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Secrets of the Tangut Manuscripts



Tangut printed document,
now held in the National
Museum, New Delhi.
Photograph from *Innermost
Asia*, Vol. III, Plate LXV.

Dr Ksenia Kepping is one of a handful of Tangut scholars worldwide and, based in St. Petersburg, she has had the chance to work closely on the largest hoard of Tangut manuscripts, excavated in the early 20th century from a stupa outside the city walls of Kharakhoto and now held in the Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (see *IDP News* 2). In March 2001 Dr Kepping came to London at the invitation of IDP and funded by the UK Heritage Lottery Fund to continue work on the smaller collection of manuscripts acquired from the same site by M. Aurel Stein and held in the British Library.

From her work on the documents Dr Kepping has found evidence to support several interesting and provocative theories— one involving the manner of Chinggis Khan's death. She gave a lecture on this at the Circle of Inner Asian Art and Archaeology in London in May and it will be published in a forthcoming CIAA book (see p. 7). Another document from the St. Petersburg collection contains, Dr Kepping argues, a reference to Chinghis Khan and her article about this is published below. Her work on the London collection has also been very productive and she plans to produce another piece shortly concerning a Buddhist poem.

Conservation work continues on the material at the British Library and IDP has started a programme of digitisation. Over 200 documents are now available (search database for 'Tangut' and 'digitised') and Dr Kepping's work on these along with transcriptions will be added next year. It is hoped that this will encourage a new generation of scholars to become interested in the Tanguts and their rich history and culture.

Chinggis Khan's Name Encrypted in a Tangut Song

Ksenia B. Kepping

Chinggis Khan's last campaign against the Tanguts (1226–7) proved to be fatal to both sides. Legend tells how the Great Khan met his death on Tangut territory in August 1227, and this same year is regarded as that of the total destruction of the Tangut state (982–1227) at the hands of the Mongols. The sources used to support this hypothesis, however, although written in several languages, do not include Tangut material. All Tangut historical records are believed to have been destroyed during the Mongolian invasion as there are no extant texts. This is why the mention of Chinggis Khan's name in one of the Tangut ritual songs (tentatively I date it to the beginning of the 14th century) at first seemed to me unbelievable.

The wood-block print (Tang. 25, No 121) held in the Kozlov collection, St. Petersburg, contains five Tangut odes written partly in Tangut ritual language.¹ On the verso are 30 or so Tangut ritual songs in cursive hand-writing, in parts almost illegible.

The colophon on the recto states that the woodblock was cut in 1185–6, to wit, in the reign of Renzong, Weiming Renxiao (r. 1139–93), the golden age of the Tangut Empire. I would argue that the ritual songs on the verso are obviously written later and certainly not before the beginning of the 14th century since the song under discussion here mentions 'Phags-pa's death: this only took place in 1280.

The content of the printed odes shows that they have nothing to do with Buddhism (there is not a single word specifically from Buddhist vocabulary). In my opinion, the odes convey ancient Tangut ideas about their origins and shamanistic beliefs and were compiled long before the founding of the Tangut state (although they were only transcribed later).

In contrast, the ritual songs on the verso are permeated with Buddhist ideas. I believe they represent secret Tantric knowledge usually transmitted orally from teacher to pupil. Seemingly they were transcribed in an attempt to save this knowledge in the face of inevitable catastrophe (note the period that they were transcribed).

The wood-block print measures 25 x 16.5 cm and was originally bound in a butterfly format. The butterfly binding has been unstitched in modern times and each page inserted into a separate plastic envelope to aid conservation and access. Because of the 1960s restoration it is impossible to ascertain the original condition of the paper.²

The songs on the verso include one — 'The Sacred Might Overcomes All Neighbouring Peoples' — which mentions four historical figures: a person I failed to identify;³ Chinggis Khan; the Tangut heir (the son of the last but one Tangut emperor Dewang, r. 1223–7); and 'Phags-pa.

The term 'sacred might' in the song's title certainly refers to the Tangut state. The term 'u I translate as 'all neighbouring peoples'. The dictionary *The Sea of Characters* (Kepping et al. 1969, 1, p. 296, no. 1764) defines 'u as 'nine brothers 'u — the Khitans, Uighurs and others.' Obviously, the Tanguts considered the Mongols as one of the brothers 'u.⁴

The content of the song is fascinating. It is permeated with strong anti-Mongolian feelings and is clearly a call to arms. Though many decades had passed since the fall of their Empire, the Tanguts had not abandoned the idea of resistance. I believe that even today's reader will be deeply impressed by the despair

expressed in the following lines by this anonymous Tangut poet — indubitably a Buddhist monk:

[I] am looking upward — there is only the blue Heaven,

[I] complain to the Heaven — [but] the Heaven does not respond.

[I] am looking downward — there is only the yellowish-brown⁵ Earth.

[I] rely on the Earth — [but] the Earth does not protect me.

This song (altogether 438 characters) consists of 33 lines, 30 of them being full and three shortened. A full line has 14 characters (seven and seven) with a caesura after the fourth character in each seven-syllable phrase:

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One of the full lines of the song is devoted to Chinggis Khan: ldiṭ thi liwe 'o / mbin 'iə rəu mbi vāc tjei min / tshā nātōn

The demon-strangler from the underworld / Blacksmith Thunder

appeared in a way one could not avoid him

(lit. one could not avoid [him] / appeared).

Chinggis Khan's designation occupies half of the line and can be easily divided into two parts at the caesura — 'the demon-strangler from the underworld' (first four characters) and 'Blacksmith Thunder' (the following three characters).

Let us start with the three characters which I translate as 'Blacksmith Thunder'. The 'blacksmith' etymology of Temujin, the name given to Chinggis Khan at birth, is well known (Pelliot 1959 p. 290) and there is little doubt that 'Blacksmith Thunder' stands in the song for Temujin. The first two syllables mean 'blacksmith' and the third seems to be his name (rather his nickname). The two syllables comprising the word for 'blacksmith' — *mbin 'iə* — belong, in my observation, to the ritual language vocabulary, the first character standing for 'gold'/'metal' (Kepping et al. 1969, 2, p. 87, no. 3980) and the second for 'master' (Li 1986, p. 330, no. 27A17). The corresponding common language word is *shōn kē* (literally 'iron master'), and is found, for example, in the Tangut Code (Kychanov 1989, p. 650).

It is noteworthy that *mbin 'iə* is homophonous with the word meaning '*membrum virile*' (Kepping et al. 1969, 2, p. 87, no. 3981). Thus, readers may understand this collocation as '*membrum virile* + master'. Another homophone is 'high', 'lofty' (Kepping et al. 1969, 2, p. 87, no. 3982), which is included into the Tangut indigenous name for their Empire *phōn mbin llāṭ lē* 'The Great State of the White and Lofty' (= 'The Great State of *yab-yum*, for details see Kepping 1994).

The third syllable is the character *rəu* 'marsh', 'swamp' (Li 1986, p. 471, no. 53B41), but I believe that this character stands here for its homophone meaning 'thunder' (Li 1986, p. 471, no. 53B38 — mind that Li Fanwen writes *lei sheng* 'sound of thunder', to wit, thunder-clap). Thus both parts of Chinggis Khan's name in the song are conveyed in a cryptic way.

There is nothing strange in this. First, even after his death Chinggis Khan inspired fear and at the time of the compilation

of the song the Mongols still ruled China. Secondly, this cyptology was in keeping with Tangut tradition. According to the definition given in one ritual song, the Tangut state was ‘the state of ten thousand secrets’ and the use of homophones was quite common (see Kepping 1994).

My colleague, Professor S. G. Kljashtornyj, has called my attention to the writings of the Franciscan friars who visited the Mongol court in the mid 13th century, since the ‘blacksmith thunder’ etymology of Chinggis Khan’s name is confirmed in these writings. Rubruck (Willielmi de Rubruquis) who was at the Mongol court in the 1250’s refers first (chapter 19) to Chinggis Khan as ‘a certain workman Chinggis who used to steal animals...’ (Malein 1911, p. 94) and later (chapter 48) he states that Chinggis Khan was a blacksmith (Malein 1911, p. 162). It is also noteworthy that the fifth chapter of Joannes de Plano di Carpini’s account of his journey in the 1240s to the Mongols (Menestò 1989, p. 357; Malein 1911, p. 22) states that Chinggis Khan was killed by a thunder-clap.

Professor H. Franke (personal letter dated Oct. 28, 2000) kindly informed me about another European source which repeats this story: ‘There exists another History of the Tartars, edited by Alf Önerfors, *Hystoria Tartarorum C. de Bridia Monachi* (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1967), where we read in paragraph 21 (p. 16): ... In English: “When they returned in their own country they found Cingis can slain by a thunder-clap.”

The idea of turning to the accounts of the Franciscan friars who visited the Mongol Empire proved to be rather fruitful. In his 48th chapter Rubruck relates the content of a letter to Louis IX, king of France, written by the Great Khan Mongke in June 1254 (Malein 1911, p. 162). The letter should clearly be regarded as an official document and hence the name of Chinggis Khan — Demugin Hingei — mentioned in the first lines was seemingly his officially adopted name. It is interpreted by Rubruck as *sonitus ferri*, i.e. ‘sound of iron’. According to Pelliot (1959, p. 289), Rubruck adds the explanation: ‘*Ipsi vocant Chingis sonitum ferri, quia faber fuit*’ — ‘They themselves call Chinggis “sound of iron” since he was a workman.’⁶ It is known that Rubruck constantly complained of his interpreter’s inadequate translation (Malein 1911, pp. 83, 86, 92, 103, 115, 120, 122, 149, 155).⁷ I suppose that the idea which the Mongols wished to convey to the friar was that the noise which a blacksmith makes while working resembles the sound of thunder. Thus, the translation *sonitus ferri* is a corrupted ‘thunder’/‘thunder clap’ resulting from misunderstanding between the Mongols and Rubruck. As to the song’s statement that Chinggis Khan appeared in a way so that one could not avoid him, no doubt it is a hint at the rituals which the Tanguts used to perform to avoid disasters (Nevskij 1960, 1, p. 52). Because of his wanton cruelty Chinggis Khan struck fear not only into his enemies but also into his compatriots and allies and this made him akin to thunderstorms — the most indiscriminate natural killer of the steppes.

Thus, the study of the sources written shortly after Chinggis Khan’s death, such as the Tangut song and the accounts of the Franciscan friars, has shown that Chinggis Khan’s name Temujin originally meant ‘Blacksmith Thunder’. Later in the process of compiling *Yuanshi* (History of the Yuan dynasty: mid. 14th c.), it was seemingly assumed that the ‘blacksmith’ etymology of Great Khan’s name did not correspond to the elevated image required by the founder of the Yuan dynasty, the original *cakravartin*.⁸ The wish to ennoble Chinggis Khan’s descent gave rise to a story of a more respectable provenance which was then introduced into circulation.

Notes

¹ There are two separate layers in the Tangut vocabulary, namely common language and ritual (secret) language. The latter is used mainly in Tangut odes. Each word in the common language has its pair in the ritual language and, as a rule, the words with the same meaning in the common language and in the ritual language are completely different both in their appearance and phonetic value, e.g. common language *mbe* ‘sun’ corresponds to *tie læe* ‘sun’ in the ritual language (for details see Kepping 1996).

² Seemingly, while being restored the paper was pressed, stretched and steeped in glue made of flour or gelatine. The edges were strengthened with layers of modern paper. The paper now is dark grey in the middle and about 0.25 mm thick and 1.35 mm thick and dark yellow at the edges. (N.M. Brovenko, artist-restorer of the St. Petersburg Branch, Institute of Oriental Studies, personal communication).

³ Obviously, this unidentified person preceded Chinggis Khan chronologically. Since I am interested only in Chinggis Khan, the regrettable lack of information on the unidentified person does not affect the results of this study.

⁴ In Professor S. E. Yakhontov’s (St. Petersburg University; personal communication) opinion, ‘*u*’ is a general designation for non-Tangut peoples (perhaps with the exception of the Chinese and Tibetans) which corresponds to the Chinese term *hu*.

⁵ ‘Yellowish-brown’ is my translation of the adjective *phe* which, I suppose, conveys the idea that the earth has withered and no longer bears fruit. This adjective is used mainly in Tangut proverbs and it seems to be a poetical epithet meaning fading and wilting. It is often contrasted with *ngwe* ‘green’, ‘blue’ (Chinese *qing*).

⁶ I would like to thank my colleague Dr. A. L. Khosroyev (St. Petersburg Branch, Institute of Oriental Studies) for the translation of this sentence from Latin.

⁷ See chapters 12, 15, 18, 24, 31, 33, 44, 46.

⁸ Professor H. Franke’s expression (1981, p. 309).

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