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The Great State of White and High: Buddhism and State Formation in Eleventh-Century Xia [book review]

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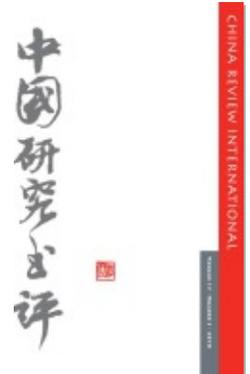
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society divide in Deng Xiaoping's China by providing detailed discussions on various subjects. Readers of this volume, regardless of their interests, will not be disappointed, and, like conference attendees, will certainly find fascinating material in at least some of the offerings here. For those who are concerned with the process of China's socialist transformation, this will be a welcome addition to their libraries. I am grateful to retain my review copy.

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Ruth W. Dunnell. *The Great State of White and High: Buddhism and State Formation in Eleventh-Century Xia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996. xxv, 278 pp. Hardcover \$49.00, ISBN 0-8248-1719-2.

Ruth Dunnell's long-awaited book on Buddhism and Tangut state formation expands on themes raised in her earlier work on Tangut history, in particular the place of Buddhism in the early Xia state officially founded by Li (Weiming) Yuanhao in 1038 and the role of the empress dowager regents in preserving that state against external and internal enemies. These issues are broached in Dunnell's chapter on "The Hsi Hsia" in volume 6 of *The Cambridge History of China*,¹ a lucid political narrative that many of us in the Song field relied on in manuscript form long before it appeared in print. In the present book, Dunnell shifts her focus from political narrative to political and cultural identity. As she puts it in her Introduction, "This book examines the native sources for early imperial Tangut history and interprets them in the light of the state's political vicissitudes up to the end of the eleventh century" (p. 4). The fact that these primary sources are overwhelmingly Buddhist and imperially sponsored provides the organizing theme of her book: "My thesis is simply that the history of early Tangut Buddhism is so intertwined with Xia state formation and the needs of the throne that analysis of the relationship between the two is a prerequisite to understanding one or the other" (ibid.).

Native sources and Tangut Buddhism lead to an examination of the larger issue of Xia national identity, a question made especially urgent for the eleventh-

century Tanguts by the combination of pervasive civil conflicts among Xia “power blocks” (including the throne and Weiming royal clan, the consort clans, the military elites, and frontier chiefs) and the high state of alert against the expansionist Song court. In the same way that “Meiji Japan, Petrine Russia, late Qing China, or the late Ottoman empire felt compelled to adopt Western technologies to avoid European political domination,” the Tangut rulers countered the threat of Chinese political domination by borrowing Song instruments of imperial bureaucracy. For Dunnell, this raises the question of whether the Chinese influence necessarily eradicated native Tangut notions of national identity: “Is westernization (sinicization) inevitable? Is the alternative a silencing of the ‘native?’” (p. 9). Her answer is that native self-conceptions survived intact, in part through the appropriation of Buddhism and its apotropaic regalia (e.g., stūpas and stele) as the foundation of the Xia state religion and a vehicle for the preservation of the particularities of Tangut ethnicity and Xia statehood (pp. 138–139). It is the goal of her book, then, to show how, in the course of the eleventh century, Buddhism became interwoven with Tangut self-conceptions to form the ideological foundation of the Tangut monarchy.

The principal source for Dunnell’s study is the bilingual (Tangut and Chinese) stele inscribed in 1094 to commemorate the restoration of the Gantong Stūpa on the grounds of Liangzhou’s Dayun (or Huguo) Temple. This stele is supplemented by inscriptional material preserved *in situ* or in gazetteers from the Ordos prefectures inhabited by the Tanguts, as well as Xia diplomatic missives preserved in Song historical sources. The Gantong stele has clearly exerted a powerful hold over Dunnell, for despite the fact that she appended a translation of the Chinese text to her doctoral dissertation (Princeton, 1983) and published two articles on it thereafter,² it still serves as “the piece around which this book is organized” (p. 5). Indeed, almost all of the second half of her 160 pages of text is devoted to aspects of the Gantong Stūpa stele: chapter 4, which might have served better as a separate journal article, analyzes five inscriptions from 711 to 1697 to reconstruct the history of the stūpa and its home temple; chapter 5 provides an annotated translation of the two inscriptions; and chapter 6 compares the messages, chief constituencies, and probable audiences for the Tangut and Chinese versions. These are preceded by a first part (collectively titled “Buddhism in Eleventh-Century Xia”) that addresses questions of theory and perspective (chapter 1) and surveys the place of Buddhism in the early Tangut state and under the Mocang and Liang regencies from 1049 to 1099 (chapters 2 and 3).

A concluding chapter 7 briefly recapitulates the claim that “In late-eleventh century Xia, faith in the Buddha, his word, and the divine powers of protection adhering in relics and the structures housing them had become one of the underpinnings of the Weiming dynasty and the state it founded. The throne strove to establish a particular, even unique, relationship between itself and the potency of

the Buddha, whose protective and salvific powers it could then channel on behalf of the state and the Tangut people” (p. 157).

The Gantong Stūpa stele is a fascinating historical artifact, but neither it nor the other evidence Dunnell adduces support her contention that Buddhism was the ideological foundation of the eleventh-century Tangut state. To the contrary, her entire book, including her analysis of the differences between the Tangut and Chinese inscriptions, suggests that the promotion of Buddhism was the special enterprise of the Mocang and Liang wives and mothers, rather than the Weiming emperors. This is not to deny that Buddhism played an important role in eleventh-century Tangut culture; indeed Dunnell is at her best when she reminds us how Tangut expansion westward out of the Ordos from the late tenth century on gave them “direct access to the early Buddhist traditions of Central Asia, Tibet, and north China”—in short, how Buddhism was “embedded in the very sand, rock, and lore of the Gansu localities that the Tanguts conquered and absorbed in the eleventh century.”

This is not even to deny, as Dunnell continues, that “these traditions conferred important advantages and sources of strength upon the state” (p. 23). From early in the eleventh century, Tangut rulers “showed interest in the cults at Wutai shan and the worship of stūpas and relics, engaged in temple and stūpa building and reconstruction, patronized Indian monks, collected copies of texts and the Buddhist canon to translate into their own newly invented script, appointed monks to Buddhist offices overseeing translation work, and starting with Yuanhao began to portray themselves as great patrons and defenders of the dharma” (p. 47). But, as Dunnell herself points out throughout her study, “in their struggle to keep and solidify power over the throne and the military” the royal Weiming clan chose, “whenever possible, to adapt the institutions of the centralized Chinese monarchy (p. 157),” since from the Tangut imperial perspective “China was the dominant power of East Asia, the principal source of statecraft strategies and symbols, the main military threat and economic benefactor” (p. 37).

What Dunnell really seems to show is that even as Tangut empire-builders waged territorial battles with the Song, Liao, and Qingtang Tibetans, key elements of the Tangut elite waged political battles for control of the emerging Tangut state; although all contestants for power drew on Buddhist symbols and institutions, it was the Mocang and Liang consorts who allied themselves most closely with both Buddhism and the symbols of Tangut ethnic identity. After imperial founder Yuanhao was assassinated by his eldest son in 1048, the Mocang empress dowager ruled in place of her infant son Liangzuo (Yizong, b. 1047, r. 1048–1067) until her own murder at the instigation of her brother in 1056. Following a series of sanguinary intrigues that eradicated the Mocang clan, the two Liang empress dowagers emerged as the powers behind their sons Bingchang (Huizong, b. 1061, r. 1068–1086) and Qianshun (Chongzong, b. 1083, r. 1086–1139). Until the death of

the second Liang empress dowager in 1099 opened the way for a restoration of power by the royal Weiming clan, the empress dowagers and their male relatives exercised control over the throne and the Weiming family, forged alliances across clan lines and outside the military elite, and spearheaded the defense against aggressive military campaigns by both the Khitan Liao (1044–1051) and the Song (periodically from 1067 to 1119) (chapter 3).

Throughout her study, Dunnell finds that it is the empress dowagers who constructed new temples (p. 50), sponsored large-scale sūtra translation projects (p. 63), openly patronized the Sangha (p. 65), and restored the Gantong Stūpa, in addition to promoting the use of Tangut court costume and rites (pp. 60–61). By contrast, the eleventh-century Weiming emperors, while patronizing Buddhism, made little overt use of Buddhist rhetoric in their state-building reforms (pp. 46, 60) and, except for Yuanhao, sought at every opportunity to replace Tangut court protocol with the more internationally negotiable Chinese models (pp. 60–61).

This culturally charged contest for power between the Weiming royal clan and the Mocang and Liang consorts is certainly fascinating (although the political narrative is more clearly presented in Dunnell's *Cambridge History* chapter). But it does not advance the claim that her book is about "Buddhism and State Formation in Eleventh-Century Xia," especially since Dunnell associates the empress dowagers with a mid-eleventh-century "strategic retreat" of the state that left the defense of the country in the hands of strong military powers. "In the course of this process, the struggle over central authority devolved for a time upon the military alliances. In the 1090s, the process gradually reversed itself, for in the face of rapidly deteriorating conditions, the Weiming were able to recover sufficient authority to reconstitute the state" (p. 52, emphasis added). Without much more precise discussions of state formation (pp. 6–13), ethnicity (p. 14), Tangut social structure (pp. 15–16), and state religion (pp. 138–139) than Dunnell provides, it is really only possible to conclude that in the eleventh century, Buddhism and nativist ethnicity were politico-ideological weapons used by the consort clans "to legitimate and secure their authority" (p. 28) and (in the case of the Liangs) to consolidate their power by championing "different conceptions of the state" (p. 59).

With greater analytical rigor, Dunnell might have constructed a tighter argument out of the admittedly spare material on Buddhism and the eleventh-century Tangut state. But it is difficult to understand why she chose to limit herself to the eleventh century at all, since by her own account the amalgamation of Buddhism and Confucianism into the mature Tangut state did not occur until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when for the first time "a distinctive Tangut Buddhism emerged" (p. 5). As Dunnell notes, the commitment to Buddhism wavered during the so-called Weiming Restoration of the early twelfth century, and was only revived under the reign of Renzong (r. 1139–1193), after the Jin conquest of north China and the Liao removed the Xia's two most aggressive foes. The establish-

ment of relative peace and stability in the Ordos opened the door to enhanced Tibetan influence at the Tangut court, and “From these currents emerged a particular blend of Tibetan Buddhism and Confucian ethical statecraft, which left its mark on the ruling vision and ideological foundations of the Tangut monarchy in its mature form” (p. 158).

Time and again we are told how much more information is available for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, making it possible to describe precisely “Tangut conceptions, representations, and practice of sovereignty and monarchy” (p. 6); the relationship between Buddhism and Renzong’s Confucian-inspired reforms (pp. 23–24); the bureaucratic structure of the official Buddhist establishment (p. 63); and “the progressive influence of Tibetan missionary activity on Xia Buddhism, iconography, architecture, and in particular the state cult” (p. 138). Dunnell claims that it is these issues she is now in the process of studying (p. 5), but, given the centrality of this rich twelfth- and thirteenth-century material to any thorough understanding of Buddhism and Tangut state formation, it is impossible not to conclude that her present book is incomplete.

Beyond these problems of analytical imprecision and premature closure, Dunnell’s book is marred by an ideological self-righteousness that transforms the Tanguts from a complex and important focus of study into a pet political cause. Dunnell seems concerned that just as Tangut survival was threatened by expansionist China and its exploitative border officials in the past, the Tangut historical identity is endangered by sinocentric historians in the present. As a result of the sinocentric perspective that “inevitably colors much Euro-American historiography on China,” Western and Chinese historians have willfully “‘read’ Tangut social history and vocabulary through ‘Chinese’ translations,” thus misrepresenting Tangut social structure (pp. 15–16)—a topic on which Dunnell herself is frustratingly vague. In addition, they have “only vaguely perceived that China was part of a larger world that mattered in any intrinsic way to China’s internal development,” demonized border dynasties “as security threats rather than as manifestations of China’s participation in ‘an Inner Asian continuum’” (p. 10), and promoted the notion that greedy “nomads” needed the Chinese though the Chinese did not need the “nomads” (p. 7).³ It is not always clear whom Dunnell means to indict, since only sometimes does she cite the offenders in her footnotes, and only rarely do those so cited make it to her bibliography. In Dunnell’s view, all of these comforting cultural prejudices are nullified by world-system theory, a richly nuanced historiographical perspective that she simplifies into an ideological club (pp. 7, 10, 18).

More disturbing is how outdated and uninformed are her jibes against sinocentric history, since the views she inveighs against have long ceased to characterize the field. For example, the conference volume on *China among Equals*, published in 1983 under Morris Rossabi’s editorship, brought to public notice a multi-

state perspective on Song-Yuan China and its neighbors that had been taking shape for years.⁴ In addition, monographic studies by Song historians of Dunnell's own generation, including Richard von Glahn, Hugh Clark, and myself, emphasize just how dependent the Chinese were on trade and resources from Inner Asia and overseas, and how thoroughly imbricated Song China was in Asia's multistate geopolitical system.⁵ Moreover this perspective has been brought to wider audiences by the work of global historians such as Janet Abu-Lughod and more recently Jerry H. Bentley, whose study of conversion, assimilation, resistance, and syncretism in cross-cultural exchanges might have been useful to Dunnell.⁶

In conclusion, then, *The Great State of White and High* must be regarded as a disappointment. Because Dunnell is probably correct that her book "is likely to be the first volume in English on the subject of Tangut Xia history" (p. 6), it is regrettable that she did not take the trouble to sharpen her argument and see her story through to the end. Since she did not, there is still a great need for the book this could have been.

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NOTES

1. Ruth W. Dunnell, "Hsi Hsia," in Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 6, *Alien Regimes and Border States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

2. Ruth W. Dunnell, "The 1094 Sino-Tangut Gantong Stūpa Stele Inscription of Wuwei: Introduction, Translation of Chinese Text, and Source Study," in *Languages and History in East Asia: Festschrift for Tatsuo Nishida on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday*, ed. Akihiro Satō (Kyoto: Shokado, 1988), pp. 187–215; and "Politics, Religion, and Ethnicity in Eleventh Century Xia: The Construction of Tangut Identity in the 1094 Wuwei Stele Inscription," *Central and Inner Asian Studies* 7 (1992): 61–114.

3. On this point Dunnell's concerns are addressed with greater precision by Nicola Di Cosmo in "Ancient Inner Asian Nomads: Their Economic Basis and Its Significance in Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 4 (November 1994): 1092–1126.

4. Morris Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10th–14th Centuries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).

5. Richard von Glahn, *The Country of Streams and Grottoes: Expansion, Settlement, and the Civilizing of the Sichuan Frontier in Song Times* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1987); Hugh R. Clark, *Community, Trade, and Networks: Southern Fujian Province from the Third to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Paul J. Smith, *Taxing Heaven's Storehouse: Horses, Bureaucrats, and the Destruction of the Sichuan Tea Industry 1074–1224* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991).

6. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).