

The State and the Buddhist Sangha: Xixia State (982–1227)

Evgenij I. Kychanov

THE Tangut State came into being in the late 10th century, surrounded by powerful Buddhist centers: the Chinese ones—Dunhuang, Wutaishan and Helanshan, the Tibetan ones—Amdo and Liangzhou, and the Uighur ones—Ganzhou, Shazhou and Turfan. Undoubtedly, the ruling Tangut Ngvemi dynasty, whose representatives had since the ninth century been Governor-Generals of the region to the south of Ordos, were not only familiar with Buddhism, but also its ardent adherents. The independent Tangut state system, even in a multi-national context, required creation of the written language for its native tongue for the purposes of conducting business correspondence (1036); further, this language was used to translate the Buddhist canon into Tangut. In 1038 a special committee was formed whose task was to translate the sutras into the Tangut language. Yuanhao, the ruler of the Great Xixia State, took personal control over the committee's activities, which, according to some Chinese sources, was consulted by Uighur monks who had some experience in translating Buddhist texts from Chinese into their own language. One of the first efforts of the committee may have been the Tangut translation of the Lotus Sutra—in any case, this is the only text to have reached us that says in its introduction that the translation had been made under the patronage of Emperor Yuanhao, i.e. in the late 30s—mid 40s of the 11th century. The text was shown at the exhibition now opened in Tokyo, among the samples of 11th century typed editions.

The choice of the Lotus Sutra could have been linked with the fact that this sutra, its 25th chapter in particular, narrates of the support that the Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Guanin, Kannon) can lend the believers in various situations.

The idea of the ruling Ngvemi dynasty being patronized by the Buddhist teaching, as well as that of the adherence of this dynasty to the Buddhist religion is one of the prevailing ones in Tangut history.

A number of investigators are of the opinion that the Xixia emperors were half-spiritual rulers, who were in some texts, according to N. A.

Nevsky, named bodhisattvas, while the Tangut State was actually a Buddhist state. It was Buddhist in the sense that the very doctrine of it was Buddhist in nature. However, this problem requires further investigation. Meanwhile, are many texts written in the Xixia language proving that the Xixia State doctrine was in fact Confucian.

The Tangut State was a multinational one, the main nationalities being the Mi—the Tanguts, the Han—the Chinese, and the Bodpa—the Tibetans and the Uighurs. Correspondingly, the two communities—Chinese and Tibetan—were mentioned as early as the 11th century, in the Liangzhou manuscript. Besides, from the “New Laws” text of the early 13th century we get to know about the existence of Tangut communities in ethnically mixed Tangut-Chinese communities, that were, nevertheless, close to the latter in terms of religious belief. Notably, the sources that we are familiar with at present do not make any mention of mixed Tibetan-Tangut or Uighur communities, though we would be justified in expecting both to exist. Moreover, the sources known to us never emphasize any antagonism or controversy among different Buddhist schools in Xixia. Based on the dated Buddhist texts that we have today, a tentative conclusion can be made that beginning from the late 12th century the Tibetan Buddhist influence increasingly grew in Xixia, which could have been directly related to the formation of its different schools, that had taken place by that time.

The evidence cited below has been taken from a legal document that reflects most dramatically the control exercised by the state over the Buddhist sangha.

In the Great Xixia State any uncontrolled preaching was prohibited; the preachers coming in from Tibet and India were to present themselves to the authorities, and only then they were allowed to preach and interpret the teaching. The preachers were prohibited most stringently to introduce into their sermons what could “be misleading for the people,” “distort the teaching” or in any way contribute to social unrest. Should he do that, he was to be arrested and sentenced to three years of hard labor. The law persecuted any kind of fortune-tellers and quacks: It is prohibited for any man to engage in provocative speeches and declare: “I see the divine light coming from Buddha!,” as well as mislead his own household and common people demanding: “I want to get rewarded for my services!” In case such speeches did confuse people’s hearts, the guilty man was on his arrest punished in a special way; obviously, in any case it all ended in his death. Speeches having less criminal intention were punished by sentencing the author to one-year hard labor, while any repeated crime of this sort ended in exile. As the state

did not support any one school of Buddhism, the speeches in question in all probability dealt with issues of everyday social life and state policy, as well as the actions of the government.

On the other hand, the state and its law protected all the objects of cult within the country's boundaries: "Nobody is allowed to steal, spoil or damage Buddha's images, temples, images of religious champions, canvases with Confucius' image or images of worshipped heavenly spirits." The punishment was three years hard labor, and if the criminal was a monk he, understandably, was punished more severely for his blasphemy. According to the laws of the country only the temples and the emperor's palace could be decorated with moldings and painted tiles. The Tangut dynasty color was yellow. Lay men could not wear yellow clothes, but the monks could.

All the grave criminal cases, as well as those pertaining to civil law, dealing with the temple destruction, false preaching, etc. were not to be considered by the local authorities, but only by special officials coming in from the capital. The matters concerned with sangha were considered by three departments, one dealing with the matters of sangha in general, another considering problems concerned with monks, and the third dealing with all cases pertaining to the lay Buddhist believers.

Similar to the neighboring China, it was only possible to become a monk in the Xixia State on the government's consent. Taking the vows without observance of the law was severely persecuted, even by capital punishment. Only men who had come of age and were in good shape were allowed to become monks, while the old and feeble were prohibited to take the vows. The future monk was to take some special training. A slave or any servant, who did not enjoy full personal freedom, could only do it on his master's consent. Some restrictions on taking the vows were imposed on people who had rare qualifications—such as carvers of texts on wood, to further print them by the method of xylography. "Those belonging to the category of text carvers on wood for book printing are prohibited to take monastic vows. Should any of them become a monk, he must still remain in the lists of text carvers."

As to the women, only a widow or an unmarried woman who was not claimed by anyone could take the veil: "Should there be a woman—a widow or a maiden, who has not yet been married, who adheres to the Buddhist teaching sincerely and wholeheartedly, is not claimed by anyone and wants to become a nun, she should be reported to the authorities. This information should then be checked by supervisors, and thereafter she may take the veil staying at home or leaving her family." Should anyone consecrate a person who had the right to become a

monk, but did so without reporting to the authorities, the instigator was to be strangled, and the accomplices got 12 years of hard labor.

There was a severe punishment envisaged for those who “had become a monk on his own account” or through swindle. They got death penalty. Those who became monks through swindle and “excluded themselves from poll-tax paying lists,” if they were full age, were to be strangled. If somebody remained in the lists, but pretended to be a monk, he was sentenced to six years of hard labor. If the authorities were aware of such cases but did not interfere, the officials guilty of such crime were to be punished. The relatives who had not reported on one of their family who had become a monk through swindle got milder punishment than the officials did. The only deviation here was that it was prohibited to report on one’s own father who had become a monk through swindle, which was in total agreement with the main standards of the Chinese law. If the head of a Buddhist community or his assistants were aware of there being an unlawful member in their community, they were also sentenced to hard labor. The same punishment was in store for a state official or military commander, who was aware of somebody of his subordinates having become a monk in an unlawful way, and had never interfered or reported on him. Even in case the head of the community or his subordinates did not know, that a certain person had become a monk through swindle, they were still subject to punishment for faulty service—those of certain rank had to give away a horse as a fine, while common people were given 13 cane blows.

A youth of common descent, who was preparing to become a monk was not to be excluded from the poll-tax payment lists of the region or the household where he had been subscribed to at birth.

As for the novices of common descent and people who were assigned to work for a temple or Buddhist community, the so-called “permanent residents” of the temple’s and community’s welfare, special lists and inventories were made for them and submitted to the authorities.

If some Buddhist monks from other states were subjects to the Xixia State, they had to introduce themselves or be introduced to the authorities, who had to “find out the true names, surnames and age (of these people) and ... what they know of Buddha’s teaching, which of them is the mentor and what teaching they adhere to.”

Further the law said: “The monks who have acquired permission to ‘leave their families,’ are prohibited to remain unregistered in community lists and thus stay at an unknown place. Starting from the day he took the monastic vows, any monks to report himself to the proper

authority and register with the community that he belongs to.” For violating this rule he got one-year hard labor sentence.

A monk had no right to change one community for another, and was punished by 12 years of hard labor for doing so.

The law also persecuted any opportunity of misusing the certificate entitling one to monastic vows, belonging to a monk, whereby his male relatives—father, brother, son, grandson or a person bearing the same name—tried to become monks having appropriated his certificate. Similar punishment was envisaged for forging the document, changing the name in it, etc.

There was also a punishment in store for the barber, who had shaved anybody trying to become a monk in an unlawful manner: “In case a barber shaves the head for a man, who has become a monk by deceit, and is aware of it, he will get a punishment three grades lower than the criminal himself. If he did not know it, then he should get punished for not wanting to look into the details of the matter: should he have a rank, he is to pay a fine of five coin bunches, while a common man should get 10 cane blows.”

Thus, the state was interested in having a full register of all adult male population. If an adult man became a monk, the state lost a full value taxed unit. It was because of this that excluding oneself from the poll-tax payment lists was punished by death penalty. The young novices and “the permanent residents” alike were registered with the civil and military authorities as potential workmen and soldiers. A consecrated monk could not leave his community. In this way the Tangut state system of assessing the entire adult population across the administrative and economic units, based either on territorial or production principle, or any other, and manifested by the prohibition to change the place of registered residence for fear of death penalty, was also spread to the Buddhist communities.

However, monks also enjoyed some privileges. For any crime perpetrated, the punishment for a monk was one degree lower than that for a lay man. Those of the monks who had some rank could be punished by losing it—by dismissal from the job, etc. A monk of some rank could avoid hard labor, but a common monk had to “serve the hard labor sentence as envisaged by the law.” After having served such sentence the monk was returned to his community, but only in the novice status.

A monk enjoying full rights did not have to pay taxes and was not enlisted to labor conscription.

In the Tangut law codex, the article related to the punishment for

crimes perpetrated inside the community by one of the monks against his religious tutors, or disciples. We can be sure that the same principle was at work here that existed in China during the Tang-Sung period (seventh–13th centuries). Such relations were “translated” into family relations, whereby the disciple was his tutor’s relative, as if the latter were his uncle on his father’s or mother’s side. A religious tutor was his disciple’s uncle, while his disciple was his nephew. A tutoress was an aunt for her nuns, while they were her nieces. However, when punished for stealing from each other or in case of adultery the monks and nuns were not punished as relatives, if only in spiritual terms, but as people not related to each other. Moreover, monks and nuns got even more severe punishment for committing adultery than lay people, for such crime was considered as committed against the very principles they were preaching. Notably, the law did not encourage any communication between monks and nuns at all, except in emergency: “None of the Buddhist monks and nuns ... should communicate with each other.”

A monk, both in China and Xixia, was strictly forbidden to enter into wedlock. If this happened, the woman was punished even more severely than for committing adultery, while the monk was exiled. The corresponding article in the Tangut codex has not reached us.

The state supported the temples and monasteries economically, assigning to them as “permanent residents” part of the people belonging to the state. These peasants and cattle breeders assigned to the temples were partly exempt from the taxes and other payments to the state, but in the 13th century such privileges seem to have been cancelled—perhaps on account of the onslaught by Genghis Khan. The lands belonging to monasteries and temples were quite extensive. According to the evidence available, in two monasteries only, called “Assistance to the State” and “Overall Sanctity,” the “permanent residents” were cultivating 835 hectares of arable lands. In the early 13th century, in the “Assistance to the State” monastery 327 ha of land, that had earlier been exempt from working off and hay deliveries as rent, were taxed 584 bunches and 951 coins (584,950 coins), based on two bunches (2,000 coins) from each 1.5 qingn of land (9.15 ha). By summing up all this and other evidence we can conclude that in the early 13th century two thirds of the temple lands were taxable. As to the arguments on whether the temples and monasteries had many land possessions (according to the data available, the average amounted to 400 ha), it is difficult to come to any general conclusion, as we have no estimates of the total arable areas in the Tangut State, as well as of the average private or state landholding size. The Tangut State had a well-developed cattle-breeding

industry, including migratory cattle breeding. The pastures belonged both to the state and to individuals; part of them seems to have been public property. The temples had to have their own pastures for raising cattle as well. In China, too, the monasteries had to submit to the state reports on the temple property, the number of "permanent residents" and the peasants assigned to the monastery. The excessive land ownership of the temples and monasteries, as the contemporaries saw it, became the cause of persecution of Buddhists in the Tang China in the middle of the ninth century. Inspectors, who were specifically appointed to fulfill this task, controlled the economic activities of the temples and monasteries in the Xixia State.

We can also get the general picture of the establishment process of the Buddhist believers' communities attached to the temples and the self-government of sangha from the sources available. The communities were formed attached to the temples, both the new and the old ones, regardless of whether they had been restored with the state or private money. Each temple (monastery) was to have a certain number of monks; the newly opened monasteries were at first staffed with the monks from the old ones, and only later they could accept the people who had just taken the vows. The temple (monastery) was the nucleus of the community; the number of monks assigned to it and the number of "permanent residents" depended on the size of donations in terms of money, i.e. by the economic potential of the temple in question. The state did not want to have poor monks. The pauper monk, whose state was not due to the fulfillment of some religious dogmas, and who actually made his living through begging, did not suit the Xixia State.

The community was self-governed. It was ruled by the community head. He was assisted by his deputy. Besides them, there were also inspectors and certain people called "decision makers." Big communities were divided into smaller ones, each headed by a leader, whose name could be translated as "a directing person." The latter position was the position of a lower-rank leader in many fields of the civil and military administration in the Tangut State. As a rule, the "directors" were at the head of groups numbering from several to several dozens of people.

Sangha was ruled by the Council of the Great Sangha. It is obvious that the Council controlled the matters concerned with the Buddhist communities around the country, which would be logical—otherwise, the regional organization (according to the schools and direction in Buddhism) will remain unclear to me. The Council of the Great Sangha is mentioned only once in an article which says: "In case there is a

vacancy for the position of the community head, his assistant, a 'decision maker' or the sangha leader, or for other positions of high rank in the community, then, if the Council of the Great Sangha has indeed made its choice, the (person concerned) should be promoted and the position taken by the candidate moved up from below. In case the community in question does not have a man, who could be promoted to this position, the latter should be taken by a candidate from another community." There was a caretaker on the community staff list, who was in charge of communal meals. The caretaker was often appointed out of the "permanent residents," which was probably because the monks were obliged to engage in spiritual matters and avoid dealing with the world of greed and avarice. The monks were prohibited to have expensive things, gilded knives, richly ornamented saddles and bridles, to have weapons, swords, spears, etc. A monk could not take part in tax collection or borrow anything from others. A monk severed his family relations and was thus exempt from the all-family responsibility in case one of his relatives committed a crime against the state or the ruler. Neither did the monk's parents bear any responsibility for their son in case he turned out to be implicated in a plot. Alongside with the clergy, physicians and prison wardens a monk had access to convicts.

The superior tutors, such as "fa shi," "go shi" and "ding shi" ("di shi" are not mentioned in the codex) were considered to be state officials; they were awarded ranks and observed the regulations set up for state administration officers.

Literacy and a certain Buddhist educational level were important prerequisites both for being ordained monk and for taking up any position in the sangha. Most important were the texts of the Lotus Sutra and the Prajñāpāramitā Sutra of the Virtuous Duke, Who Defends His State. The candidate had to be able "to voice the sounds of Sanskrit purely and clearly," and "do the ritual bowing" while reading the holy texts. The Chinese, Tanguts and Tibetans who were pretending to the position of Father Superior were required to know the "Da fanguang fo hua yan jing" sutra and the "Da cheng qi xin lun" shastra. There existed a list of works in the Tangut and Tibetan languages, which was obligatory for those who were going to serve in the sangha administrative bodies. The list was the same both for the Tanguts, the Chinese and the Tibetans: "Should there be among the Tangut, Chinese and Tibetan youths any who have a good knowledge and can read sutras and gāthās ... such youths can be appointed heads of offices..." The obligatory list included the chapter of "The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World Sounds" from the Lotus Sutra. It was required

that the candidates be familiar with the Chinese versions of the same texts. Thus, ideally the future superior Buddhist hierarch in Xixia was to be familiar with the holy texts in the Sanskrit, Tangut, Chinese and Tibetan languages. The knowledge of Sanskrit was not declared; from the colophons of the Buddhist books we know that the Tangut translators were also using the texts of the original works in Sanskrit in case they had survived.

Unlike the lay men, a monk-officer could not hand down his rank to his successors. We have no evidence concerning the appointment of monks to any secular positions.

On the community's consent, a monk could leave it and return to civilian life. However, this also led to some disfranchisement—a former monk could not serve the ruler, he could only get a low-rank job and hard work. He was also invariably excluded from monastic lists.

The state restricted the community in its claims to the inheritance left by a deceased believer. Although the Tangut law, as well as the Chinese law, did not recognize the will of the deceased when distributing his inheritance, his will was, nevertheless, taken into account when deciding on the inheritance portion that was to be handed over to the community. True, this was the case only when the deceased had no lawful successors and his possessions were to be handed over to the state treasury. After “a noble man or a noble woman change their body for another one” there was a fast to be held for seven by seven days (49 days), and only thereafter the will of the deceased was to be fulfilled. The monks themselves were prohibited to ask for anything out of this property.

In exchange for the right of control over the temples and communities the state protected their interests. We have already mentioned the punishments envisaged for damaging temples and other places of worship. In the vicinity of the temple, it was prohibited to slaughter cattle, kill wild animals and catch birds, which was punished by six months hard labor. It was prohibited to settle for the night in a Buddhist temple, enter the territory riding a horse, tie up any domestic animal in the precincts and use it relieve nature. The monks and temple attendants were not allowed to bring into the temple and leave for the night women from their families. The servants were obliged to live beyond the temple's walls. No strangers could reside in the temple. It was only on the permission from the authorities that one could extract clay or dig wells on the temple premises.

Thus, the life of Buddhist communities in the Xixia State proceeded under continuous control on the part of the state. A roaming monk preaching the teaching the way he liked, a temple or a monastery put up

in a solitary place according to the wish of the believers and monks alone, a lay man, who had suddenly decided to become a monk and perpetrated his wish by taking the monastic vows—all these were inconceivable from the point of view of both the Tangut legislation and that of China proper.