it belongs to Chinggis Khan, the height is not surprising since his military power was enormous. Chinggis Khan's «nine-streamered white flag»¹¹ was set up as a sign of his dignity when he arrived at a place and the streamers fluttered free in the wind. There are some fine depictions of Mongolian armour and similar flags in Edinburgh University's Raschid al-Din manuscript¹².

It is known that besides the white banner Chinggis Khan had a black banner as well – *Khara sulde*, which represented the embodiment of his charisma¹³ which was believed to stay in the finial at the top of the banner¹⁴. The finial was in the shape of the sun and moon. Charisma, in Mongolian *sulde*, is supposed to originate from the light of the sun and moon. The black standard in the picture with no sun and moon but a vajra instead probably symbolises the fact that Chinggis Khan's charisma had gone.

Turning to the horses, we see that the stallion has a very bright harness:

despite his size and strength, his round and staring eyes suggest a state of fear. This is in sharp contrast with the mare, which is calmly grazing. Her four feet are not flat on the ground, her hind legs are obviously in the air, as if she has thrown her rider which ties in exactly with the words of the «Secret History of the Mongols» in Paul Kahn's translation.

Later that winter as they approached the land of the Tanghut,
Chinggis Khan was hunting wild horses in the Arbukha region,
Riding his horse known as Red-Earth Gray.
As some soldiers drove the wild horses out from the bush
Red-Earth Gray *bolted and threw Chinggis Khan to the ground.*
The fall caused him a great deal of pain
And he pitched his camp there at Chogorkhad¹⁵.

Thus, these two sources, pictorial and literary, support each other, both presenting the story that Chinggis Khan died as a result of being thrown from his horse. The horse is a metaphor for the Tangut Empress.

Horses were crucial to Mongol and Tangut life. In modern Mongolian songs we encounter phrases which indicate that a Mongol loves his horse as much as his girlfriend, in other words horses were regarded as beloved females. Riding a horse is compared with copulation (a man is in the upper position) and if a woman does not want a certain man, she «throws» him off, as we see the mare doing in the painting. There is one more corroboration for the special relations between these horses: according to M.I. Nikitina, in the Far Eastern cultural tradition, a «dark container» symbolises the female principle, whereas banners, sticks and poles represent the male principle. Attached to the mare's saddle is a long cylindrical container of some sort, a «dark container», and the stallion has a banner.

The stallion, which we suppose to personify Chinggis Khan stares at the people dancing and playing musical instruments beside the grave, particularly at the man in red who we see full-face, and who occupies a central position in the circle. His *tufa* hairstyle is characteristic of Tangut ethnicity and especially convincing are his Tangut features. Compare his turned up nose with those of the butchers in a Tangut woodblock print¹⁶. We suggest that he is a personification of the whole Tangut people.

Previous scholars have suggested that the last major figure in the painting, in the bottom left-hand corner, is a Tangut emperor, accompanied by a boy. The emperor wears a green robe with golden dragon medallions. He has a black hat similar to an official hat and what is most striking is that he wears a kind of slippers, perhaps made of straw. Were these «slippers» the characteristic shoes for the deceased? They are in marked contrast to the shoes worn by the boy at his side or the gentleman depicted in another famous Tangut painting¹⁷.

The emperor's features, a projecting forehead and long crooked eyebrows are neither Tangut nor Chinese and, indeed, he may be wearing a mask, seen in the light line stretching from his ear along his lower jaw. Where the boy and the dancing

Tanguts have normal complexions, that of the Emperor is livid and pale. He holds a censer with burning incense and whilst he is standing on a cloud, which presumably indicates that he is dead, the lack of halo is very significant, since a deceased Tangut emperor would certainly have been depicted with a halo.

He stands half-bent, almost crouching, in a posture of supplication. This pathetic posture may be compared with figures in the painting where the Tangut Emperor and Empress are shown standing straight and upright¹⁸. He is pleading with Guanyin who is unmoved but continues to point towards the grave.

It seems that the whole picture conveys Tangut ideas about the last years of the Tangut empire and the end of Chinggis Khan, and in order to place these important ideas in context, it is necessary to start with some general information on the Tanguts, since so far not much is known about their state and the culture they had created. First of all let us turn to the ethnonyms by which this people is known.

The Mi-nia people and the Mi-nia state

The problem of the ethnonyms is of the utmost importance, since there is a variety of designations for the people and the state used in different literatures. In academic literature this people is known by two ethnonyms: Tangut and Xi Xia (or Western Xia). Russian and Western scholars mainly use the term «Tangut», whereas the collocation «Xi Xia» is exclusively used by the Chinese scholars. But both Tangut and Xi Xia are names which were used by those who had destroyed their state or conquered them: Tangut used by the Mongols and Xi Xia or Xia by the Chinese.

It is also to be stressed that in literature, besides Tangut and Xi Xia¹⁹ there are two further designations for the state – Hexi (meaning West of the Yellow River) and Qashin (variant – Kashin), a Mongolian designation, seemingly a corrupted version of Hexi²⁰.

However in Tangut indigenous texts we find the self-appellation, Mi, or Mi-nia and the Tibetans called them Mi-nia. The collocation «Mi state» is widely used in the Tangut encyclopedia «The Sea of Meanings Established by Saints» and in the Tangut Codex. The two-syllable word Mi-nia is used in Tangut poetry (odes and ritual songs).

As Tangut studies are rapidly developing, it is high time that their own terms be introduced into academic and popular literature. By introducing their self-appellation we may be seen to do justice to their terrible fate and their efforts to convey their own story.

I propose that we use the term Mi-nia, since the two-syllable term is more euphonious, and it was used by a related people, the Tibetans, though we must remember that Mi-nia is rather a poetic ethnonym. And we should also bear in mind that the Mi in Mi-nia is not the same word as Mi, the single-syllable word used to designate the Tangut/Xi Xia. The two words are even not homophonous, belonging respectively to the rhyme 28 and 10, both second tone. Below we will use the term Mi-nia for Tangut and Xi Xia, as well as He-xi and Kashin.

Message to posterity

The Mi-nia culture is the last lost civilization of the Old World. In sharp contrast with the last lost civilization of the New World (Mayan), which has been meticulously studied and widely popularized, almost nothing is known about the Mi-nia outside the small team of specialists working on the subject in different countries (mainly Russia, China, Japan and the USA). It is therefore often defined as a «mysterious kingdom».

But the Mi-nia Empire (1032–1227) was every bit as significant in the history of Central Asia as the Mayan was to Central America, and the culture it created no less fascinating. On the basis of my life-long experience of work on Mi-nia materials, I would define their culture as exquisitely sophisticated. Once revealed to the public and popularized, it certainly will occupy its due place in the world history.

The apparent total annihilation of the Mi-nia state and civilisation forms part of the world-wide legend of Mongol ferocity, which arises in part from the text of the «Secret History of the Mongols» which gives a picture of terrible destruction. As a result it was automatically assumed that all the Mi-nia treasures found sealed in the suburgan in the abandoned city of Khara Khoto, must have dated from before 1227 and Chinggis Khan's last campaign against the Mi-nia.

But when the Russian scholar Professor L.N. Menshikov began working on the Chinese-language material from the famous suburgan, he found a lot of documents dating from *after* 1227 the latest text being from 1371, about a century and a half after the destruction of the Mi-nia state.

Professor Menshikov described more than 24 Chinese documents apparently concerned with local administration bearing dates between 1304 and 1371²¹. He also found over 50 Chinese texts which, despite not being dated, obviously belong to the Yuan period.

Despite this, the idea that everything in the suburgan must be dated prior to 1227 was difficult to dislodge. Professor Menshikov explained the very late dates on the documents by the fact that they were found not in the suburgan, but somewhere else in Khara Khoto. And the original excavator, Kozlov state that he found some written material in a rubbish heap.

In 1993, Dr. K.F. Samosyuk, curator of the Khara Khoto collection in the State Hermitage Museum, attributed one of the pictures from Khara Khoto, a Crowned Buddha with a coin of Chinese type apparently bearing an inscription in Chinese indicating the reign period Tianyuan (1378–1387), to the last quarter of the fourteenth century²².

In the same publication Dr. Samosyuk stated: «Most of the paintings in the collection date from the 11th through 13th century while the majority of the fragments of porcelain with cobalt decorative glazing are of the 14th century. No painting is of a later date than 1378–1387; no Chinese text – later than 1371; no Tangut text – later than 1212». Thus, the idea that everything found in Khara Khoto is to be dated before 1227 was only very recently supplanted by the notion

that the city was still alive in the last quarter of the 14th century.

About five years ago, amongst the Tangut documents in the Oriental Institute, I found a Mi-nia ritual song «The Sacred Might Overcomes All the Neighbouring Peoples» which lists a number of historical figures such as Chinggis Khan and mentions the death of the Phags-pa Lama (1280). I believe that this ritual song was compiled somewhere at the end of the 13th or the beginning of the 14th century.

Such a large amount of varied material, most of it in perfect condition, produced much later than 1227, including the painting of the Crowned Buddha, a Mi-nia wood-block with no less than thirty «butterfly» pages which has preserved in a written form a Mi-nia ritual song and a lot of Chinese materials are unlikely to have been found amongst Khara Khoto's rubbish.

We may assert that at least the main part of these late dated items were found in the suburgan, which means that suburgan was loaded for a second time somewhere at the end of the fourteenth century. This second loading was of enormous significance to the Mi-nia for it included precious artefacts intended for posterity, carrying the message of what actually happened at the end of the Great State of White and High.

Notes

¹ The main ideas in this article were first presented at the meeting of the Circle of Inner Asian Art in SOAS, 16th May, 2001.

² For a description of the suburgan and its contents see the catalogue *Lost Empire of the Silk Road* (Piotrovskij, 1993).

³ Samosyuk, 1997 and 2000.

⁴ See *Lost Empire of the Silk Road* and Sir Aurel Stein's description in *Innermost Asia*.

⁵ Menshikov 1984, p. 467.

⁶ For details see Kepping, 1993.

⁷ H.A. van Oort, *The Iconography of Chinese Buddhism in Traditional China*, Leiden, 1986, p. 1.

⁸ See for example the So Ku-bang Avalokitesvara of 1323 in: Kim Wonyong et al., *Korean Art Treasures*, Seoul, 1986, pi. 10.

⁹ See for example Piotrovskij, 1993, pl. 77, TANG 376, Inventory 95.

¹⁰ Samosyuk 1993, p. 139.

¹¹ Franke, 1978, p. 56.

¹² Talbot-Rice D. *The illustration to the World History of Rashid ad-Din*. Edinburg, 1976.

¹³ Kramarovskij, 2000, p. 96.

¹⁴ Kramarovskij, 2000, p. 68.

¹⁵ Kahn, 1998, p. 161, our italics.

¹⁶ Piotrovskij, 1993, pl. 77.

¹⁷ Piotrovskij, 1993, pl. 63.

¹⁸ Piotrovskij, 1993, pl. 61.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that in the children's computer game, «Age of Empires» «Tangut» and «Xi Xia» regrettably stand for different states.

²⁰ Strange as it may be, but even in some serious literature on Chinggis Khan one finds a muddle of all known designations for the state. Thus, in the index to the «Chinggis Khan. The Golden History of the Mongols» (London, 1993) we find nearly all the possible names: Xi Xia Kingdom (p. 188), Tangut clan (p. 187), Qashin, place (p. 186) without indication that all they stand for one and the same state. As a result, one gets an idea that Qashin was a Buddhist tribe whose ruler was Burqan Khan (Buddhist ruler) (p. 136) who had nothing to do with the Tangut state.

²¹ Menshikov, 1984, p. 467.

²² Piotrovskij, 1993, p. 234.