

# Xixia

## Xīxià Wángcháo 西夏王朝

**Xixia was a flourishing regional state in northwest China eventually destroyed by the Mongols. Before its downfall, Xixia was ruled by the Tanguts, a group of uncertain ethnic origin, although they were probably Sino-Tibetan.**

**X**ixia (western Xia), named after an ancient Chinese dynastic name dating to 2100 BCE, existed in northwest China from the late tenth century until extinguished by the Mongols in 1227. The core population was composed of Tanguts, a culturally mixed group variously identified but most likely Sino-Tibetan, with many other elements present, including: the Altaic Tuoba, who had played a major role in northern China prior to the reunification of the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE); local Turkic speakers, in the Ordos; Chinese; and even a few Mongols. Considered the real founder of the state was Li Yixing (d. 967), whose surname was a gift for services rendered from the Tang (618–907 CE). He and his successors, ruling a small state—wedged at first between Khitan Liao Dynasty (960–1125) and Northern Song (960–1126), and later between the even more powerful Jurchen Jin dynasty (1125–1234) and Southern Song (1127–1279)—had to tread carefully to survive, taking full advantage of a remote position in the northwest surrounded by natural barriers and large, well-fortified cities in a relatively well-populated region. Nonetheless, thanks to a successful military, Xixia did survive and, by the eleventh century, occupied a substantial strip of territory, including the Ordos, the Alashan Desert, and the Gansu corridor, an area



**A mural fragment from the Xixia (western Xia) dynasty, which existed in northwest China from the late tenth century until defeated by the Mongols in 1227.**

once well connected to China but, by the time of the Tang dynasty, heavily influenced by non-Chinese cultures. Contributing to Xixia's survival was not only the power and skill of its military and leaders, but also its position as the third party in a balanced rivalry between the Chinese

north and south, one that was to persist for almost three hundred years. Neither the north nor the south was able to conquer the other and reunify China, and Xixia carefully positioned itself to upset the balance of forces at any one time, if one of its rivals grew too powerful.

## Mongol Invasions

Xixia managed this quite successfully, and the end came for Xixia not due to an attack by one of its immediate rivals, but rather from an entirely new direction, the steppe, where the Mongol world had been united under the house of Chinggis Khan (often referred to as Genghis Khan, reigned 1206–1227). Even before his official rise, Chinggis Khan had sent some of his troops to raid Xixia domains in 1205. The raids continued until 1210, when, after

a deep penetration to threaten the Xixia capital of Eriqaya (in what is now Ningxia Province), the then Xixia ruler, Li Anquan (reigned 1206–1211), agreed to submit to the Mongols. Making the Tangut position insecure was the Mongol acquisition of the realm of the White Tatar, or Ongud, positioned in the Ordos and inland toward Jurchen Jin domains and providing Mongol armies with easy access not only to the Jurchens themselves, but to Xixia. In any case, Xixia's submission eased the Mongol military position by eliminating one potential enemy, on their left flank, allowing a concentration of forces to attack the Jin in a series of major advances between 1211 and 1214. In 1215, the Jin government abandoned much of its territory and fled to what was seen as more security south of the Huang (Yellow) River.

After the Mongols turned their attentions west, Xixia seemed secure, except that its government had gained

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**Members of a Tibetan minority traverse the hills once inhabited centuries ago by the Tanguts of the Xixia dynasty, a state that flourished in northwest China before being taken over by Mongols.**



the enmity of Chinggis Khan by refusing to support his invasion of Turkistan. This invasion absorbed Mongol energies for a number of years thereafter, but on his return to Mongolia, Chinggis Khan began planning the complete subjugation and destruction of Xixia. After carefully mobilizing troops, the advance began in 1226, the Xixia strong points being reduced one after the other. By this time, the Mongols possessed a substantial siege train and substantial ability to reduce even the most heavily fortified cities. In the end, the last Xixia ruler, Li Xian (reigned 1226–1227), had no choice but to surrender his capital. The Mongols, enraged by his last-ditch resistance and by the death of Chinggis Khan probably weeks after the final Xixia submission, executed Li Xian and all of his family as well as large masses of his subjects.

## Surviving Records of Xixia Culture

Despite the ferocity of the final war of conquest, and what seems to have been an intentional genocide, at least among the Tangut elite, the culture did survive, although the surviving Tanguts were not numerous enough to leave behind a recognizable society persisting until today. Some Tanguts were given to Mongol potentates as booty, and some Mongol groups may trace all or some of their origins back to them. Others were drafted into Mongol service and served in civil and even military capacities. Also surviving, for a short time at least, was the complex Tangut script. This script, based on Chinese characters but lacking their pictographic basis, provided a large number of complex symbols to write Tangut words, without any of

the visual clues associated with the Chinese script. Long unreadable, this script is slowly being deciphered, and along with it, the Tangut language, but this work is still far from completion, and it will be decades before the existing corpus of documents can be understood to its fullest. Of course, Chinese was also in use in Tangut domains, and much of what we know about Xixia history comes from Chinese sources, principally those written by Xixia enemies.

The Tanguts, as far as can be determined, were devout Buddhists, and a good deal of their surviving literature, mostly manuscript fragments, but some nearly complete texts as well, is composed of Buddhist literature. Texts are not always the same as those circulating under the same names elsewhere, a fact having an adverse impact on reading them as Rosetta stones to decipher Tangut. Because of its Buddhism, Xixia maintained active connections with other Buddhist cultures, including with Tibetans, who established direct connections with Xixia from an early date and later used the Tangut domains as a jumping off point for converting Mongols.

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## Further Reading

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