

THE WRITING AND LANGUAGE OF THE SI-HIA 西夏

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Ever since Edouard Chavannes brought back to Europe about 1870 the first rubbing of an inscription from the doors of Kü-yung-kuan (on the road between Peking and Kalgan) science has never ceased its attempt to solve the problems it involved. This inscription was written in a then unknown writing, but it was soon recognised as Si-hia.

The documents at our disposal in the first decades after the discovery included a few inscriptions on stone and on coins, but were so few that it was impossible to decipher this writing. This situation was radically altered when in 1900 Berteaux, Morisse and Pelliot found on the Pai-t'a (the so-called Coal Hill) near Peking, in a pile of refuse, among scattered papers and books, six volumes among which for example, was a translation of the Saddharmapundarikasūtra, all found to be written in the Si-hia language. They were gold characters on a blue background. Today three of these volumes are in the Prussian State Library in Berlin and three in the Guimet Museum in Paris. In 1908 Koslov discovered a tremendous library in a stūpa near Quara-qoto (also called Quara-Baising) not far from Edsin-gol. There were innumerable printed pages, manuscripts of books and rolls of writing in the Si-hia language. They were brought out and placed in the Museum of the Academy of Science in Leningrad. Later Aurel Stein during his third expedition into Central Asia in 1915, gathered from the same place another great quantity of Si-hia documents, nearly all of which are now in the British Museum in London. The latest great discovery of Si-hia writings, more than 100 volumes, was made during the excavations at Ning-hia in the province of Kan-su in 1929. All of this material was bought by the Peking National Library.

While studying these documents, texts were recognised transcribed in Chinese and Tibetan. There were dictionaries organised under every imaginable system; translations from Chinese and Tibetan, particularly of Buddhist works; works by Confucius; works on strategy; collections of maxims and celebrated sayings of various philosophers; "Serious Instructions" by different emperors; Tangute codes; even poetry that was purely Tangute. Thus it was possible to learn more and more of the rules of this very special writing and language which formed the historical foundation of a people who once spoke this language, of the dynasty that once ruled over them. But they have not nearly finished sorting the material from the enormous number of volumes. It is a tremendous work which will occupy science for many years to come.

Marco Polo has already mentioned the "peculiar language" spoken by the inhabitants of the Tangute Empire (cf. *The Book of Sir Marco Polo*, ed. Yule and Cordier, vol. I p. 203). These people, their state and their language, have rather been introduced to European literature as the Si-hia (Western Hia). The Tangutes themselves use the expression Ta-hia 大夏 (Great Hia) in their