

Tangut Ritual Language*

The Hsi-Hsia (Tangut) state (982-1227), or according to the indigenous Tangut sources 𐰽𐰺𐰍𐰏 phiow¹- bji²- lhji- lji² «The Great State of the White and Lofty» (大白高國) in many aspects still remains a mysterious kingdom. This may be explained by the fact that everything we know today about the Tanguts is based exclusively on Chinese-language materials, mainly the accounts of Hsi-Hsia in Sung, Liao, Chin dynastic histories (mind that the Tangut state was devoid of its own dynastic history). But these, as stated by some scholars (e.g. Hok-Lam Chan), are inadequate representations of the historical importance of Hsi-Hsia.

It is well known that the vast majority of the Tangut materials the scholars have at their disposal today, are translations from Chinese (mainly Buddhist texts). The indigenous Tangut texts are few and because of both – the poorly studied language and in many cases extremely sophisticated content, these texts are mostly incomprehensible.

However the importance of the study of Tangut indigenous texts for the reconstruction of the Tangut history and Tangut culture is quite obvious. Thus, it seems not an exaggeration to state that today the most urgent task in Tangut studies is the study of the language itself, since the adequate understanding of Tangut-language materials is in direct accordance with our knowledge of the Tangut language.

A. In about fifty years after its foundation in 982 A.D. the Tangut state has put into circulation its own system of writing (1038). According to the legend, in a very short time (one year only) six thousand Tangut characters have been created. In 1916 one of the first explorers of the Tangut language B. Laufer stated that Tangut script represented one of the most complicated systems of writing ever invented by a human mind. And up to now Tangut script is still considered as «an enormously complex and dense graphic system» (R. Dunnell 1996).

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My study of the Tangut language has revealed the fact that even a half of the created Tangut characters is quite sufficient not only for rendering both numerous Buddhist texts and Chinese secular works (such as 孫子 and 類林), but for the bulk of Tangut indigenous texts as well (Tangut law code, documents, proverbs, some forms of Tangut poetry, etc.). Since I could not find in the texts I studied another half of the created Tangut characters, I always wondered what were these characters created for (mind that all of them are registered in standard Tangut dictionaries, such as 文海). However Tangut studies are still in progress, new Tangut texts are constantly put into circulation, and, finally, I found the mysterious characters in Tangut indigenous odes 緄 dzjo².

The wood-block print containing the odes is held in St Petersburg branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies (Tang. 125, No 121). There are altogether five Tangut odes, but only three of them came to us in a complete form, namely, «The Ode on Monthly Pleasures», «The Great Ode», «The Ode on Maxims». Other two – «The Ode on Wisdom» and «The Text of the Odes» (tentative translation) are incomplete.

It is to be noted that the word 緄 dzjo² 詩 is homophonous with the word 鑼 dzjo² 儀式, thus the listener may perceive the titles of the odes as «The Ritual on Monthly Pleasures», «The Great Ode», «The Ritual on Maxims» and so on.

These five odes, I believe, belong to the most ancient layer in Tangut indigenous literature – at least there is no doubt that they belong to pre-Buddhist times, i.e. definitely long before the foundation of the Tangut state. This is evident from the fact that the odes neither mention Buddha's name, nor use the Buddhist vocabulary. The ancient provenance of these odes can also be illustrated by the fact that only the Tibetans and Chinese, besides the Tanguts themselves, are mentioned in the odes, whereas the documents written during the times of the existence of the Tangut state, also name the Jurchens (the ancestors of Manchu), Khitans (tribes dwelt on the territory of what is today Mongolia and North China), Uighurs (Tanguts' western neighbours), etc.

As the first step in the study of the Tangut odes I have chosen «The Ode on Monthly Pleasures». There were three reasons for such a choice:

1) the content of this ode is connected with the everyday life of the Tanguts and one may suppose that our perceiving of this ode would not be as difficult as understanding the content of «The Great Ode» which is permeated with some ancient Tangut ideas about Tanguts' origin. Thus, an attempt to translate such a complicated Tangut text, as «The Great Ode», mildly speaking, would be a very brave undertaking;

2) this ode was already studied by the well-known Japanese scholar Nishida Tatsuo;

3) the text of this ode has red dots marking the end of each line.

B. «The Ode on Monthly Pleasures» (altogether 1415 characters) through centuries conveys to us the idea of Tanguts' everyday life during a calendar year. Each lunar month gets its description – first it is given in the characters not to be found anywhere else. I suppose that these characters form the vocabulary of Tangut ritual language (hereafter RL). My supposition is founded on the fact that, as I have already said, the designation for the verses (緘 dzjo² 詩) where the mysterious characters were found is homophonous with the word 緘 dzjo² 儀式. After the description of the month in RL we get the description of the same lunar month in the common language vocabulary (hereafter CL). This vocabulary being well known by all the scholars of the Tangut field represents no difficulty to them. Thus, each lunar month is described twice – first by means of the RL, and then – the CL.

Nishida Tatsuo (p. 74) gives two probable explanations for the two descriptions of each month in the verse:

1) the first description of each lunar month is given in the language of the «black-headed» (黑頭), whom he equals with the Tangut nomadic people 遊牧民, whereas the second description is written in the language of the «red-faced» (赤面), who, in his opinion, represent agricultural people (農耕民);

2) the first language is spoken by the Tangut ruling class 緘 lhjwj¹, whereas the second language is spoken by those who are governed 緘 mji². However, according to my observation made in different Tangut indigenous texts, both characters – 緘 lhjwj and 緘 mji² – have one and the same meaning – the Tangut people the difference between these words lies in that they belong respectively to the RL and CL.

The ode begins with a preambula (introduction) consisting of four lines each having six characters. It runs as follows:

- 1 line RL [Somebody] asks about the origin of the monthly pleasures.
- 2 line CL Where does the origin of the monthly pleasures come from?
- 3 line RL [We] speak about the origin of the monthly pleasures.
- 4 line CL [We] explain the origin of the monthly pleasures.

It is obvious that the idea of the compiler of the ode was to equal the number of characters in RL and CL while describing one and same lunar month:

	Number of characters	
	RL	CL
First lunar month	53	53
Second lunar month	56	55
Third lunar month	58	55
Fourth lunar month	72	74
Fifth lunar month	63	66
Sixth lunar month	64	64
Seventh lunar month	57	57
Eight lunar month	50	49
Ninth lunar month	50	49
Tenth lunar month	63	64
Eleventh lunar month	40	39
Twelfth lunar month	53	57

According to the text of the ode, each season begins with a state banquet and ends with «the state joy” 糜霏 lhjj-rejr². If there is no question about the banquet at the beginning of each season, it is not clear what was meant by «the state joy» which marks the end of each season. It seems to me that since the Tangut state was a Tantric Buddhist state (it is my personal opinion, founded on textual and art evidences), one may suppose that some special Tantric rituals were held to mark the success of accomplishing the tasks of the season which has just passed.

A comparison of a description of a lunar month in Tangut RL with the same passage in Tangut CL shows that:

1. The text in RL is not translated *verbatim* into CL, the text in CL is rather a rendition of certain ideas expressed in Tangut RL or *vice versa*.
2. The words with the same meaning (synonyms) in Tangut RL and Tangut CL often are quite different both in their appearance (i.e. on the level of the script) and phonetic value. Thus, neither on the visual level, nor on the audio level the reader gets a slightest hint on the semantic closeness of synonyms in the Tangut RL and Tangut CL.
3. One-syllable words in Tangut CL irrespective of the class they belong to (except verbs) usually correspond to two-syllable words in Tangut RL.
4. The Tangut RL lacks grammatical morphemes. As a rule, there are no postpositions, almost no verbal prefixes. Instead of interrogative pronouns the verb «to ask» is inserted into a RL text. The relations between the words in a sentence are governed by the word order, which is purely Tangut (SOV, the attributes standing in front of the words they modify, except adjectives, which are always in postposition).

C. One may wonder how people in their everyday life could communicate using a language without any grammatical morphemes. It is also very strange that simple numerals (3,4,5,6) in the RL consist of two syllables (as far as I know,

usually simple numerals have only one syllable). Thus, the RL of Tangut odes creates an impression of an artificial phenomenon.

I suppose that the RL was invented by the pre-Buddhist, obviously shamanistic, Tangut priests for their own usage.

By the end of the 12th century, when the odes were published, the Tanguts already on the state level were following Buddhist teaching. However, there still could be Shamanistic followers. But it seems to me that the rituals described in the «The Ode of the Monthly Pleasures» could be continued on the state level.

D. Such a phenomenon as a RL language is known to exist not only among the Tibeto-Burman languages (e.g. in Belhare – B. Bickel, personal communication), but is rather widespread throughout the world (e.g. some Amerindian tribes possess RL as well).

However, if we compare the Tangut RL with the RL used in other Tibeto-Burman languages, we have to admit that the Tangut data are invaluable, since here we get

a. a written form of a RL;

b. a bilingual text – Tangut RL is «translated» into Tangut CL.

E. The following pages represent the text of the first lunar moon from «The Ode on Monthly Pleasures».