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ИНСТИТУТ ВОСТОКОВЕДЕНИЯ  
РОССИЙСКОЙ АКАДЕМИИ НАУК



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УЧЁНЫЕ ЗАПИСКИ ОТДЕЛА КИТАЯ

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Выпуск 47

**Тангутская и китайская  
филология  
К юбилею М. В. Софронова**



Москва  
2024

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ББК 81.71(Кит)  
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УЧЁНЫЕ ЗАПИСКИ ОТДЕЛА КИТАЯ

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Выпуск 47

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# **Preliminary study of a manuscript fragment in an unidentified script from the Western Xia Shānzuǐgōu site\***

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## **1. Introduction**

The Shānzuǐgōu Caves (Shānzuǐgōu shíkū 山嘴沟石窟) are situated on the eastern flank of the Hèlán Mountains, about 20 km due west of the centre of Yínchuān, the capital of the Níngxià Huí Autonomous Region of China. Shānzuǐgōu (literally, ‘Mountain mouth gully’) is a dry valley running approximately west to east through the Hèlán Mountains, opening onto the Níngxià plain by Tombs 5 and 6 of the Western Xia imperial tombs.

The site comprises six natural caves in a short gorge called Bottle Gourd Ravine (Húlúyù 葫蘆峪) which leads off the main valley about 10 km from the mouth of Shānzuǐgōu, and runs in a northeasterly then northerly direction for about 1 km. The caves are located in the middle section of Bottle Gourd Ravine, high up on a steep slope on the eastern side of the gorge. The caves are on two levels, four at the base of a cliff face rising above the top of the slope are designated K1 through K4, and two at the bottom of the slope overlooking a precipice are designated K5 and K6<sup>1</sup>.

Three of the upper four caves (K1, K2, K3) preserve the remains of Buddhist murals painted on plaster on some of the walls. The caves were first surveyed in 1984, but at the time it was not known when the murals were painted, and the report merely notes that they must date to at least as early as the Ming dynasty as there were graffiti

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\* Рукопись получена 12.09.2020.

<sup>1</sup> Shānzuǐgōu Xīxià Shíkū vol. 1, p. 1–3.



inscriptions dated 13th year of the Jiājìng 嘉靖 era (1534) and 2nd year of the Lóngqīng 隆慶 era (1568) on the murals in Cave K2<sup>2</sup>.

It was not until the summer of 2002, when four member of the Ningxia Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology (Dù Yùbīng 杜玉冰, Liào Yáng 廖陽, Zhū Cúnshì 朱存世, Sūn Chāngshèng 孫昌盛), together with Xiè Jìshèng 謝繼勝 from the Institute of Ethnology, Chinese Academy of Social Science, spent two days taking photographs and making a preliminary survey of the caves, that it was realised that the murals were probably painted during the Western Xia (1038–1227). The team also collected a number of clay *tsha-tsha* and small clay Buddha figurines, which suggested that the caves were the site of a Western Xia Buddhist temple<sup>3</sup>.

In 2004 the Ningxia Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology received permission from the National Cultural Heritage Administration to carry out a detailed investigation of Western Xia Buddhist sites on the eastern side of the Helan Mountains. The first stage of the project, led by Sūn Chāngshèng, lasted from late August to early October 2005 (the second stage was a topographic survey carried out in July 2006). The main purpose of the 2005 investigation was to survey the four caves on the upper level, and to photograph and draw their murals. However, while preparing the ground outside Cave K2 for ladders in order to reach the highest murals, the team unexpectedly uncovered some Tangut Buddhist texts under the surface of the accumulated detritus. Because of this discovery, they decided to clean the debris and earth inside the caves and around their entrances, which resulted in the discovery of a large number of documents dating to the Western Xia<sup>4</sup>.

No complete scrolls or book fascicles were found, but a total of 688 fragments and sheets of paper with handwritten or printed text were recovered from three of the caves (17 pieces from K1, 567 pieces from K2, and 104 pieces from K3). The vast majority of these were Buddhist texts written in the Tangut script, mostly in manuscript form but also including xylograph editions and three movable type editions.

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<sup>2</sup> Shānzǔgōu Xīxià Shíkū vol. 1, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Shānzǔgōu Xīxià Shíkū vol. 1, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Shānzǔgōu Xīxià Shíkū vol. 1, p. 6.



The six columns of text on the Chinese xylographs (K2:100-1 and K2:100-2) are from the *Shèng miào jí xiáng zhēn shí míng jīng* 聖妙吉祥真實名經 [Taishō Tripiṭaka no. 1190], a translation of the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* ‘Litany of the names of Mañjuśrī’ made by a monk who is called Zhihui 智慧 in Chinese. Thirty-three fragments from a xylograph edition of this text were also discovered in the ruins of the Western Xia Bàisīgōu square pagoda in August 1991 after it had been illegally destroyed the previous year.<sup>14</sup> In extant versions of *Shèng miào jí xiáng zhēn shí míng jīng*, Zhihui is credited as a Tibetan living during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), but Hoong Teik Toh (卓鴻澤) argues that the translator was actually a Tangut who translated the text into Chinese from Tibetan under the Western Xia.<sup>15</sup> The discovery of fragments of the Chinese translation in Western Xia contexts at both the Shānzuǐgōu and Bàisīgōu sites would seem to confirm that *Shèng miào jí xiáng zhēn shí míng jīng* is indeed a product of the Western Xia, and therefore its presence cannot be taken as evidence that the Shānzuǐgōu caves were still in use as a Buddhist site during the Yuan dynasty.

The only securely datable artefacts found at the caves were a number of bronze coins dating from the Tang dynasty (*Kāiyuán tōngbǎo* 開元通寶), Northern Song (*Xiánpíng yuánbǎo* 咸平元寶, 998–1003; *Xīníng yuánbǎo* 熙寧元寶, 1068–1077; *Yuánfēng tōngbǎo* 元豐通寶, 1078–1085; *Yuányòu tōngbǎo* 元祐通寶, 1086–1094), and Jin dynasty (*Zhènglóng yuánbǎo* 正隆元寶, 1156–1161). These also do not indicate that the caves were in use after the end of the Western Xia.

It is possible that the caves continued in use as a Buddhist temple after the fall of the Western Xia in 1227, and indeed the graffiti evidence indicates that it was not certainly abandoned until the mid 16th century, during the Ming dynasty<sup>16</sup>. However, if the caves were occupied during the Yuan dynasty we might expect to see a more diverse range of texts, including many more texts written in Chinese.

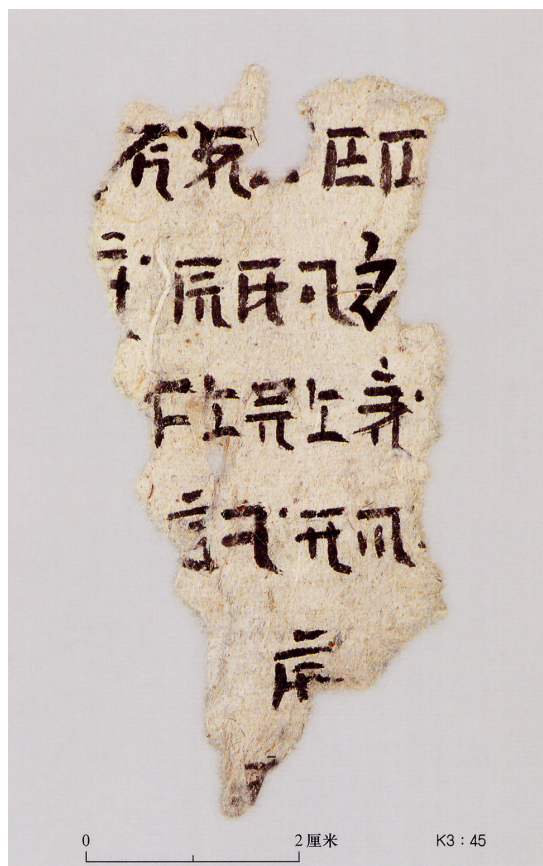
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<sup>14</sup> Bàisīgōu Xīxià Fāngǎo, pp. 180–193 (catalogue no. F036). This text is not identified here as *Shèng miào jí xiáng zhēn shí míng jīng*, but is given the name *Chūlún gōngdé shí'èr jì* 初輪功德十二偈. See Shěn 2007, p. 287 for the correct identification of the text.

<sup>15</sup> Toh 2004, p. 27–32.

<sup>16</sup> Shānzuǐgōu Xīxià Shíkū vol. 1, p. 3 cites the 1984 survey of the caves as noting the presence of graffiti dated Jiājīng 13 (1534), but on p. 291 it is stated that the earliest graffiti (shown in Plate 23) is dated Jiājīng 34 (1556).

The fact that 97% of the texts (668 out of 688 pieces) are written in Tangut strongly suggests that they represent the remnants of a Western Xia monastic library. As the manuscript fragment with unidentified writing (K3:45) was found in this Western Xia assemblage, it is reasonable to assume that it also dates to the Western Xia.



**Fig. 1. Fragment K3:45**

Source: *Shānzuǐgōu Xīxià Shíkū* vol. 2, plate 333-2

## **2. Description of fragment K3:45**

The manuscript fragment K3:45 found in Cave K3 (see Fig. 1) is roughly rectangular in shape, 6.6 cm in height and 3.2 cm in width, with six horizontal rows of signs (see discussion in Section 2) written in ink on one side (the other side is apparently blank). There are five signs on each of the top three rows, four signs on the fourth row, one sign on the fifth row, and only a small fraction of a sign surviving on the bottom row. In total there are 19 complete or partial signs

remaining, as well as two signs (one on the top row and the one on the bottom row) which are too incomplete to consider. Some of the signs are separated by a raised dot similar to the Tibetan *tsheg* mark. What survives is clearly only a small fragment of a much large text.

The catalogue of the Shānzuǐgōu finds merely states that it is written in ‘Tibetan script’, and says no more about it<sup>17</sup>. However, the signs written on this fragment are certainly not Tibetan *dbu can* or *dbu med* script, nor indeed any form or style of Tibetan writing that we have ever encountered. Surprisingly, we have been unable to find any specific references to K3:45, or discussions of the writing on it, in any other books or papers published since its discovery fifteen years ago.



**Fig. 2. Our tracing of the fragment K3:45 with signs numbered**

<sup>17</sup> Shānzuǐgōu Xīxià Shíkū vol. 1, p. 282: 一面书写藏文 ‘Tibetan script written on one side’.

### 3. Discussion on the orientation and direction of writing of the unidentified script

Since we believe the script which the text of fragment K3:45 is written in to be unidentified (at least, it is not Tibetan, as indicated by the publishers, which formally allows us to use this term), it is necessary to first consider the orientation of the fragment. Needless to say, there are four possible orientations for reading the fragment (as shown in Fig. 1, and rotated 90°, 180°, and 270° from the orientation shown). Regardless of the orientation of the fragment, it is easy to identify the lines of text (rows or columns, depending on orientation), firstly because interlinear space is wider than the space between signs on the same line, and secondly because signs in the same position on different lines are not necessarily written directly one under another (i.e. signs are not placed in a square grid with fixed positions as is usually the case with Chinese, Tangut and other ideographic scripts). The consequence of the latter is that the number of characters in each line will not necessarily be the same, but may vary depending upon the width of individual signs and the number of raised dots between signs.



**Fig. 3. Mirror with inscription.  
Song or Ming dynasty. MRM, no. 5189**

**Photo by Vyacheslav Zatubinsky (published with permission)**

Analysis of the graphic forms of signs (their calligraphy and ductus), as well as the similarity of a few signs or their parts with Tangut components (namely B5 𐰇 with 𐰇 or 𐰇), indicates to us that the orientation of the fragment given in the published catalogue (our Fig. 1) is correct. In this case, the text is written in horizontal rows (lines), and, as stated above, the rows are easily distinguished visually. The interlinear spacing is almost equal to the size of the signs in a row. The lines are parallel, although the paper is unruled (there are no visible traces of rules). The direction of writing in a line (from left to right or from right to left) is difficult to determine from the text when only a small fragment of a whole paper sheet is available (i.e. when the margins of the lines and the sheet are not visible)<sup>18</sup>, and we cannot offer convincing formal graphic data to prove one direction and exclude the other yet. However, many of the signs show a right-curving swash at the end of a vertical stroke on the right side (A1 𐰀, A2 𐰁, B3 𐰃, B4 𐰄, C3 𐰆, D2 𐰈, D3 𐰉, D4 𐰊), which is probably the final stroke of the sign, suggesting that the signs were written from the left side to the right side. If this is the case, the script is most likely to have been written left-to-right, as in Tibetan and other Brahmic writing systems known in Western Xia, and lines should be read from top to bottom. For ease of discussion, we follow this model, and number the individual signs as shown in Fig. 2 (dots between signs are shown with a dot sign •), although this is subject to reconsideration if new information comes to light.

#### 4. General observations on the unidentified script

The script looks as if it could be an unusual form of Brahmic script or have been created in imitation of a Brahmic script<sup>19</sup>, although

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<sup>18</sup> Characters can be condensed at the end of a line which can help identify the direction of writing. For example, analysis of the layout of characters at the margins revealed that the direction of writing in the Harappan script was from the right to the left, because empty spaces regularly appear on the left side of a line [Lal 1966, 1968]. The direction of writing of an unknown script can also be determined if a sequence of characters which occurs entirely within a line in one place also occurs across a line break, with the first part of the sequence at the end of one line, and the second part of the sequence at the start of the next line [cf. Zaytsev 2011, p. 141, note 20]. However, these methods are not applicable to fragmentary texts such as the one under consideration here.

<sup>19</sup> We do not consider the case of stylization of a known script as a solution here, despite the fact that this is possible in principle. As an example, we can cite the Chinese

the individual signs are not recognizable as letters from any Brahmic script that we are familiar with. Here are some general observations:

4.1. The signs appear to be written in horizontal rows, which means that they are unlikely to be based on a Sinitic script such as Khitan Large Script as Sinitic scripts were normally always written in vertical columns.

4.2. There are four raised dots between signs (at the left of signs A1 𑖀, B1 𑖁, C5 𑖃, and D2 𑖄), which looks like a Tibetan intersyllabic separator mark (*tsheg*) — it occurs too infrequently to mark syllable divisions, but could perhaps be a word or sentence separator.

4.3. A few signs (B1 𑖁, B5 𑖅, D1 𑖇, E1 𑖉) have superfixed marks which may be vowel signs, but there are too few for these to be the only indicators of vowels (D1 and E1 look similar to a Tibetan “o” ོ vowel sign, and B5 looks similar to a Tibetan “i” ི or “e” े vowel sign).

4.4. The two strokes above C5 𑖃 look like a *candrabindu* diacritic, and the whole sign has the general appearance of *om̐* or *hūṃ̐*.

4.5. There are some signs which have the same outer structure with different internal components (A4 𑖔, A5 𑖕, B2 𑖒, B3 𑖓; B4 𑖖, D4 𑖘), which may suggest that the outer structure and the internal components each have separate phonetic purposes (perhaps representing consonants and vowels).

4.6. There are a couple of recurring internal components (A5 𑖕, C2 𑖚 = C4 𑖛; B2 𑖒, C3 𑖔) which may have the same phonetic purpose.

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inscription on the mirror of the Song or Ming dynasty (Fig. 3), made in seal script (*zhuànshū* 篆書), which is believed to be stylized into a Brahmic script (script for writing Sanskrit). The inscription consists of four Chinese characters: *shòu* 壽 or *cháng* 長 (top), *yǒng* 永 (right), *yòng* 用 (bottom), *bǎo* 保 (left). This is a palindrome and there are 24 ways to read these four characters as a meaningful phrase, depending on the choice of the first character and direction of reading [Shùndé xiànzhi 1853, juàn 19, f. 18b, 六朝永用保壽鏡]. For example, *cháng yòng yǒng bǎo* 長用永保 (top-bottom-right-left) [Chéng et al. 1989, p. 34, no. 62 and pl. 116; Oborin et al. 2017, p. 363, 447, no. 3.153], *yǒng bǎo shòu yòng* 永保壽用 (right-left-top-bottom), *yǒng yòng bǎo shòu* 永用保壽 (clockwise starting from right) [Shùndé xiànzhi 1853, juàn 19, f. 18b–19a]. It is interesting to note that the inscription on this mirror was considered to be written in an unknown ideographic (non Chinese) script by some scholars previously and this forced them to put forward hypotheses about its writing system [Starikov 1986].



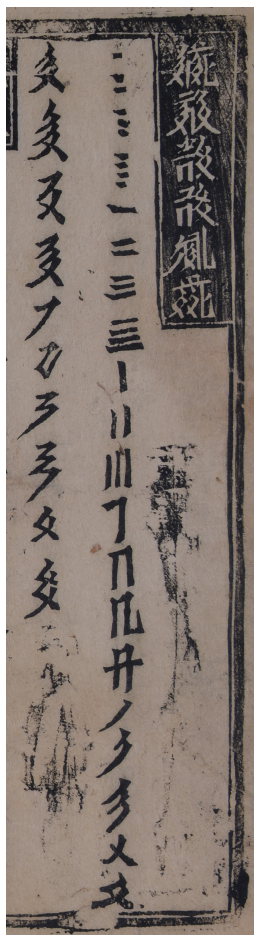


Fig. 4. Thirty Letter Signs  
in *Homonyms* (folio 4a)

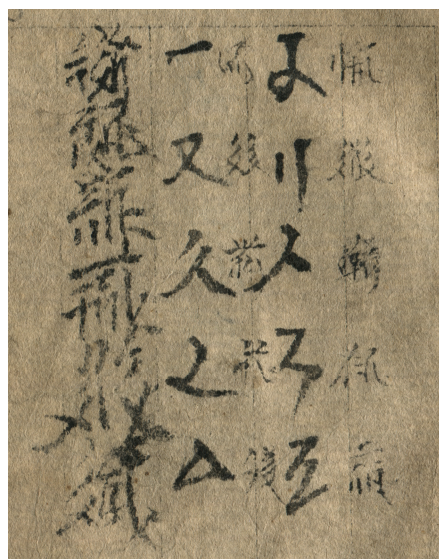


Fig. 5. Musical notation on page 39a  
of a manuscript version of *Rhyme Tables*

4.7. There seem to be incremental patterns in some of the internal components (ㄣ inside A5 𪛗, but ㄥ inside A4 𪛖; two vertical lines inside D4 𪛘, but two horizontal lines over two vertical lines inside B2 𪛒), which may suggest that the glyphs were designed logically, with series of shapes made from dots, horizontal lines and vertical lines corresponding to series of phonetic values.

4.8. Only one sign occurs more than once (C2 𪛚 and C4 𪛛), which may indicate that the signs are not alphabetic, and are more likely to be syllabic.

4.9. Individual signs may look similar to (or possibly derivable from) some specific letter or character in another script, but as far as we can tell there is no consistent correspondence between the signs on this manuscript fragment and any other known script. We have to



signs we see in the fragment K3:45 are not attested in any other known Tangut documents, it is interesting to note the identification of musical signs (Fig. 5, explained in details in West 2012) and counting rod numerals in Tangut documents, which demonstrates that the Tanguts were willing to adopt or adapt sign systems from outside of their native script in order to meet their requirements.

If, as we suspect, this is a previously unknown and unrecorded script, then the most likely explanation is that it is the creation of one or more Tangut Buddhist monks at the Western Xia monastery at the Shānzūgōu site. Perhaps the monks devised a special cryptic script loosely based on a Brahmic or Tibetan model so that esoteric knowledge could be protected, and only passed on to the few monks who were taught it. However, as we do not have more samples, we cannot exclude the possibility that this specimen may be the intellectual activity, training or diversion of single person<sup>22</sup>.

We have noted that the sign C5 𑖦 looks as if it has a *candrabindu* diacritic (representing vowel nasalization, *anunāsika*) on top, so it could be the Sanskrit syllable *om̐* or *hūṃ̐*, so perhaps the script was used for writing Sanskrit texts such as *dhāraṇī*. The syllable *hūṃ̐* frequently occurs at the end of a mantra, whereas the syllable *om̐* frequently occurs at the start of a mantra, and as there is a raised dot at the left side of C5 𑖦, possibly indicating the end of a word or sentence, we suppose that if written left-to-right C5 is more likely to represent *hūṃ̐* (final syllable in a mantra), whereas if written right-to-left C5 is more likely to represent *om̐* (first syllable in a mantra). The signs C2 and C4 to the left of C5 are identical, so if written left-to-right, the signs C2 through C5 may be part of a sequence ending ... X Y X *hūṃ̐*, and if written right-to-left may be a part of a sequence starting *om̐* X Y X .... Certainly there are many Sanskrit mantras which do fit this pattern. For example, in the *Auspicious Tantra of All-Reaching Union* the Sanskrit mantra *om̐ jra domsta varahāmokhu tramvatrava hūṃ̐* is written in Tangut characters

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<sup>22</sup> This would not be a unique or rare case. We can mention, as an example, the specimen in so-called “Russian” letters (see line 1 on Fig. 6) appearing in a Tibetan work by lCang-lung Ārya Paṇḍita (1770–1845), entitled *rGya dkar nag rgya ser ka smi ra bal bod hor gyi yi ge dang dpe ris rnam grangs mang ba bzhugs so* ‘Letters of India, China, Russia, Kashmir, Nepal, Tibet [and] Mongolia, together with many illustrations’. No more samples of this script can be found, and its nature is still a mystery. See Taube 2002 for the last attempt to explain it and reconstruct the whole hypothetical alphabet.



Table 1. Structural Analysis of Signs

Bottom Part of Character	Top Part of Character									
	First Group							Second Group		
	一	厂	乚	乚	乚	口	丿	丿	乚	乚
・			乚 B4							
一		𠂇 C1	𠂇 D2							
〃			𠂇 D4							
丩		𠂇 A5		𠂇 𠂇 C2 C4						
𠂇		𠂇 A4								
𠂇	𠂇 D3					𠂇 C3				
𠂇		𠂇 B2					𠂇 A1			
才		𠂇 B3								
𠂇	𠂇 B3									
𠂇				𠂇 A2	𠂇 C5					𠂇 C5
𠂇 A1										
𠂇					𠂇 B5			𠂇 B5		
Damaged Characters										
?		𠂇 E1							𠂇 E1	
?	𠂇 D1								𠂇 D1	
?	𠂇 B1								𠂇 B1	

## 7. Conclusion

The manuscript fragment K3:45 from the Western Xia Shānzūigōu site discussed in this paper is an interesting specimen, made, as we believe, by a Tangut monk in a script that we consider to be unidentified. Despite the fact that we do not have sufficient data to provide a satisfactory explanation of the nature of this script and to be able to read the text, we have tried to put the fragment in its historical context, actualize the problems involved, and draw more academic attention to it. As the culmination of our study we made a preliminary analysis of the structure of the signs in the fragment. Although this is just a working hypothesis which cannot be verified until and unless additional samples of this script are found, we believe that it provides a useful approach to understanding the structure of the signs. We hope that further research and archaeological discoveries may be able to shed more light on the script, and solve some of the questions raised in our paper.

## Abbreviations

IOM RAS — Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Институт восточных рукописей Российской академии наук), Saint Petersburg, Russia

MRM — Minusinsk Regional Museum of Local Studies  
(Минусинский региональный краеведческий музей имени  
Н. М. Мартянова), Minusinsk, Russia

## Bibliography

## 1. Tangut texts

**Auspicious Tantra of All-Reaching Union** — *ngiṃ rjyü zi ni ngwu  
phjow mə twei* 𑖦𑖫𑖞𑖩𑖪𑖨𑖫𑖮𑖱𑖨 [Auspicious Tantra of All-  
Reaching Union = *Jíxiáng biànzhi kǒuhé běnxù* 吉祥遍至口和本  
續 ]. Movable type edition, 9 vols. Ningxia Institute of  
Archaeology, Yinchuan. Pressmark N21:001–009.

**Homonyms** — *tshī tsī ·iū ndai m̃e leu ndi ndza* 𪛗𪛗𪛗𪛗𪛗𪛗𪛗𪛗 [Essential Selection of Often-Transmitted Homonyms and Mixed Characters = *Zéyào chángchuán tóngmíng zázi* 擇要常傳同名雜字]. Xylograph edition, folios 1–14. Sold at an auction of ancient documents held by the Beijing Debao International Auction Company (Běijīng débǎo guójì pāimài yǒuxiàn gōngsī 北京德宝国际拍卖有限公司) on 23 November 2014 (Lot 65). Provenance unknown. Now in private ownership. For details see: West 2018.

**Rhyme Tables** — *ngwə ·ēi we mb̃iū* 𪛗𪛗𪛗𪛗 [Corresponding Rhymes of the Five Sounds = *Wǔ shēng qiè yùn* 五聲切韻]. Manuscript, 39 ff. IOM RAS, Tangut Collection. Pressmark Tang 22/1, old inventory № 620.

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