Buddhist Warfare and Tantric Statecraft in the Twilight of Western Xia as Seen Through the Eyes of Ti shri Ras pa Shes rab seng ge

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From the mid-12th century, the Tangut Empire (also known as Western Xia, Chin. Xixia 西夏, 1038–1227) underwent a strategic pivot toward Tibetan Buddhism—a process catalyzed by the annexation of the mDo smad region. Tibetan monks, whose esoteric doctrines were perceived as uniquely efficacious in both spiritual and temporal realms, ascended to the political vanguard as indispensable ritualists. As Mongol expansionism posed an existential threat in the empire's twilight years, this symbiosis intensified; the Tangut court increasingly instrumentalized the propitiation of protector deities as a transcendent "technology" of state defense. This convergence of Tantric pragmatism and geopolitical crisis propelled Tibetan masters to the zenith of power. Serving as State Preceptor (Chin. *Guoshi* 國師) and Imperial Preceptor (Chin. *Dishi* 帝師), they wielded unprecedented authority that unified sacred liturgy with imperial administration.

This study centers on Ti shri Ras pa Shes rab seng ge (1164–1236), the last Imperial Preceptor of the Tangut Empire, situating his career within the empire's struggle for survival and its deployment of Tantric statecraft. A lineage holder of the 'Ba'rom Bka' brgyud tradition, Ti shri Ras pa served the Tangut court during its final three decades (c. 1196–1226). Celebrated for conducting battlefield Mahākāla rituals to fortify Tangut forces against Mongol incursions, he exemplified the fusion of esoteric Buddhism and secular governance that defined Tibet-Tangut relations. His career offers a critical vantage point from which to explore the entanglement of religion, warfare, and political vulnerability in a collapsing empire.

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I. Previous studies

Eliot Sperling pioneered the study of Ti shri Ras pa, situating this 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud master as a pivotal figure in Tibeto-Tangut geopolitics. In his 1987 study, Sperling established Ras pa's preeminent role as Imperial Preceptor and identified his specific 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud lineage. Crucially, Sperling argued that the Imperial Preceptor institution was a Tangut precursor to the Mongol system, rather than a novel Yuan development.[1] Based on the 15th century source *lHo rong chos 'byung*, Sperling's 2004 follow-up reconstructed the deployment of "army-repelling" (Tib. *dmag bzlog*) rites and Mahākāla rituals by Ti shri Ras pa against Mongol incursions. He highlighted Ti shri Ras pa's role in establishing the Mahākāla cult at the Tangut court and pointed out that the lineage's continued presence in the Tangut borderlands provided the direct institutional and ritual bridge for the Mongol Empire's subsequent adoption of Tibetan Buddhism.[2]

Kuowei Liu's work (2003) extends the study of the 'Ba' rom Bka' brgyud beyond the Tangut imperial court back to its heartland in Qinghai. He demonstrates that the lineage was not merely a transregional political actor, but an enduring tradition deeply rooted in Southern Qinghai, sustained by clan politics and local religious devotion. Consequently, this article provides indispensable geopolitical evidence for understanding the "hometown background" of the Tangut Imperial Preceptor, Ti shri Ras pa, and how the lineage emerged as a pivotal hub in Tibeto-Mongol relations.[3]

A pivotal milestone in the study of Ti shri Ras pa occurred in 2018 with the publication of his long-lost [auto]biography named *The Liberation of the Precious Guru and the Protector of the Sentient Beings Ti shri Ras pa* (Tib. *Bla ma rin po che 'gro ba'i mgon po Ti shri ras pa'i rnam par thar pa*, hereafter *Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*). Compiled by his Tangut disciple Mi nyag Ras pa dkar po Shes rab byang chub (1199–1262), this text's substantial first-person passages suggest it was derived from Ti shri Ras pa's personal accounts, leading scholars to categorize it as a semi-autobiographical work. Its primary historical value lies in its granular documentation of Ras pa's political, military, and religious interventions during the late years of the Tangut Empire—accounts frequently bolstered by eyewitness testimonies. However, the manuscript presents significant hermeneutic challenges: its linguistic register is a complex Tibetan dialect interwoven with Tangut, Mongolian, and Chinese loanwords, transcriptions, and specialized

1 Sperling 1987: 31–50; Dunnell 1992: 85–111.
2 Sperling 2004:1-26.
3 Liu 2003: 308–326.

ritual terminology.[4] Paradoxically, these linguistic idiosyncrasies may preserve the authentic "voice" of Ti shri Ras pa, serving as a verbatim artifact of the text's self-referential origins.

The rediscovery of this biography catalyzed a wave of Chinese scholarship. Xiaoyuan Zhang pioneered analysis of late-Xia political-military events in the biography, demonstrating its value for Tangut historiography.[5] Karma bdud 'dul briefly introduced Ti shri Ras pa's life and career, explored the master's post-Tangut activities using the unpublished *Collected Works of Ti shri Ras p*a (Tib. *Ti shrī bka' 'bum*).[6] Xingjian Zhang redirected the scholarly gaze toward Ras pa's religious formation. His thesis offers a comprehensive study of Ti shri Ras pa's teachers and spiritual lineage. By analyzing his education under diverse Tibetan masters, Zhang highlights the cross-sectarian fluidity of the Later Propagation (Tib. *phyi dar*) of Tibetan Buddhism.[7] By examining the careers of Tibetan monks at the Tangut court, Zhouyang Ma's dissertation explores how the bKa' brgyud pa established their religious hegemony within the empire. Central to this narrative is Ti shri Ras pa, whose activities and rise to prominence serve to illustrate the school's institutionalization in the Tangut Empire.[8] In my 2023 postdoctoral report at Tsinghua University, I provided a translation and analysis of sections documenting the propagation of Mahākāla cycles within the Tangut court.[9] A part of this research was published.[10]

Utilizing the biography of Ti shri Ras pa, this study examines Ras pa's three-decade tenure at the Western Xia court, specifically his strategic roles and ritual efficacy during domestic and military crises. By integrating contemporaneous Chinese records, this analysis addresses gaps in Tibetan sources and mitigates their inherent fragmentation through empirical grounding. Using Ti shri Ras pa as a case study, this research aims to reconstruct the Tibetan perspective on late Western

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4 For an insightful remark on the language of Ti shri Ras pa's biography, see Dan Martin's 2019 blog post, "The Flood that Backfired, & the Tangut Refugees," on *Tibeto-Logic*. Available through: https://tibeto-logic.blogspot.com/2019/01/the-flood-that-backfired-tangut-refugees.html (accessed December 12, 2025).

5 Zhang 2021: 83–90.

6 Karma bdud 'dul 2024: 131–139.

7 Xingjian Zhang, "The Teachers and the Religious Transmissions of Ti shri ras pa Shes rab seng ge (1164-1236)," Master's thesis, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, 2023.

8 Zhouyang Ma, "An Inner Asian Buddhist Revolution: The Rise of Tibetan Buddhism in the Tangut Xia State," Ph.D dissertation submitted at Harvard University, 2023.

9 Haoran Hou, "Xixia de Daheitian Chongbai 西夏的大黑天崇拜 [The Mahākāla Cult during the Tangut Empire]," Postdoctoral Research Report, Tsinghua University, 2023.

10 Hou 2025: 129–139.

Xia politics and warfare; examine how tantric masters intervened in internal affairs and mediated military crises through ritual "sorcery"; decipher the religio-political negotiation mechanisms between the Western Xia royalty and Tibetan spiritual masters; evaluate the utility of religious narratives as credible historical sources.

II. Ti shri ras pa's early life and his journey to Western Xia

Ti shri Ras pa Shes rab seng ge was born into the sTong clan at 'Dam shod sNar mo during the Wood-Male-Monkey year (1164). His father was named Dar khra'o and his mother was sKa za klu lcam. At his birth, a Bönpo priest performed a divination, foretelling that taking monastic vows would bring great auspiciousness; accordingly, the priest named him "Hor grags", meaning "renowned among the Mongols".[11] As his parents were dedicated patrons of 'Ba'rom pa Darma dbang phyug (1127–1199), Ras pa developed an early and profound spiritual bond with the 'Ba'rom pa master.

At age fifteen, at the request of Slob dpon dBang seng, a chief disciple of Darma dbang phyug, Sangs rgyas sgom pa Shes rab gzhon nu (1128–1200) conferred upon him the monastic name Shes rab seng ge. In 1188, at the age of twenty-five, he took novice vows at dBen chung hermitage at Re'u rtsa in the lower part of the sKyid valley, a site offered to 'Ba' rom pa Dar ma dbang phyug by Sangs rgyas sgom pa. By age thirty-two (1195), he received full ordination at 'Bri gung mthil Monastery. His early education reveals a diverse and prestigious bKa' brgyud pa pedigree; he studied under such luminaries as 'Ba' rom pa Dharma dbang phyug, Zhang brTson 'grus grags pa (1123–1193), Sangs rgyas sgom pa, sTag lung thang pa bKra shis dpal (1142–1209), and 'Bri gung sKyob pa 'Jig rten gsum mgon (1143–1217).[12]

Ras pa's interest in Western Xia began to develop around 1195. While residing at 'Ba' rom Monastery in eastern Tibet (modern Nangchen County, Yushu, Qinghai), Ras pa participated in month-long rituals and *sūtra* recitations to pray for the recovery of his root teacher 'Ba' rom Dar ma dbang phyug, who had fallen gravely ill. As the sessions

[11] The biography of Ras pa consistently uses *Hor* to refer to the Mongols. While thirteenth-century Mongols are commonly called *Hor*, seventeenth-century Mongols are more often designated as *Sog* or *Sog po*. As noted in the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, the term *Hor* in Tibetan sources does not denote a fixed ethnic group but shifts in meaning across historical periods: "Earlier, during the Tang and Song periods, *Hor* typically referred to the Uyghurs; in the Yuan Dynasty it denoted the Mongols; in the transitional period between the Yuan and Ming Dynasties it was applied to the Tuyuhun; and in modern usage it commonly refers to pastoral populations of northern Tibet as well as the Tu people of Qinghai." (Zhang 1985: 3071).

[12] Zhang 2024: 3–4.

neared their conclusion, a mysterious old man appeared—described as short in stature with grizzled hair, draped in a yellow cloak and mantle beneath a towering felt hat. He seated himself beside Ras pa, who, intrigued by the elder's unusual appearance, initiated an exchange regarding his origins:

> [The old man] came and sat beside me. When I asked him, "Where have you come from?" he responded, "I came with the tea merchants from rTsi bar." [I asked,] "How many tea merchants are there?" [to which he replied,] "There are many tea merchants and also many silk merchants from mDo smad." Without further prompting, he continued, "In the land of mDo smad, the emperor of Western Xia, a Dharma king, who was said to be the incarnation of Glang ri thang pa, has passed into *nirvāṇa*. As he had no son of his own, his twelve-year-hold nephew has now been enthroned. Astrological calculations predict that he will also conquer the land of China. He received an empowerment from a lama from Central Tibet called Bla ma rGya. The lama who conferred the empowerment for the one called sPya[n] [s]nga lHa chen po was Bla ma Pu rangs pa Ti shri. Also [there were] the one called Be 'dul Gug shi and 'Brom Da ra ti, and besides them, there were many from Central Tibet. He is said to have possessed great merit."
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> Then that night, after going to bed and engaging in meditation for a while, I repeatedly had the thought that, recalling what the old man had said, I needed to go to that place. The next morning, I thought I should ask thoroughly, but when I looked, he was not there. [13]

The elder reported the death of Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (r. 1139–1193), identifying him as the reincarnation of the bKa' gdams pa master Glang ri Thang pa rDo rje seng ge (1054–1123). Emperor Renzong was born in 1124, the year following Glang ri Thang pa's death, and both figures shared a lifespan of seventy years. Such parallels suggest that the reincarnation narrative was deliberately constructed. While the ini-

[13] "*mdo smad na mi nyag rgyal po bya ba glang ri thang pa'i sku'i skye ba yin zer ba'i chos rgyal zhig bzhugs pa mya ngan las 'das/ da kong rang la sras med tsha bo zhig yod pa rgyal sar phyung zer/ lo bcu gnyis lon/ rtsis byas pa la rgya nag po'i yul yang des 'thob zer/ de la bla ma rgya zer ba'i dbus pa zhig gis dbang bskur byas/ spya[n] [s]nga lha chen po bya ba de'i dbang skur mkhan bla ma pu rangs pa ti zhi bya ba yin/ be 'dul gug shi bya ba dang/ 'brom da ra di bya ba dang/ de min yang dbus pa mang po yod/ bsod nams che zer/ de nas nub mo mal du phyin nas bsgom tsam na/ khos zer ba de rnams dran pas yul der 'gro dgos snyam pa rtog pa la yang yang skyes/ nangs par yag par dri dgos snyam bltas pas kho ni snang/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 277). For another translation, see Ma 2024: 132–133, my translation differs slightly from his.

tial Tibetan account mistakenly claims that Renzong was succeeded by a nephew—a direct contradiction to Chinese dynastic records—subsequent Tibetan historiographies rectify this discrepancy, noting that his son Tha'i hu (Chin. Huanzong 桓宗, r. 1193–1206) ascended the throne.[14]

This exchange reflects the mid-12th-century patron-priest (Tib. *mchod yon*) dynamic, where the Western Xia court recruited Tibetan monks to sacralize royal authority as *dharmapālas*, in turn providing these clerics with political patronage and material support. While figures like Bla ma rGya[15] and contemporaries gTsang so ba dKon mchog seng ge (d. 1218), Be 'dul Gug shi and 'Brom Dha ra ti achieved high clerical ranks—eventually holding titles like State Preceptor and Imperial Preceptor—others, such as Pu rangs pa Ti shri, his toponymic prefix "Pu rangs" indicates origins in the Upper Ngari region of Western Tibet, though his precise identity remains unresolved. These relationships underscore the complex ritual reciprocity and political patronage that defined the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism into the Tangut Empire.

Inspired by the elder's account of the prestige accorded to Tibetan monks at the Tangut court, Ras pa sought leave from his teacher, 'Ba' rom pa Dharma dbang phyug. On the 17th day of the eighth lunar month in the Wood-Rabbit year (1195), he set out to the East. His journey was a grueling pilgrimage defined by extreme physical hardship. After enduring starvation and cold in Re shod, he nearly abandoned his mission due to acute poverty in 'Dan klong thang. His resolve was restored by a vision of Vaiśravaṇa and the intervention of the 'Bri gung master Śrī phug pa, who secured local support for him.[16]

Despite his spiritual expertise, Ras pa remained vulnerable to social marginalization and physical violence from local officials.[17] These hardships underscore the difficulties he faced as an outsider

[14] A similar story is retold in later Tibetan historiographies, see Sperling 2004: 132–133; Liu 2003: 313.

[15] The Bla ma who conferred the empowerment upon the new Tangut sovereign is identified as Bla ma rGya from Central Tibet; this is probably referring to Yar lung pa Grags pa seng ge, who is also addressed rGya Yar lung pa. Zeng 2020: 184–185.

[16] While in 'Dan, Ras pa encountered the 'Bri gung master dPal chen Śrī phug pa, a pivotal figure in forging ties between the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud and the Tangut Empire. Recognizing Ras pa's dire circumstances, Śrī phug pa intervened by drafting a letter to the local nobleman lHa rje dPal rtse, successfully petitioning for his support. For dPal chen Śrī phug pa's travel in Khams and his encounter with Ti shri Ras pa, see Vitali 2024: 125-126, n. 163.

[17] During a commemorative feast in dBa' rong held for a late State Preceptor (Gug shri) from Kong po, a dispute over seating precedence led the governor's steward to forcibly relegate Ras pa to the lowest position. Later, at Sing to chos 'khor, a minor accident involving a broken well bucket resulted in Ras pa being severely beaten by a local governor's servants (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 287–288).

navigating the Eastern Tibetan frontier without established local networks. The decisive turning point occurred at dKar po Monastery, where he took refugee with Yar lung pa. Yar lung pa, whose full name was Yar lung pa Grags pa seng ge (also called Gung thang pa Grags pa seng ge), was a prominent disciple of Bla ma Zhang. One of the earliest recorded Tshal pa bKa' brgyud pa masters active in Eastern Tibet, he had been dispatched by his master to Tsong ka, where he founded the monastery of Go ra and served as teacher to a local king.[18]

At their first meeting, Yar lung pa inquired Ras pa's spiritual lineage and esoteric trainings. Pleased with his answers, Yar lung pa presented him with gifts and asked him to remain at his seat.[19] Later, Yar lung pa invited him to serve as "gatekeeper of the Dharma" (Tib. *chos sgo ba*) at Tre rong Monastery in Tsong ka. Despite this prestigious offer and Yar lung pa's warnings against travelling to Ling chu (Chin. Liangzhou 涼州), Ras pa persisted northward.[20] It appears that during this period Ras pa encountered significant hostility from local clergy toward monks arriving from dBus.[21] Following a revelatory dream from his root master 'Ba' rom pa, Ras pa was advised to retreat to Khams. However, on a subsequent visit to Yar lung pa, both the master and local patrons urged him to remain in Tsong ka. Despite their petitions, he insisted on proceeding to Ling chu. His departure was halted by an urgent, unexpected summons from Yar lung pa, forcing a final, decisive shift in his trajectory:

> On the night of the third day, a sound came from the sky, and it said, "Do not set forth until the thirteenth day." On the evening of the thirteenth day, just as I was about to depart, an individual named gNyan ston appeared and said, "The Tangut emperor extended an invitation to the precious Guru Yar lung pa, summoning him to 'Gar mo. You are appointed to the monastic seat." He further stated, "Given the invitation has not yet arrived,

[18] For the Tibetan biographical account of Yar lung pa, see also Sørensen, Hazod and Tsering Gyalbo 2007: 46–47, 364–366. On Yar lung pa's lineage in the Tangut register and a brief Tangut biographical account, see Solonin and Gao 2024: 108–117.

[19] For the conversation between Yar lung pa and Ti shri Ras pa at their first meeting, see Zhang 2024: 40–43.

[20] Yar lung pa attempted to dissuade him, citing a local proverb that disparaged the destination: "The elite head for Gha; the middling serve as chaplains for Tshar rtse 'dze; the desperate drift to Ling chu." (Tib. *rab cig yod pa ghar song/ 'bring zhig yod tshar rtse 'dze'i bla mchod gyis/ tha ma zhig yod pa ling cur song gsung/*; *Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 290).

[21] In early 1199, a clash erupted between rDzong 'go (a fellow monk from dBus) and the local monk mDo sgom. During the altercation, mDo sgom's exclamation—"I do not depend on the people of dBus; the people of dBus depend on me"—deeply affected Ras pa, epitomizing the xenophobic tensions facing Central Tibetan monks (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 291).

> do you intend to go?" I thought, "Well, this must be what was meant by 'stay until the thirteenth'." Unwilling to remain at that monastic seat, I considered going to Bha ti[22] and set out for Ling chu.
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> Therein, a messenger came to summon me, I went to Tsong ka again. When I arrived at Thang tsang on the twenty-first, the Master [Yar lung pa] had already departed. On the twenty-second, I was invited to Go ra Monastery, where the monastic community held a great welcoming ceremony. On the twenty-fourth day, [the monks] erected a great Dharma throne and invited me to sit upon it, and more than two hundred monks requested teachings. Thereafter, I did not reside at the main seat itself but remained nearby, continuing to offer Dharma instructions and spiritual guidance to the community.[23]

In 1199, Yar lung pa was summoned by the Tangut emperor to Gha—a phonetic rendering of the medieval pronunciation of *Xia* (Chin. 夏)—that is, the capital of Western Xia, also known in Chinese sources as Zhongxing (Chin. 中興).[24] Before departing for the Western Xia court, Yar lung pa appointed Ras pa as the acting abbot of Go ra Monastery. As a preeminent Buddhist center in Tsong ka, Go ra provided Ras pa with a critical institutional platform to consolidate his standing and integrate into the region's elite socio-religious networks.

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[22] Sperling concludes Bha ti is a Tangut prince ruling the Bha ti citadel, see Sperling 2004: 9, n. 28. Chinese scholar Hang Su identifies Bha ti as a toponym and hypothesizes its correspondence to the Grottoes of Mati Mountain (马蹄山) in Zhangye. Su 2014: 96–97.

[23] "*de nas tshes gsum gyi nub mo mkha' nas sgra zhig byung nas tshes bcu gsum bar du 'di nas ma 'gro zhig zer/ tshe bcu gsum gyi dgong mor song tsam na gnyan ston bya ba byung/ bla ma rin po che yar lung pa mi nyag rgyal pos 'gar mor gdan drangs/ khyod gdan sar sko zer ba la gdan 'dren mi song ba la da rung yong ma song ngam zer/ 'o na tshes bcu gsum la sdod zer ba 'di yin par snang snyam/ der gdan sa der sdod mi 'dod pas bha tir 'gro snyam nas ling cur song/ der 'bod mi slebs pas yang tsong kar song/ nyi shu gcig la thang tshang du sleb tsam na/ slob dpon pa bzhud nas snang/ nyi shu gnyis kyi nyin par go rar gdan drangs nas dge 'dun gyis bsu ba chen po byas/ nyi shu bzhi'i nyin par chos khri chen po brtsigs pa la bzhugs su bcug nas/ dge 'dun nyis brgya lhag tsam gyis chos zhus/ de nas gdan sa dngos su ni mi bsdad/ zur du bsdad nas dge 'dun la chos bshad pa dang khrid byas/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 292–293).

[24] This interpretation is further supported by the research of Chen Yinke. Chen examines the toponym *Irghai* in the Mongolian historiography *The Chronicles of Sagang Sechen* and its Manchu translation, which restores the place name as "Ning Hiya," corresponding to the Chinese "Ningxia" (Chin. 寧夏). He demonstrates that the Mongolian *Irghai* is a phonetic rendering of Ningxia, with *ir* corresponding to *Ning* and *ghai* rendering *Xia*. In its historical context, he further notes, the toponym denotes the Xia imperial capital, Zhongxing Prefecture. Chen 1930: 125–129.

At the imperial court, Yar lung pa served as the chief chaplain (Tib. *bla mchod*) to the Tangut emperor, who bestowed upon him the title "Gu shri rTogs pa yong su gsal ba." His career is further illuminated by the Khara-Khoto manuscripts, which contain a Tangut-language tantric corpus—primarily focusing on *Vajravārāhī* and *Nāro's Six Dharmas*—attributed to him. Colophons within these manuscripts identify him as Guoshi Juezhao (Chin. 覺照國師), the Tangut equivalent of his Tibetan epithet "State Preceptor of Perfect Realization." These sources place his primary residence and pedagogical activities at Dadumin Temple (Chin. 大度民寺) in the Helan Mountains (Chin. 賀蘭山).[25]

Following Ras pa's one-year tenure as acting abbot, the Western Xia emperor issued an imperial edict (Tib. *bka' yig*) commissioning him to establish an independent monastic seat. This mandate—facilitated by the considerable political capital of Yar lung pa—served as the definitive catalyst for the institutional expansion of Ras pa's lineage within the Tangut state:

> After staying [at Go ra Monastery] for more than a year, a royal edict arrived stating, "You should establish a monastery in another place where there is water and trees in abundance." In the Monkey year (1200), in the fifth month, at the age of thirty-seven, accompanied by two attendants, he went to Kaṃ chu. At a place called Kaṃ chu Gu rub, he established a monastery and went to pay homage to Bha ti ba. 'Dul 'dzin Gug shi offered a yellow woolen cloth. Yid bzhin Gug shi offered three *nas 'jag*.[26] The spiritual friend gTsang so ba offered *phye ya do*. That autumn, the spiritual friend gTsang so ba Te zis (viz. Ti shri) offered one hundred and eight *nas 'jag*. The two groups of Zha ga offered one hundred and two *nas 'jag* […...] when the monastery was established, more than four hundred fully ordained monks gathered there. Both the Buddhist teachings and the welfare for others flourished.[27]

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[25] For Yar lung pa's activities in Western Xia and his writings recovered from Khara-Khoto documents, see Dunnell 2009: 51–54; Sun 2019: 25–29; Zeng 2020: 180–183; Solonin and Gao 2024: 108–117.

[26] The phrase *nas 'jag* in Tibetan is not very clear in meaning. *Nas* refers to barley, while *'jag* means grass or straw. When combined, the meaning becomes ambiguous, and it may possibly refer to straw of barley(?).

[27] "*lo gcig lhag bzhugs nas khyod rang gzhan du chu shing na 'dzom sar dgon pa zung gsung pa'i bka' yig byung/ dgong lo sum cu rtsa bdun bzhes pa'i spre'u lo zla ba lnga pa la dpon g.yog gsum byas nas kam cur song/ kaṃ cu gu rab bya bar dgon pa bzung bar byas/ bha ti ba la phyag 'tshal du song/ 'dul 'dzin gug shis snam ser zhig phul/ yid bzhin gug shis nas 'jag gsum phul/ dge ba'i bshes gnyen gtsog so pas phye ya do phul/ de'i ston dge ba'i gshes gnyen rtsang so te zis/ nas 'jag brgya and brgyad phul/ zha ga tsho gnyis kyis nas 'jag*

As the first monastery founded by Ras pa, Gu rub was established under an imperial edict of the Western Xia emperor. This authorization marked a turning point in Ras pa's career, elevating him from a temporary administrator to an imperially sanctioned founder and integrating his specific lineage into the state-sponsored Buddhist framework of Western Xia. Beyond this top-down support, in expanding to Kaṃ chu, Ras pa secured local backing from the influential Bha ti ba and received further material support from Tibetan colleagues at the Tangut court.

Not long after the foundation of Gu rub, Ras pa went again to Tsong ka and took over another Monastery named dByar pa. During this period, the Western Xia emperor dispatched an envoy bearing a silver seal to summon Ras pa to the imperial court. The latter initially declined, citing poor health. However, when the Tangut emperor later traveled to Kaṃ chu to pay homage at Bha ti, he summoned Ras pa a second time. On this occasion, Ras pa deliberately adopted an unkempt appearance—marked by an eccentric haircut and slovenly attire—to leave an unfavorable impression on the sovereign. This behavior reflected his deep-seated reluctance to depart for the capital, as he prioritized the consolidation of his monastic community in Tsong ka over imperial court service. Ras pa later recalled the encounter:

> Since Slob dpon Yar lung pa and I were bound by the teacher-disciple relationship, I went there to uphold my commitment [to him]. Although the Master acted as the intermediary for the audience with the emperor, in the absence of a translator the emperor and I sat together briefly [in silence], unable to exchange words.[28]

The Tangut sovereign referenced here is likely Emperor Huanzong. Subsequent to this audience, Ras pa traveled to Gu rub Monastery and then onward to Ling chu. He resided for over a month at g.Yang spyi zhing gye'u Monastery, where 'Gu ti Lotsāwa and many Western Xia disciples had congregated. On the third day of the third lunar month in the Mouse Year (1204), he was installed as the abbot of gZing dga' Monastery in Ling chu. Under his administration, the monastic community underwent rapid institutional expansion, reaching a population of two thousand within only two and a half years.

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brgya dang gnyis phul/ […] *de nas dgon bzung ba la grwa pa rab tu byung ba bzhi brgya lhag 'tshogs/ chos dang gzhon don 'phel bar byung/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 293).

[28] "*slob dpon yar lung pa dang dpon slob yin pas dam tshig bsrungs pas der phyin/ slob dpon pas rgyal po dang mjal ba'i sna bo byas pa la lo rtswa ba med pa dang/ rgyal po dang nga gnyis dar cig lhan du bsdad dang gleng slong ni ma byung/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 294).

The burgeoning footprint of Ras pa's monastic foundations underscores his ascending socio-religious authority within the Tangut state. Despite his original aspiration to avoid the secular entanglements of the Western Xia capital, the shifting political tides—compounded by the Mongol invasions—subsequently propelled him onto the center stage of history, placing him at the very heart of Tangut power.

III. Internal affairs and foreign wars of Western Xia

This part reconstructs the pivotal events of Ti shri Ras pa's thirty-year tenure at the Tangut court. The primary Tibetan source material, the *Ti shri Ras pa'i rnam thar*, belongs to the *rnam thar* genre (literally "complete liberation"), which functions essentially as hagiography rather than secular biography. Its linguistic and narrative focus lies not in the documentation of mundane facts, but in the manifestation of the subject's religious activities and spiritual realizations.

Consequently, the *rnam thar* presents distinct historiographical challenges. First, the text prioritizes "spiritual truth" over objective historical reality. The text is rich in religious nuance and emphasizes transcendental milestones—such as lineage transmissions, empowerments, and meditative miracles—while remaining vague regarding the political and social contexts of secular activities. Second, as is characteristic of the genre, the narrative is saturated with metaphors, cryptic imagery, divine revelations, and prophetic dreams. By employing dense Tantric terminology and highly stylized descriptions, the text seeks to sanctify the subject, often obscuring the physical world in favor of a sacred landscape.

To integrate these disparate elements into a rigorous historical analysis, this study employs a dual-source methodology. First, a chronological backbone is established using Chinese historical records, which provide a stable external timeframe. Subsequently, the rich, subjective details extracted from the Tibetan narratives are intercalated into this timeline. This approach strips away the "hagiographic shell" to reveal the underlying historical reality, effectively clarifying the specific historical references embedded within Ras pa's personal accounts.

1. The first Mongol invasion of Western Xia

In 1205, Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–1227) launched a devastating punitive expedition into Western Xia, ostensibly to pursue remnants of the Naiman confederation along the frontier. Mongol forces successfully reduced strategic Tangut fortifications at Lijili Stockade (Chin. Lijili Zhai 力吉里寨) and Luosi Fortress (Chin. Luosi Cheng 落思城). After

a campaign of pillaging local settlements, the Mongol army withdrew to the steppe, laden with significant spoils of war, including captured populations and livestock. Emperor Huanzong, unable to mobilize a viable defense, remained powerless as the invasion desolated his territories.[29]

Throughout this period, from 1204 to 1206, Ras pa resided at gZing dga' Monastery in Ling chu. During the initial Mongol incursion, the flames of war had yet to engulf Ling chu—the Tangut heartland where Ras pa's monastic activities continued undisturbed until 1206. It was only after this pivotal year that his biography begins to document the escalating Mongol threat and its encroachment upon his immediate surroundings:

> On the first day of the first lunar month of the Tiger Year (1206), during a session of devotional practice in a tent among fellow practitioners and local dignitaries, Tsha ri Khyer mi bu arrived and pleaded, "The army of De mu ru is marching on lNga 'o. My father is there. Precious One, I beg you to protect him!"
>
> The moment the name "De mu ru" of the Mongol emperor was uttered, my body went numb, my heart turned cold, and I fell into a faint. [Upon regaining awareness,] I wondered, "Should this not be heeded?", I first conducted a divination based on the elements—the result was unfavorable. I then turned to another method, divining by the wind cycles, yet the outcome remained inauspicious. With deeper reflection, the result grew unmistakable: the empire stood imperiled.
>
> I turned to those gathered and declared, "You must all remember this: the empire shall face danger from beyond its borders." Seeing clearly that the realm was doomed and that no legal measures could avert its downfall, I refrained from intervening.[30]

The name "Tsha ri Khyer mi bu" does not appear to be a conventional Tibetan name; rather, it likely represents a Tangut personal name. The

[29] Martin 1942: 197–198; Shi and Zhang 2014: 187–188.

[30] "*yang stag lo zla ba gcig pa'i tshes gcig la dge sbyor zhig byed pa'i dus su/ gur gcig tu dge ba'i bshes gnyen 'ga' dang mi chen ang po 'ga' dang lhan cig tu 'dug pa'i dus su/ tsha ri khryer bu byung nas lnga 'or du mu ru'i dmag 'ong/ nga'i pha de na yod/ rin po ches bsrung gyis zer/ hor gyi rgyal po de mu ru zer ba kho'i ming thos pa dang/ las po sbrid ting gis song/ snying tsha kam kyis song nas dran pa med pa zhig byung/ 'o na 'di mi nyag zig 'dug gam snyam nas/ 'byung ba'i rtsis byas pa la yang ma bzang/ rlung rtsis bya pas kyang mi bzang bar byung/ de'i dus su brtag pa byas pas rgyal khams la gnod par snang bas/ de na 'dug pa'i mi rnams la khyed rnams 'di yid la zung dang/ phyi rgyal khams la gnod pa yong bar snang byas/ rgyal khams 'chor ba shes par byung ba/ khrims kyis zlo bar dka' bas ma bzlas gsungs/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 296).

passage employs rhetorical exaggeration to amplify Ras pa's visceral dread upon hearing the name "De mu ru" (Mong. Temüdschin, the birth name of Chinggis Khan), thereby heightening the atmosphere of oppressive terror surrounding the Mongol Emperor.

The toponym 'lNga 'o'—as recorded in Tibetan sources—can be contextualized within the broader geography of the early Mongol invasions into Western Xia. Based on Chinese historical records, scholarship has established that the first and second Mongol incursions primarily targeted the Back Loop Plain (Chin. Houtao Pingyuan 后套平原) in the empire's northeastern sector.[31] Corroborating this, Ras pa's biography specifies that Mongol troops advanced as far as lNga 'o circa 1205–1206. This alignment suggests that lNga 'o was situated within this same northeastern frontier—a geographical identification that will be further substantiated in the following sections.

2. Anquan's usurpation

In the spring of 1206, while Ras pa was in Ling chu, he found himself amidst a palace coup. The mounting Mongol threat exposed Emperor Huanzong's military inadequacies, precipitating a collapse of support among the Tangut elite. Seizing this instability, Prince Li Anquan (Chin. 李安全), supported by Empress Dowager Luo, deposed Huanzong and ascended the throne. Chinese historical records offer only laconic accounts of this transition— *Jin Shi* 金史 [*History of the Jin Dynasty*], for instance, tersely states: "In the third lunar month of the sixth year of the Taihe Era (1206), Li Anquan, nephew of Renzong, deposed Chunyou (Chin. 純祐). One month later, Chunyou died in captivity."[32] In contrast, Ras pa's biography provides a for more comprehensive account of the event:

> On the thirteenth day of the third lunar month of the Tiger year, I was again summoned to Zi pu ri. While traveling a short distance east of Ling chu Fort, I spotted a tall figure standing atop the fort. I asked the companions, "Who is that at the fort gate?" — but none of them could see him. It appeared a non-human had occupied the fort gateway.
>
> Along the way, a man named Ke'u Kong invited me for tea. As soon as I sat down, he—being skilled in calligraphy—showed me a sign, as if testing my understanding. He appeared to be

[31] Shi and Zhang 2014: 188, 190.

[32] "泰和六年三月仁孝弟仁友子安全, 廢純佑自立, 再閱月死于廢所." *Jin Shi*, *Juan* 134: 3029.

secretly seeking counsel regarding the royal succession. He said, "Last night, I dreamt of two pigeons in the sky, tugging a vase filled with nectar back and forth." Just as I thought to inquire further, he asked, "What does it mean?" I replied, "Our emperor has exiled the pigeons to Ling chu, yet the birds are overjoyed—does this not portend a threat to our prosperity?" Hearing this, he rejoiced, prostrated himself, and fell in silence.

On the night of the fourteenth, I conferred empowerments upon those who had invited me. On the fifteenth day, I set out toward the monastery. Before arriving, while lodging overnight *en route*, I saw two stars—one familiar, one new—clashing like small red sparks. On the sixteenth day, I reached the monastery. On the seventeenth day, elders including Tsin Tha Nga, Phyis Tha Hu, Tsin Dha Hu, and Ling Tha Hu arrived. They invited sPyan snga Sho ho who was then residing at the monastery, and installed him at Tsir Khab of Ling Chu. Two yellow parasols were offered [to him], and it seemed that everyone made a petition saying, "You are to be made emperor."

On the eighteenth day, I went to Gu lde Tsil po che Monastery. Word spread that sPyan snga Sho ho was made emperor. On the nineteenth day, the emperor was raised to the dragon throne, and it appeared that everyone was given work. On the twentieth day, gShan shi of the royal family came to summon me. I departed on the twenty-first, and on the twenty-second, I met the emperor and offered prayers. He entrusted me with the duties of Tsen 'dze, then said, "Wait a moment." As evening fell, he conferred upon me the title of "State Preceptor," while also appointing thirty-two of my retainers to official posts [……

……] on the twenty-seventh day, the emperor summoned me again, so I went. He had grown fearful upon hearing that the emperor of Gha had dispatched a messenger and gathered a great army. "What will become of me now?" he asked. When he consulted all his ministers, they replied, "It seems you shall hold the empire. There is no need to fear."

I was again summoned to sPyan snga [Sho ho]'s residence and went there. sPyan snga [Sho ho] approached, bowed, and seated me on his own seat. It is said that sPyan snga rGyal rgod had distributed large quantities of livestock and amassed a vast army. "Will we succeed?" he asked. I replied, "sPyan snga, you need not fear—you shall hold the empire." He rose, prostrated, and declared, "If that is so, I shall offer my flesh and bones to you." sPyan snga continued, "Do not forget this when the time comes. The day I conquer the empire will be the day I seek the

Dharma [from you]!" I repeated, "sPyan snga, do not fear—you will seize the empire," and then I returned.

Together with dPal chen Ye shes rdo rje, I performed virtuous rites to repel the armies. The combined forces of Ling chu ba and Tsong ka ba advanced upon Gha. As they departed at dawn, the Great King Vaiśravaṇa manifested—single-faced, two-armed, clad in white vestments, brandishing a single-pointed spear, his gaze fixed eastward. Before leading his troops into battle, the general paid homage to me and inquired: "What outcome awaits this campaign?" I responded: "It will be favorable."

On the evening of the twenty-fourth day of the fourth month, I dreamt that the emperor of Gha descended from a high platform. He went into an assembly of many monks, crying, "Save my life!" Yet no one came to his aid, and he departed elsewhere. That very night, just as in the dream, the emperor of Gha appeared to descend from *then thogs* and flee toward China.[33]

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[33] *"yang stag lo zla ba gsum pa'i tshes bcu gsum gyi nyin par zi pu rir gdan 'dren mi zhig byung bas/ ling chu mkhar gyi shar phyogs na phar song tsam na/ mkhar gyi 'go la mi tham ba nam bar snang/ rtsa na yod pa kun la mkhar sgo na mi 'di tsam ci byed pa red byas pa la khong gis ma mthong bar 'dug/ /mi ma yin gyis mkhar sgo bzung bar snang/ lam ka na ke'u kong bya ba snang bas ja zhig gsol la bzhud zer/ ja la bsad tsam na khong yig tshad la mkhas pas nga la brda' bstan nas e shes ltar bar snang/ khong rgyal po rje ba'i gros lkog tu byas nas yod par snang ba la/ khong na re mdang rmi lam na phug ron gnyis nam mkha' la bdud rtsi bum pa gang phar 'then tshur 'then byed bzhin snang ba la/ de de la 'dri dgos snyam tsam na/ de ci yin zer/ de 'o skol gyi rgyal pos phug ron rnams ling cur spyugs pas bya rnams dga' nas/ 'os skol longs spyod la gnod pa zhig 'ong ba ma yin nam byas/ khong dga' bas phyag byas nas cang mi zer/ tsher bcu bzhi'i nub mo 'dren rnams la dbang bskur byas/ bco lnga'i nyin par yang dgon na bslebs/ ma bslebs pas lam du nyal tsam na skar ma sngar yod pa zhig dang sngar med pa zhig dang gnyis me stag dmar phra la la 'dzing zhing 'dug mas la gnod tshes bcu drug la dgon par bslebs/ tshes bcu bdun gyi nyin par tshin tha nga dang/ phyis tha hu dang/ tshin dha hu dang ling tha hu dang khong gsum gyis 'go byas mi rgan rnams ra byung ba la/ kyis spyang nga sho ho dgon na yod pa gdan drangs nas/ ling cu tshir kha btu bzhugs su bcug/ lha'i gdug ser po gnyis phul/ khyod rgyal por 'byin pa yin zer rag dan nas thams cad kyis zhu ba byas par snang/ tshes bco brgyad kyi nyin par gu lde tshil po che dgon par yong/ spya[n] [s]nga sho ho byas zer/ tshes bcu dgu la rgyal po 'brug khri la phyung nas thams cad la las ka byin par snang/ nyi shu'i snyin par rgyal gshan shi 'bod du yongs/ nyi shu gcig la phyin/ nyi shu gnyis la rgyal po dang mjal/ smon lam btab/ rgyal pos nga la las ka tsen de nas en cig/ sdod zer nas dgong kar song tsam na las ka gug shi byi 'khor sum cu rtsa gnyis la las ka byin/…de nas nyi shu bdun gyi nyi par rgyal pos shog zer bas phyin/ gha'i rgyal pos ldi ba btang dmag chen po bsag nas snang zer nas skrag nas snang/ nga la ci tsug 'ong bar snang zer nas blon kun gyis dri bar snang bas/ da lan rgyal khams khyed kyis 'dzin par snang sgrag mi dgos byas/ de nas spya[n] [s]nga du byon zer nas phyin/ spyan nga byon nas nga la phyag 'tshal/ spya[n] [s]nga'i bzhugs sar nga bzhugs su bcug/ spya[n] [s]nga rgyal rgod kyis zog mang po bkram nas dmag mang po bsags nas snang zer/ 'o skol yag par e 'ong gsungs pa rgyal khams spyang nga khyod kyis 'dzin 'jigs skrag mi dgos byas/ kag rjel dang 'kho kyis langs nas phyag 'tshal/ de tsug yin na nga'i sha dang rus pa tshun khyod phyogs su gtong gsungs/ spya[n] [s]ngas de dus su ma brjed tsig byas/ rgyal khams tsham pa phebs dang chos zhu ba yin zer/ spyang nga sgrag mi dgos rgyal khams khyed kyis 'dzin byas nas nga*

The cited passage provides critical details absent from Chinese official records, including the specific coup's origins in Ling chu and a rigorous timeline of the transition.[34] In this context, sPyan snga Sho ho is the Tibetan rendering of Emperor Xiangzong (Li Anquan, r. 1206–1211), while sPyan snga rGyal rgod refers to Emperor Huanzong (Li Chunyou). The latter, residing at the capital Gha, is also addressed in the text as the "Emperor of Gha." Previously, drawing on the *lHo rong chos 'byung*, Sperling identified several Tibetan appellations for the emperors of Western Xia. He argued that the name *rGyal rgod* corresponds to Emperor Shenzong (Chin. 神宗, r. 1211–1223).[35] In the present study, however, I contend that *rGyal rgod* should instead be identified with Emperor Huanzong. Notably, the biography of Ras pa also records the Tibetan designation of Shenzong—indeed, more than once—under the form *rGyal rgan*.[36] This suggests that later sources

phyir phyin/ de nas dpal chen rdo rje ye shes dang nged gnyis kyis dmag zlog gi dge sbyor mang po byas/ ling cu ba dang tsong ka ba'i dmag rnams ghar song/ 'gro ba'i nang par rgyal po chen po rnam thos sras zhal gcig phyag gnyis pa/ na bza' sku mdog dkar po phyag na mdung rtse gcig bsnams pa/ zhal shar du gzigs tu 'gro zhi nas snang/ dmag dpon dmag la 'gro khar phyag 'tshal du 'ongs pas/ de nas zla ba bzhi pa'i nyi shu bzhi'i nub mo rmi lam du gha'i rgyal po des sa stegs mthon po zhig nas mar babs/ ban sde zhig gin ang du song nas srog skyobs zer ba la/ srog skyob par ma byung bas der phar song/ de'i nub mo de kho na bzhin du dga'i rgyal po then thogs nas rgya'i phyogs su song bar snang/" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 299).

34 The biography establishes a timeline: the Ling chu conspiracy was hatched between the 15th and 17th of the third month; Anquan was enthroned on the 18th; the campaign against Gha began in late third month; and Huanzong "descended from *then tog* and fled to China" on the 24th of the fourth month.

35 Sperling 2004: 21.

36 As corroborated by the *lHo rong Chos 'byung* and *Ti shri Ras pa'i rnam thar*, the Tibetan name *Sho ho* undoubtedly refers to Emperor Xiangzong. In the cited passage, while recounting Sho ho's seizure of power in 1206, Ras pa clearly identifies his political opponent as *rGyal rgod*. This indicates that *rGyal rgod* must be identified with Huanzong, the predecessor supplanted by Xiangzong. Previous scholarship, however, mistakenly identified *rGyal rgod* as the Tibetan name of Emperor Shenzong. If that is not the case, then what is Shenzong's Tibetan designation? To address this question, let us examine the following passage from Ras pa's biography: "Again, in the tenth month of the Ox year (1205), while I was residing there at the invitation by the royal scion dKon mchog chung ba, I had a dream one night in which it was announced that a royal scion who was an envoy bearing a silver-letter had arrived. When I went before him, he appeared as such an envoy. As I then took my seat among the practitioners, the Great King Vaiśravaṇa manifested in front of him, clad in golden armor. The following day, a royal scion named Hu cu being sent as a silver-letter envoy came, and we met in person. He was later inaugurated as the emperor and became known as "rGyal rgan." Moreover, on the night of the eighteenth day of the second month of the Tiger year (1206), the Great King Vaiśravaṇa was seen circumambulating the citadel of Ling cu to the north and seizing it; he then proceeded westward to the place where sPyan snga Sho ho had been appointed." ("*yang glang lo zla ba bcu pa la rgyal rgyud dkon mchog chung bas gdan drangs nas 'dug tsam na/ nub cig gi rmi lam*

may have conflated *rGyal rgod* and *rGyal rgan*, thereby giving rise to the discrepancy.

Furthermore, the text identifies several officials implicated in the coup. While names such as "Tsin," "Phyis," and "Ling" appear to be Chinese surnames, and "Tha hu" likely transliterates the title "Dafu 大夫" (Grand Master), their precise identities remain subjects for future research.

Following the usurpation, Anquan's authority remained fragile, beset by Mongol incursions and internal instability. To secure institutional legitimacy, he pursued formal investiture from the Jin Dynasty (Chin. 金, 1115–1234). Empress Dowager Luo orchestrated this diplomatic maneuver, commissioning Grand Commandant Wangzuo Zhizhong (Chin. 罔佐執中) to petition the Jin court. Despite initial Jin inquiries into the irregular succession, the Empress justified the transition by citing the predecessor's incompetence and claiming a ministerial consensus. Consequently, in the ninth lunar month of 1206, the Jin court dispatched a high-level embassy led by Wendihan Sijing (Chin. 溫迪罕思敬) and Huang Zhen (Chin. 黃震) to formally confer the title "King of Xia (Chin. 夏國王)," a mandate Anquan accepted with full state honors to consolidate his sovereign status.[37]

Ras pa observed and recorded the diplomatic initiatives undertaken by Anquan to secure formal enfeoffment from the Jin court:

> When the emperor departed for Gha, three of us—dPal chen rDo rje Ye shes, 'Brom Ti zhi, and myself—remarked: "As the emperor travels to Gha, numerous non-human beings come to greet him along the way." Subsequently, we were invited to Gha to safeguard the emperor and proceeded there, though dPal chen turned back midway. Upon our arrival, we proclaimed: "May Emperor Sho ho rule the realm and bring it peace."

na rgyal rgyud dngul yig pa 'ongs zer/ mdun du phyin tsam na dngul yig par snang/ der dge sbyor gral du bsdad tsam na gser khab gon nas rgyal po rnam thos sras su snang/ phyi de nyin par rgyal rgyud hu cu bya bas dngul yig btang nas yongs bas mjal/ phyi nas de la rgyal por mnga' gsol bas spya[n] [s]nga rgyal rgan yin/ yang stag lo zla ba gnyis pa'i tshe bco brgyad kyi nub mo/ rgyal po rnam thos sras ling chu mkhar gyi byang phyogs la bskor nas bzung ba na/ spya[n] [s]nga sho ho bskos nas yod pa can du bzhud/"; *Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 295–296) The passage indicates that Ras pa met a Tangut royal scion named Hu cu in late 1205. Ras pa explicitly states that at the time Hu cu was still a prince and had not yet ascended the throne under the name *rGyal rgan*. In this context, *rGyal rgan* cannot be a scribal error for *rGyal rgod*, since by 1205 the latter was already the reigning emperor with whom Sho ho was contending. Rather, *rGyal rgan* designates a distinct individual. The subsequent account of *rGyal rgan*'s enthronement following Sho ho's deposition further confirms that *rGyal rgan* refers to Shenzong. See "5. Palace Coup Launched by Zunxu."

[37] *Jin Shi*, *Juan* 62, Tablet 4: 1509–1570; *Xixia Shushi Jiaozheng*: 465.

> A messenger was then dispatched to the Khitan emperor. To protect the Emperor [Sho ho], we performed the *sādhanā* of glorious Cakrasaṃvara, placing a vase within the royal palace. On the night when Khitan messenger reached the border of Western Xia, I dreamt that the Great King Vaiśravaṇa arrived holding a bamboo staff in his hand. The next morning, I was greatly pleased when I recounted my dream that the [Khitan] emperor's messenger was arriving. Then, when Emperor Sho ho fell ill, I revealed to him the visualization [from my dream], and his health was restored. The next morning, [he] sent Tsin Dha hu with a message: "I am well. You have done an immeasurable kindness. I am busy right now, but I will ask for an empowerment when I am free." Later, after the Khitan messenger's arrival, the emperor rose to *then tog*. I remained at Gha for the winter.[38]

The Tibetan term *then tog* appears twice at critical moments of power transition: first during Chunyou's deposition and again during Anquan's enfeoffment. Lacking a clear Tibetan etymology, the term is likely a phonetic adaptation of the Chinese term *Tiandao* (Chin. 天道, the Way of Heaven). In this context, it signifies the supreme imperial power and the legitimacy bestowed by the Mandate of Heaven.

Diverging from Chinese records, Ras pa's biography omits Empress Luo's role in the usurpation, framing the quest for legitimacy instead through visionary and symbolic motifs—most notably the dream of Vaiśravaṇa. The account portrays Ras pa as a vital stabilizer during the volatile interim of Jin confirmation; he consolidated his influence not only through ritual protection but also through his role as a fortune teller. These narratives underscore the multifaceted agency of Tibetan monks at the Tangut court. They functioned as spiritual masters, ritual specialists, political confidants, and diviners, actively legitimizing imperial authority through sacred means.

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[38] "*de nas rgyal po 'gar bzhud la/ nga dang dpal chen rdo rje ye shes dang 'brom ti zhi nged gsum rgyal ghar bzhud pa'i dus su lam na mi ma yin gyis bsu ba byed pa mang po byung gsungs/ rgyal po'i srung ba la 'gar gdan drangs nas song/ dpal chen lam nas phyi bros nas song/ nged gnyis phar song/ de nas ghar slebs nas/ rgyal po sho hos rgyal khams bzung nas bde bar byung gsungs/ de nas khyi than rgyal po la pho nya btang nas/ nged rgyal po'i bsrung ba byed pa la rgyal po'i pho brang du bum pa bcas nas dpal 'khor lo bde mchog gi bsnyen pa byas/ khyi than gyi pho nya mi myag rgyal po'i sa mtshams su slebs pa'i nub mo rmi lam du rgyal po chen po rnam thos sras phyag na smyug ma yod pa cig bsnams nas byon pa rmis nas/ nang par rgyal po'i pho nya 'ongs par 'dug pa rmis byas nas bzlas pa la shin tu mnyes par byung/ de nas rgyal po sku khams ma bde ba la dmigs pa bstan pas sku khams bde/ nangs par tshin dha hu bya ba btang nas khams bde khyod kyis drin bsam gyis mi khyab/ nga brel ba skobs pa dang dbang bskur zhu ba yin zer/ phyis pho nya slebs nas rgyal po then thog tu byung/ dgun 'gar bsdad/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 300–301).

Furthermore, the persistent use of "Khitan emperor" (Tib. *khyi than rgyal po*) to refer to the Jin emperor suggests that "Khitan" had evolved into a generic Tibetan descriptor for the powerful empires of the northeast. From the Tibetan perspective, the transition from the Liao (Chin. 遼, 916–1125) to the Jin represented a shift in leadership within a singular, continuous geopolitical entity.

3. Reconstruction of lNga 'o kyer jun mkhar fortress

In the winter of 1206, Ras pa resided at Gha, journeying the following spring to the reconstructed fortress of lNga 'o kyer jun mkhar. His biography provides a harrowing eyewitness account of the Mongol devastation there, noting that "he scattered rice upon the bones of countless people slaughtered by the Mongols."[39] At this site, Ras pa offered prayers for the victims of the massacre and performed the consecration rites for the reconstructed citadel.

These events align closely with the Chinese records of the early Mongol campaigns (c. 1207–1208), which detail extensive assaults on the northeastern stronghold of Woluohai (Chin. 斡囉孩). Ras pa's biographical account of the fortress's destruction and subsequent reconstruction synchronizes precisely with the official Chinese chronology. This consistency in both timing and historical context strongly suggests that the Tibetan "lNga 'o kyer jun mkhar" and the Chinese "Woluohai" or "Wulahai" (Chin. 兀剌海) denote the same strategic site. Furthermore, the Tibetan nomenclature offers critical administrative insights: "lNga 'o kyer jun mkhar" translates to the "Fortress of the Military Supervision Commission at lNga 'o." Here, *kyer jun* is a phonetic loan from the Chinese *Jianjun* (Chin. 監軍), referring to the supervisory commissions established by the Western Xia in 1036. Given that current scholarship identifies Woluohai as the seat of the Black Mountain Weifu Military Supervision Commission (Chin. Heishan Weifu Jianjun Si 黑山威福監軍司),[40] a direct correspondence with the Tibetan "lNga 'o kyer jun mkhar' is firmly established.

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[39] "*hor gyis mi mang po bsad pa'i rus pa la 'bras gtor zer nas*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 301).

[40] In the biography, the toponym "lNga 'o" appears twice with the suffix "ra", forming "lNga 'or", which I interpret as a locative particle. However, if this "ra" is not a grammatical marker but rather the result of a scribal error or collator's mistake—for instance, if the original spelling was "lNga 'o ra"—then the pronunciation would correspond to "Wula" 兀剌 or "Woluo" 斡囉 in Chinese. Unfortunately, I have thus far been unable to locate earlier manuscripts or alternative versions that could corroborate this hypothesis. As for the element "hai" in "Wulahai" or "Woluohai", it likely derives, as earlier scholars have argued, from a Tangut word meaning "castle" or "fortress."

This identification is further corroborated by the toponym "Gho ra nya." Following a vision of Vaiśravaṇa, Ras pa traveled from lNga 'o to Gho ra nya to consecrate a "newly built fortress" (Tib. *mkhar so ma*). "Gho ra nya" phonetically matches the Tangut name for Black Mountain /ow rar nja/, transcribed in Chinese as "Wularuo Shan" (Chin. 午臘蒻山) or "Woluoniang Shan" (Chin. 臥囉娘山).[41] This "new fortress" likely corresponds to the Western Xia-era Xin'an County (Chin. 新安縣), a new settlement established near Woluohai.[42]

While making offering at the shrine of Vaiśravaṇa by the new fortress's northern gate, Ras pa received an omen of the Mongol advance. His subsequent flight took him through a desolated Ling chu to Khar lung in Tsong kha. After crossing the Yellow River (Tib. rMa chu) to reach Cog ro Khri kha, he was met by an imperial envoy bearing a silver-engraved edict. Summoned back to the capital, Ras pa and Ti shri gTsang so ba were jointly entrusted with the protection of the sovereign.

4. Siege of Western Xia capital Gha

In the spring of 1209, Chinggis Khan launched the third campaign against Western Xia. Advancing from Khara-Khoto, the Mongol army first overwhelmed the fortress of Woluohai before pressing southward toward the strategic pass of Keyimen (Chin. 克夷門). As a vital passage through the Helan Mountains, this stronghold served as the primary "northern gateway" protecting Zhongxing Prefecture (Chin. 中興府), the Tangut capital. After a grueling two-month stalemate, the Mongol forces finally breached the pass and laid besiege to Zhongxing.[43] Throughout these hostilities, Ras pa was in residence at Gha; his biography provides a rare and critical eyewitness:

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41 For the Tangut toponym of Wularuo Shan and its connection with Heishan and Wulahai, see Nie 2008: 67–69.

42 The newly built fortress at Gho ra nya can be reasonably identified with the Xin'an Zhou (新安州) documented in the *Jingshi Dadian* (Chin. 經世大典). Chinese sources locate it at the foot of Mt. Wulanghai—a variant transcription of Mt. Wularuo or Mt. Woluoniang, also known as Black Mountain. This site had previously been established as Xin'an Xian (Chin. 新安縣) under Western Xia administration, its name literally meaning "newly established stability," with Xian designating a lower-level administrative unit comparable to a county or garrison. During the Yuan dynasty, it was elevated to Zhou, a prefecture-level division. Given both its nomenclature and geographical context, it is well-founded to conclude that the "new fortress" mentioned in Tibetan sources corresponds to the Western Xia-era Xin'an County. For a discussion of the location of Heishan Weifu Military Commission and Wulahai based on Chinese sources, see Shi 2017: 416–448.

43 Martin 1942: 199–202; Shi and Zhang 2014: 191–193.

On the seventeenth day of the first autumn month of the Snake Year (1209), I dreamt that the fort of Gha was besieged by Mongol cavalry and surging floods. Ling chu ba was summoned, and through his intervention, the Mongol army was repelled without battle. Later, the emperor commanded, "Come to 'Ga'," and so in the eleventh month, I went.

On the twenty-first night of the twelfth lunar month (1209), I beheld in a dream a massive non-human figure from the eastern direction of Gha. It had a red face and an extremely long, thick beard. Its presence filled the space as it moved toward me. Feeling my own form too small to confront it, I visualized a large image of my tutelage deity. I made an offering from its right shoulder, and the tutelage deity turned its face south toward Gha. Then, offering butter from its left shoulder, I caused it to look north toward the castle. But at that moment, the butter was knocked over. The next morning, when I repeated that to the virtuous spiritual friend gTsang so ba, he asked, "Well then, is there any hope that the fortress will not fall?"

On the fifteenth day [of the first lunar month], I remained in Gha. The following day, the Mongol army surrounded the fortress. Together with dPal chen Śrī Phug pa and gTsang so ba, I engaged in spiritual practices to avert the enemy and provide protection. However, Śrī Phug pa, troubled by health problem, did not join us for about ten days. Thus, the two of us continued the ritual practices until the Mongol retreated.

On the night of the twentieth day of the second lunar month, we beheld the Four-armed Wisdom Protector Mahākāla, flanked by two crow-faced attendants. I grasped the beak of one crow-faced and pulled it, making the beak appear longer. "This time, it needs to be long." At dawn, I recounted the dream to all assembled retinues, adding, "The fortress will certainly fall." Another night, I dreamt of the Great King Vaiśravaṇa moving toward the Mongol positions beside the fortress—an omen interpreted as auspicious.

On the first day of the third month, the fortress was encircled by floodwater. Earlier, on the seventeenth night of the seventh month, I had dreamed of being surrounded by water, and then I dreamed that everything turned out well. On the night of the fifteenth, the water broke through into the drainage holes of the citadel. Just as the citadel was on the verge of being cut off, a method to block the water was shown, and thus it did not collapse from the force of the water. Later that evening, gTsang so ba and I made ritual cakes and cast them into the water.

> By midnight on the sixth day, the water flooded outward and swept away many Mongol army camps. On the fourteenth day, the [Western Xia] emperor's daughter was given as a gift and a reconciliation was reached, after which [the Mongols] returned to their own land. On the seventeenth [of the fourth month], the Tibetan monks and the virtuous spiritual friends requested *tshe ka*(?) and returned to their monasteries. I, too, went to gZing 'ga' Monastery in Ling chu.[44]

Ras pa's narrative highlights the intersection of mundane defense and esoteric ritual, attributing the protection of the stronghold to the divine intervention of protective deities such as Mahākāla and Vaiśravaṇa. Following the Siege of Zhongxing, hagiographical accounts of Ti shri Ras pa began to incorporate narratives of Mahākāla's miraculous manifestation. In these records, the deity appears specifically as Four-Armed Mahākāla, accompanied by his primary attendant, Raven-Faced Mahākāla. This specific cycle of teachings was brought to Tibet by rTsa mi Lo tsā ba Sangs rgyas grags pa and his disciple rGwa Lo tsā

[44] "*de nas sprul lo zla ba bdun pa'i tshes bcu bdun gyi nub mo 'ga' hor gyis bskor ba dang chus bskor bar mi lam du byung gsung/ ling chu bas gdan drangs nas hor gyi dmag bzlog byas nas der dmag ma byung/ yang rgyal pos 'ga' shog zer bas zla ba bcu gcig pa la ghar('ghar) song/ zla ba bcu gnyis pa'i tshes nyi shu gcig nub mo rmi lam du gha'i ('gha'i) shar phyogs nas tshur mi ma yin gzugs shin tu che ba/ ngo dmar bas ma ra shin tu ring ba ched po yod pa la/ bar snang nas tshur khengs pa zhig byung/ phyir bzlog pa la nga'i gzugs bong chung bas phyir mi bzlog par snang/ yi dam gyi lha sku che ba zhig byas nas de'i dpung pa g.yas pa nas phul bas gha'i lho phyogs su kha zhag byas nas kha btabs pa zhig byas/ yang dpung pa g.yon pa nas/ mar cig phul tsam na/ mkhar gyi byang phyogs su kha btabs pa zhig byas/ de nas mar bzlog pa cig(zhig) rmis/ nang par dge ba'i bshes gnyen rtsang so ba la de skad bzlas pas/ 'o na gha('ga') mkhar mi 'chor ba'i re ba yod dam gsungs/ de nas tshes bco lnga la gha mkhar du bsdad/ tshes bcu drug la hor gyis mgar bskor/ de nas dpal chen shi ri phug pa dang/ dge ba'i bshes gnyen rtsang so ba dang nged gsum gyis dmag bzlog dang bsrung ba'i dge sbyor byas/ dpal chen shi ri phug pa zhabs ma bde nas zhag bcu tsam la ma byon/ nged gnyis kyis hor ma song bar du dge sbyor byas nas zla ba gnyis kyi nub mo chos skyong ye shes mgon po gtso bo phyag bzhi pa g.yas g.yon gnyis na 'khor bya rog gi gdong pa can gnyis bzhugs p dang/ gtso 'khor gsum zhal mthong/ bya rog gi gdong pa can gcig gi mchu la 'jus nas thang rang bas mchu ring bar snang byas pas/ gnas skabs 'dir ring dgos par snang gsungs/ nangs par 'khor kun la 'di tsug rmi lam du byung bas mkhar u bu 'chor byas/ yang nub cig rgyal po chen po rnam thos sras mkhar gyi kha na phar hor gyi kha na phar hor yod phyogs na bzhud pa cig rmis/ de yang rten 'brel bzang byas/ de nas zla ba gsum pa'i tshes gcig la mkhar chus bskor/ bla ma bde bar byung sngar zla ba bdun pa'i tshes bcu bdun gyi nub mo chus bskor ba rmis nas/ de nas bde bar byung bar rmis/ de nas tshes bco lnga'i nub mo mkhar gyi chu khung nang du rdol bas chod la khad du yod pa'i dus su chu 'gog pa'i thabs bstan pas chu khog nas mkhar ma zhig/ phyir de dgongs mo rtsang so ba dang nged gyis kyis gtor ma byas nas chu la 'phangs pas/ tshes drug gi nam phyed na chu phyir bo nas hor gyi dmag ra mang po phyags/ tshes bcu gzhi la rgyal po'i bu mo byin nas 'dum byas/ khong rang gi yul du phyir song/ tshes bcu bdun la bod kyi bla ma dge ba'i bshes gnyen rnams tshe ka zhus nas rang rang so so'i dgon par song/ nged kyang ling chu'i gzing gha dgon du song…*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 302–304).

ba gZhon nu dpal; the latter, during his tenure in Eastern Tibet, transmitted these doctrines to Bla ma Zhang, the root guru of Ras pa.[45] The discovery of bilingual Tibetan and Chinese manuscripts at Khara-Khoto further substantiates the widespread influence of rGwa Lo tsā ba's lineage within the Tangut Empire.[46]

The depiction of Ras pa and gTsang so ba deploying ritual cakes (Tib. *gtor ma*) to confront the deluge reflects a prominent hagiographic motif: the mastery over nature as a demonstration of a monk's ritual power and spiritual authority. In this context, religious potency is effectively transformed into a form of metaphysical national defense during a period of existential state crisis.

To gain a fuller picture of the Mongol blockade of Zhongxing in 1210, the following translated excerpt from *Yuan Shi* is provided:

> [Chinggis Khan] led his army to besiege Zhongxing Prefecture and diverted the Yellow River to flood it. When the embankment collapsed and the waters overflowed outward, they withdrew the siege and retreated. The Grand Preceptor Eda was sent into Zhongxing to demand the Xia ruler's submission; the Xia ruler offered his daughter in marriage and sought peace.[47]

In comparation to the Chinese account, the Tibetan narrative provides a far more granular and structurally coherent chronology. It dates the encirclement to the 16th day of the first lunar month of 1210; by the 1st

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[45] For Bla ma Zhang's study of the Mahākāla cycle with rGwa Lo, see Yamamoto 2012: 116–117.

[46] For the Chinese and Tibetan Mahākāla documents from Khara-Khoto, see Shen 2010: 418–459, Hou 2022a: 400–429; for the role played by rGwa Lo tsā ba in the spreading of the Mahākāla cult during the Tangut period, see Hou 2022b: 657–682.

[47] "薄中興府,引河水灌之. 堤決, 水外潰, 遂撤圍還. 遣太傅訛答入中興, 招諭夏主, 夏主納女請和." *Yuan Shi*, *Juan* 1: 14. A fuller account appears in the later source *Xixia Shushi*: "The Mongol Khan pressed his forces against Zhongxing Prefecture. Anquan personally commanded officers and soldiers in mounting a defense atop the fortress, successfully repelling Mongol assaults. When torrential rains swelled the Yellow River unexpectedly, the Mongol Khan ordered his generals to construct dikes and divert the raging waters to flood the fortress. Catastrophic flooding ensued, drowning countless residents. [...] as the relentless waters eroded the fortress's foundations to the brink of collapse, the outer containment dike ruptured. Floodwaters surged back into the Mongol encampment, compelling their retreat. Subsequently, the Mongols sent their Grand Tutor, E'da (Xibi E'da), to negotiate surrender terms. Emperor Xiangzong ultimately capitulated, securing peace by offering his daughter in marriage to the Khan." (蒙古主引兵薄中興府,安全親督將士登城守禦,蒙古兵不能破.會大雨,河水暴漲,蒙古主遣將築防, 遏水灌城, 居民溺死無算…河水久灌, 城址將圮.會外堤決,水勢四潰,蒙古兵不能支, 遂解圍退。已, 遣其太傅訛答入城諭降, 安全乃納女請和.) *Xixia Shushi Jiaozheng*: 468–469.

day of the third lunar month, the fortress was inundated by water and was completely submerged by the 15th day of the third lunar month; on the 6th day of the fourth lunar month, the floodwaters burst outward, ravaging the Mongol encampments; the siege culminated on the 14th day of the fourth lunar month, when Anquan surrendered and offered his daughter as a pledge of peace, prompting the Mongol withdrawal.[48]

Beyond matters of chronology, Ras pa's biography offers an internal perspective on the event, preserving vivid details absent from Chinese records—such as the striking image of water surging from the fortress's drainage holes. Notably, as Dan Martin has pointed out, unlike Chinese records—which claim that the Mongols diverted the Yellow River to inundate Zhongxing—the Tibetan account does not explicitly explain the cause of the flood.[49]

5. Palace coup launched by Zunxu

The catastrophic defeat at the siege of Zhongxing brought the Western Xia to the threshold of collapse. This crisis provided the impetus for the ambitious clansman Zunxu (Chin. 遵頊, viz. Emperor Shenzong) to stage a palace coup in 1211, deposing Emperor Xiangzong and usurping the throne. While Chinese official histories record these events with characteristic brevity, Ras pa—who experienced the turmoil firsthand—offers a more immediate and detailed perspective in his biography:

> In the Sheep year (1211), during the fifth month, a severe drought struck, scorching all the crops. The emperor requested rain and a great rain fell, delivering all the people from famine. On that occasion, when the emperor extended an invitation [to me], he appeared to be under some great constraint. I was unable to attend as I was engaged in a great spiritual practice.
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> On the night of the seventeenth day of the seventh month of the Sheep year, tents and shelters were set up directly west of Gha fort, and a great crowd gathered. From the four directions, the Four Great Kings and numerous generals assembled, filling

[48] By contrast, Chinese sources such as the *Yuan Shi* 元史 [*History of the Yuan Dynasty*] date the siege to 1209, situating these events between the ninth and twelfth lunar months. Sperling has noted a discrepancy in this dating on the basis of his comparison with a related passage in the *lHa rong Chos 'byung* (Sperling 2004: 20).

[49] For Dan Martin's discussion of Ras pa's narrative of the siege of Zhongxing, see his 2019 blog post, "The Flood that Backfired, & the Tangut Refugees," on *Tibeto-Logic*. Available through: https://tibeto-logic.blogspot.com/2019/01/the-flood-that-backfired-tangut-refugees.html (accessed December 12, 2025).

the sky like silk covering the heavens. The western gate of the fort, known as "Ya ta," seemed to transform into a gate of gold. Suddenly, the mass of people surged noisily towards it. They converged first at *che'u then* (?) and at the gate of the royal palace inside Gha. I followed them.

The [new] emperor was seated on a dragon throne. All present bowed down and showed him deep reverence. I, however, exited through a side gate to the south and did not remain. A young man emerged from the emperor's own body. He approached me, bowed, and I asked him, "How old are you?" "I am eight," he replied. I showed five fingers of my hand and said, "Eight is not enough; I add five more." At that moment, the virtuous spiritual friend gTsang so ba arrived barefoot. The emperor prostrated [to him] and the two—the master and disciple— entered the palace. I then dreamed that I went back.

Later, a silver-sealed envoy came. From him, it was heard that Emperor Sho ho had been deposed and Emperor rGyal rgan was enthroned. [The envoy asked:] "How many years the emperor would reign?" "By observing signs of the empire's peace and stability it appeared he would reign for eight years. To this, I added five, making thirteen."

After sending the butter offering to the emperor, I wrote down the dream in a letter and bestowed it upon him. When the emperor saw it, he thought, "To fix the year and time in this manner is not in accordance with the law, and from this, darkness will arise." Reflecting thus, he concealed the letter in a *dpung te'u* chest.[50]

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[50] *"lug lo zla ba lnga pa la than pa chen po byung nas lo tog thams cad tshig pa'i dus su/ rgyal pos char 'bebs zhus pas/ char cher po phab pas mi thams cad mu ge las thar bar byas pa yin/ der rgyal pos gdan 'dren byung ba la ngo cig rgyal po la sku bkag che bar snang/ dge sbyor ched po gyis nga ni mi 'ong byas/ lug lo zla ba bdun pa'i tshes ba bdun pa'i tshes bcu bdun gyi nub mo gha('ga') mkhar gyi nub phyogs kyi thad cig la gur dang sbrel cig dang phub nas rkya mi mang po 'tshogs nas phyogs bzhi na rgyal po chen po sde bzhi dang dmag dpon mang po 'tshogs nas nam mkha' dar gyis chod nas snang/ mkhar gyi nub sgo ya ta de gser gyi sgo ru snang/ glo bur mi de rnams kyis 'ur gyis sgo la btsang nas gha('ga') nang gi rgyal po pho brang gi sgo la che'u then la 'tshogs nas snang/ nga yang de rnams song ba'i rjes su song/ rgyal po 'brug khri la bzhugs nas snang ba/ thams cad kyi mar 'dren pa dang zhe sa byed shin snang/ ng ani lho phyogs kyi glo sgo cig nas byung nas phar byung/ der ma bsdad/ rgyal po sku nas gzhon nu zhig byung/ nga can du byon nas phyag 'tshal zhing snang ba la dgong lo du lon byas/ brgyad lon zer/ ngas lag pa'i sor mo lnga bstan nas/ brgyad kyis mi tshad lnga bsnan pa yin byas/ de tsam na dge ba'i bshes gnyen gtsong so ba zhabs rjen du byas nas byon/ rgyal pos phyag 'tshal nas khong dpon slob gnyis pho brang du song/ nga phyir song ba zhig rmis gsungs/ de nas gha nas dngul yig pa yongs nas/ rgyal po sho ho bzhag nas spya[n] [s]nga rgyal rgan sar bzhugs zer ba thos/ de nas rgyal pos lo ci tsam thub/ rgyal khams bde mi bde bltas pa la lo brgyad thub snang/ ngas lnga bsnan pa dang bcu gsum thub par snang bas/ rgyal po la mar 'dren gtang nas/ rmi lam de rnams yig ger bris nas bskur ba la/ spya[n] [s]nga gzigs nas e lo dus 'debs pa de*

The passage provides unique granular details regarding Zunxu's usurpation. Prior to the coup, Emperor Xiangzong appears to have already been subjected to some form of confinement. The takeover was executed through coordinated military action: rebel forces first encamped west of the capital, then breached the western gate of the fortress, and marched into the royal palace. Following the breach, Zunxu ascended the throne and formally received the submission of his ministers. These specific maneuvers are notably absent from Chinese historiography, which records only the finality of the power transition rather than the tactical progression of the coup.

Ras pa's subsequent "prophecy" regarding the duration of Zunxu foretold an initial eight-year reign, to which he himself added five more years, extending the prediction to thirteen. Since historical records confirm his rule from 1211 to early 1223— a span of precisely thirteen years—this prophecy is highly likely a *vaticinium ex eventu* (a prophecy authored after the fact). Such a narrative construction serves a dual purpose: it bolsters Ras pa's reputation for supernatural foresight while simultaneously framing Zunxu's reign as a matter of divine ordainment.

This episode underscores the profound agency of Tibetan monks within the Western Xia state apparatus. They functioned not merely as ritual officiants but as political seers and indispensable legitimizers of imperial authority. By capitalizing on their mastery over spiritual discourse and dream interpretation, these clerics gained the leverage necessary to influence secular political outcomes and navigate palace intrigues. This "theocratic model" of governance—where religious authority and statecraft were inextricably linked—was epitomized by the symbiotic relationship between the Tibetan clergy and the Tangut court.

Following two years of service under the newly enthroned Emperor Shenzong Ras pa's biography records yet another portentous vision that would shift the court's religious hierarchy:

> In the west, in a dream, I saw a great flag waving from Gha. Just as it was about to reach me, the master Yar lung pa suddenly appeared, swiftly seized it, and placed it into the hand of the spiritual friend gTsang so ba. Following this dream, the emperor requested an empowerment from the spiritual friend gTsang so ba, who was subsequently installed as Imperial Preceptor.[51]

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khrims las mi bde de'i dus su nag ldang ba yin byas nas dpung te'u byas sgam zhig tu sbas par snang/" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 304–305).

51 *"de nas lo gnyis lon pa'i dus su nub rmi lam na gha nas dar chen po phyar ba zhig byung/ nga'i mdun du sleb tsam na slob dpon yar lung ba byung nas lhur gyis phrog dge ba'i bshes gnyen rtsang so ba'i phyag tu bcug pa rmis gsungs/ phyi nas dge ba'i bshes gnyen rtsang*

Ras pa's account betrays a clear sense of professional grievance; he seemingly harbored the conviction that he was the rightful candidate for the 1213 appointment, attributing his bypass to the intervention of Yar lung pa on behalf of gTsang so ba.

The newly appointed Ti shri—gTsang so ba dKon mchog seng ge—carried significant prestige as a prominent disciple of the First Karma pa Dus gsum mkhyen pa (1110–1193). Having traveled to the Tangut realm as the Karma pa's representative, gTsang so ba had cultivated a tenure at court spanning more than two decades before his promotion.[52]

Despite this professional rivalry, the association between gTsang so ba and Ras pa was remarkably durable. Ras pa's biography chronicles a series of collaborations between the two. After 1206, they served as a joint ritual front at the imperial court to safeguard Emperor Xiangzong. Their partnership was most notably tested during the 1209 siege of Zhongxing, where they performed rituals to repel Mongol forces and mitigate catastrophic flooding. And both figures proved adept at navigating the volatility of Zunxu's usurpation in 1211. They succeeded in securing the new emperor's confidence, thereby consolidating their influential standing within the Tangut state apparatus.

6. Erecting Mahākāla statue at Northern Mount Wutai Monastery

In 1213, Ras pa was summoned by the Tangut emperor—apparently Shenzong—to preside over the consecration rituals for a newly built monastery. The biography of Ras pa records:

> At the emperor's invitation, the three of us, gTsang so ba Te zhi, lHu bi Guk shi, and I, performed the consecration for Five-Peaked Mountain Monastery (Tib. *ri lnga sde*), which the emperor had built. One day, a golden envoy arrived and proclaimed: "The Mongols are advancing. Conduct the ritual to repel their armies!" Thus, we constructed a Cakrasaṃvara *maṇḍala* and performed a fire offering with propitiation and accomplishment, through pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, and subjugating deeds. When the Dharma protector manifested, we offered sacrificial cakes to the deity. On the summit of the mountain, the statue of the Dharma Protector Mahākāla of Wisdom was present. At the time of invoking the Wisdom Being (Skt. *jñānasattva*), the appearance arose of the glorious Great Black One, the Wisdom Mahākāla, actually being present. [The figure's] face did

so ba la rgyal pos dbang bskur zhus/ te zhir mnga' gsol/" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 305–306).

[52] For gTsang so ba's career at the Tangut court, see Ma 2023: 128–131.

> not look towards the Mongols, but rather seemed to look towards the emperor. This was interpreted as an omen of impending internal strife. The emperor, already anxious about the approaching Mongol forces, grew further concerned about potential internal unrest. Later, it indeed happened just as feared. [53]

The term *Ri lnga sde* is tentatively translated as "Five-Peaked Mountain Monastery." *Ri lnga* is an abbreviation of *Ri bo rtse lnga*, the Tibetan rendering of "Five-Peaked Mountain" in Shanxi (Chin. 山西), while *sde* is derived from *chos sde* (trans. monastic estate). This reflects a strategic "transposition of sacred geography" by the Western Xia rulers, who established a "Northern Mount Wutai" (Chin. Bei Wutai Shan 北五台山) within the Helan Mountains to domesticate the cult of Mañjuśrī within Tangut territory. Historical maps, such as the *Topographical Map of Western Xia* (Chin. *Xixia Dixingtu* 西夏地形圖), locates the Northern Mount Wutai Monastery (Chin. Bei Wuitai Shan Si 北五台山寺) within the Helan Mountains.[54]

A critical moment in the 1213 ritual involves the invocation of the Wisdom Being (Skt. *jñānasattva*) to manifest and reside within a Mahākāla statue situated on the mountain summit. Crucially, the biography notes that the deity's face did not look towards the Mongols, but rather toward the emperor. While the ritual was intended to repel external invaders, the deity's gaze toward the sovereign was interpreted as a dire omen of internal instability—a prophecy later vindicated by the political turmoil and the struggle over the deposition and installment of the Crown Prince that plagued Emperor Shenzong's reign.

Previously, it was widely held that the state-sponsored commissioning of Mahākāla iconography began with the Yuan Dynasty. According to the *Fozu Lidai Tongzai* 佛祖歷代通載 (*A Comprehensive Registry of Successive Ages of the Buddhas and the Patriarchs*) and the *rGya bod yig tshang* (*Indian-Tibetan History Collection*), the imperial commis-

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[53] "*de nas rgyal pos 'ga' nag dan drangs/ rtsang so ti zhi dang lhu bi gug shi dang nga dang gsum gyis rgyal pos ri lnga sde zhig bzhengs pa la rab gnas byas/ nyin zhig gsr yig pa gcig 'ong/ hor 'ong bar snang zer ba'i skad byung/ dmag bzlog gyis zer ba dang/ bde mchog gi dkyil 'khor bzhengs/ bsnyen bsgrubs zhi rgyas dbang grags mngon spyod kyis sbyin sreg byas/ de nas thon pa'i dus su chos skyong gi gtor ma byas/ ri rab kyi steng du chos skyong ye shes mgon po'i sku 'bal bzhugs pa la ye shes sems dpa' bkug nas gdan drangs pa'i dus su dpal nag po chen po ye shes kyi mgon po dngos su bzhugs pa'i snang ba byung/ zhal hor yongs phyogs su mi gzigs par rgyal po'i phyogs su gzigs par snang/ nang du zing ldang bar 'dug bya ba'i brda' bstan par go rgyal po la yang hor gyi dmag mi 'ong bar snang ba la nang du skyon yod dogs yod byas/ phyis de kho na bzhin du byung ba yin/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 306).

[54] Debreczeny 2011: 11–12; Lin 2021: 420–464.

sioned installation of a Mahākāla statue was first initiated during the reign of Kublai Khan (Chin. 忽必烈, r. 1260–1294). In 1275, as Kublai Khan prepared to dispatch his general Bayan (Chin. 伯顏, 1236–1295) on a campaign against the Southern Song, he followed the advice of the Sa skya Patriarch Imperial Preceptor 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1235–1280) and ordered the construction of a Mahākāla temple in Zhuozhou (Chin. 涿州) to ensure Bayan's success. This Mahākāla statue, sculpted by the Nepalese artisan Anige and consecrated by 'Phags pa himself, was deliberately oriented toward the Southern Song (referred to as *Manzi* 蠻子).[55] After its installation, 'Phags pa's disciple Dam pa Guoshi (Chin. Danba Guoshi 膽巴國師, Tib. sGa A gnyan dam pa, ca. 1230–1303) was appointed abbot of the temple.[56]

Following the precedent set by Kublai and 'Phags pa, the Mongol emperors and their Tibetan preceptors actively promoted the construction of Mahākāla temples and statues across the empire.[57] However, as documented in Ras pa's account, the Tangut precedent of establishing Mahākāla shrines at strategic sites within the Helan Mountains fundamentally challenges the notion of Mongol innovation. It shows that the Western Xia court had already integrated the enshrinement of the Tantric protector deity into its state-protection and military infrastructure that would later define the Yuan Dynasty's religious-political landscape.

7. *Ras pa's ascending to Imperial Preceptor*

Between 1213 and 1216, Ras pa consolidated his religious authority through a series of prestigious temple restorations. His primary achievements included the renovation of the seven-tiered *stūpa* at rTsi khab in Ling chu—a structure renowned for enshrining the relics of the Buddha Kāśyapa and miraculously surviving Mongol fires. Furthermore, in the third month of 1216, he assumed control of the mKhar lung Monastery in Tsong ka, where he established a three-story tantric temple. His subsequent journey to the front lines of the Tangut–Khitan conflict culminated in a pivotal imperial audience and a protective vision of Vaiśravaṇa, both of which underscored his burgeoning influence within the Western Xia state.

In the Tiger year (1218/1219), gTsang so ba passed away at Byang ngos (Chin. Liangzhou 涼州). At that precise period, Ras pa was trav-

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55 Shen 2004: 203–204.

56 For the role played by Dam pa Guoshi in spreading the Mahākāla cult during the Yuan Dynasty, see Debreczeny 2015: 133–138.

57 For the sculpting of Mahākāla statues and icons during the Yuan Dynasty, Namu Jila 2001: 83–89.

elling to the southern mDo smad to receive offerings, but upon hearing the news, he immediately diverted his course to Byang ngos. There, he presided over the consecration of the reliquary and shrine hall erected in predecessor's memory. The vacancy left by gTsang so ba's death was eventually filled, when the emperor summoned Ras pa to Gha. On the twenty-fifth day of the eighth month (1219), following his performance of the empowerment ceremony for the sovereign, Ras pa was formally invested with the title of Imperial Preceptor. Upon his appointment, he immediately began his duties by offering counsel to the emperor:

> I petitioned the emperor, requesting an exemption decree (Tib. *mu dzu*)[58] that all the local chieftains in Western Xia should not levy military taxes and other burdens on the monastic communities. [I further] requested an amnesty for those under the age of thirteen except for those who committed crimes against the emperor. Finally, [permission] was granted for the subject of the realm to engage in the circulation of goods.[59]

This passage offers a vivid portrayal of the institutional functions of the Tangut Imperial Preceptor through a detailed interaction between Ras pa and Emperor rGyal rgan, viz. Shenzong. Leveraging his spiritual prestige to secure tangible benefits for both the monastic communities and the populace, Ras pa negotiated three pivotal concessions that underscore the political agency of his office:

First, he secured military immunity via an exemption decree, shielding the monastic communities from military conscription (Tib. *dmag khral*). This reaffirmed the monastic community's extraterritorial status—a vital safeguard against the forced mobilization of monks amidst the acute manpower shortages of the late Tangut-Mongol wars; second, he obtained legal amnesty in the form of a "great pardon" (Tib. *ldi ba chen po*) for youths under thirteen, notably excluding cases of high treason (Tib. *rgyal po la nag byas*). This petition effectively integrated Buddhist principles of compassionate governance into the state legal framework, tempering judicial rigor for the vulnerable; third, he facilitated commercial deregulation; the authorization for the "unfettered circulation of goods" (Tib. *zog 'grim*) suggests a strategic

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[58] The term *mu dzu* likely functions as a phonetic loan from Chinese (e.g., *mianchu* 免除, "exemption") or a specific Tangut administrative term designating a formal certificate of immunity.

[59] "*de nas rgyal po la zhus nas mi nyag gi yul na yod pa'i sde dpon thams cad kyis ban sde kun la dmag khral la sogs pa mi 'babs pa'i mu dzu zhus/ rgyal po la nag byas ma gtogs pa'i lo bcu gsum man chod kyi ldi ba chen po zhus/ rgyal khams kyi 'bangs la zog 'grim du bcug/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 312).

relaxation of state monopolies or wartime trade restrictions that had previously stifled the Tangut economy.

8. Military conflict between Western Xia and Jin Dynasty

Following his appointment as Imperial Preceptor, Ras pa was tasked with performing battlefield rituals to support the Western Xia military. His biography chronicles a series of armed military confrontations involving the Tangut state against the Mongol, Chinese, and Khitan forces between 1219 and 1222. However, owing to chronological ambiguities and inconsistencies regarding locations and participants, it remains difficult to fully cross-reference these events with contemporary Chinese records. The following section provides a translation of Ras pa's accounts, followed by an analysis of the salient historical data they provide:

> The Mongol armies besieged [the fortress] for three months. I conducted a great spiritual activity, which resulted in the death of General Mo gha li and the retreat of the enemy forces. At the place called Zhim lto Kye lung, [the residence] of the Tangut emperor, during the time when the Khitan emperor encircled it with seventeen envoys bearing golden letters and an army of seventeen myriad troops, I performed a great virtuous practice of repelling the enemy. As a result, the Dharma Protectors, such as Śrī Mahākāla, guarded the castle, manifesting in a form visible both to the besieging forces and to the Western Xia troops themselves. At that time, the Western Xia army was greatly outnumbered by the Khitan forces. I therefore taught the Western Xia Commander, rNgu mi spyi gzings, the art of military leadership and the tactics of troop deployment. At midnight of the twenty-fifth of the fourth month, while the Western Xia troops were arrayed for battle, the Khitan army abruptly turned and fled. The Western Xia forces gave chase and killed many of them.[60]

[60] "*hor gyi dmag mang pos zla ba gsum du bskor ba la dge sbyor chen po byas pa la dmag dpon mo gha li bya ba shi dmag zlog pa yin/ mi nyag rgyal po'i zhim lto kye lung bya bar/ khyi than rgyal pos gser yig pa bcu bdun dmag khri tsho bcu bdun gyis bskor ba'i dus su dmag bzlog dge sbyor chen po byas pas chos skyong ba'i srung ma dpal nag po chen po la sogs kyis pha rol gyi dmag dang/ rang gi dmag rnams kyis mngon bar mkhar bsrungs pa yin/ de'i dus su mi nyag gi dmag nyung/ khyi than gyi dmag mang ba yin pa la mi nyag gi dmag dpon rngu mi spyi gzings bya ba la dmag khyer byed lugs dang/ dmag gi 'thab shom tshun chad bstan pa las/ zla ba bzhi pa'i nyi shu lnga'i nub mo nam phyed yol nas 'thab shom byas pa dang khyi than gyi dmag g.yul log nas bros/ mi nyag gis ded nas mang po brlags par byas/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 312).

After the 1210 siege of the capital Zhongxing, the Western Xia supported Mongol campaigns against the Jin Dynasty. Prolonged warfare, however, exhausted the state and bred popular discontent, leading to resistance to further participation in Mongol expeditions. This angered Chinggis Khan, who subsequently led Mongol forces across the Yellow River and laid siege to the city in the late 1217 or early 1218. Emperor Shenzong fled to Xiliang, eventually secured a Mongol withdrawal by reaffirming his fealty.[61]

The siege mentioned in Ras pa's biography can be identified with the event recorded in the Chinese sources discussed above. However, the biography dates the siege to a period after Ras pa's appointment as Imperial Preceptor in 1219, thereby postdating the Chinese historical record, which places the event in 1217/1218. Such a discrepancy should perhaps not be surprising, as similar chronological divergences between Chinese and Tibetan sources have already been noted in the preceding discussion.

The "Mo gha li" mentioned is almost certainly Muqali (Chin. Muhuali 木華黎,1170–1223), Chinggis Khan's supreme commander in North China. In 1217, Chinggis Khan turned to Khwarazm (Chin. 花剌子模) and appointed Muqali as Grand Preceptor and King to lead eastern Mongol, Khitan, Jurchen, and Han forces against the Jin Dynasty. Muqali would not have been unfamiliar to the Western Xia: during this period, Western Xia forces repeatedly cooperated in his campaigns against the Jin, and in 1221 he even led an expedition against Western Xia, attacking Suide (Chin. 綏德) and capturing the forts of Mati (Chin. 馬蹄) and Kerong (Chin. 克戎).[62] Ras pa implied that his ritual performance caused the death of Muqali. Historical evidence, however, contradicts to this claim: Muqali in fact succumbed to illness in 1223 at Wenxi (Chin. 聞喜) in Shanxi, while campaigning against the Jin.[63]

The text's reference to "Khitan" is a misnomer for the Jurchen-led Jin Dynasty. Following the Jin's refusal to assist the Tanguts during the 1210 Mongol siege, Emperor Shenzong maintained a hostile pro-Mongol stance, launching frequent retaliatory strikes against the Jin territories.[64] While the specific campaign mentioned in Ras pa's account is difficult to corroborate in the *Jin Shi*, the text identifies a

[61] For the Chinese historical records of the Mongol's siege to Zhongxing in 1217/18, see Martin 1942: 203–205; Shi and Zhang 2014: 193–194.

[62] Wen 2024: 124–126.

[63] For the death of Muqali, see *Yuan Shi*, *Juan* 119: 2936. See also Martin 1942: 209–210.

[64] For the military conflict between the Jin and Western Xia during the final decades of Western Xia, see Chen 2013: 76–81.

Tangut commander, rNgu mi spyi gzings. Although "rNgu mi" phonetically transcribes the imperial surname "Weiming" (Chin. 嵬名), the individual's specific identity remains unverified in Chinese official records.

In the biography, Ras pa also narrates a war between the Western Xia and the Jin Dynasty around 1221/22:

> That evening, during the feast offering (Skt. *gaṇacakra*), a vision appeared of an army advancing from the south toward Kle'u che'u. A golden envoy was sent to verify [the sight]. As the feast ended and the attendees prepared to leave, the envoy returned with news that Chinese forces had besieged the Kle'u che'u fortress and were fighting our troops.
>
> The next day, I performed a grand ritual to repel the invaders. That afternoon, as I drifted into sleep, I dreamed of the Khitan army assembled on one side and the Western Xia forces arrayed on the other. At dawn, I beheld the majestic form of the Great Black One, Lord of Wisdom, the Four-Armed Mahākāla, surrounded by an immense retinue of countless Raven-faced Mahākāla, filling the heavens. They moved toward the armies of Pha ta, followed by flocks of crows flying toward his camp.
>
> The Great King Vaiśravaṇa, clad in golden armor, seated in the sky, encircled by a boundless entourage. To my right, a golden-armored figure riding a swan-like horse drew a bow fitted with an arrow as thick as a rafter and tipped with a golden three-pointed vajra. As he drew the string, I fell asleep and later awoke. A golden envoy subsequently arrived and reported: "The armies of Pha ta have withdrawn from the battle."[65]

[65] "*de'i dgong mo tshogs kyi 'khor lo byas pa'i dus su lho phyogs klan tse'i ngos su dmag cig byung ba'i snang ba byung/ de'i ngos su gser yig pa thong la 'drir chug byas/ de nas tshogs 'khor thon nas phyir la langs tsam na gser yig pa zhig bslebs pas klen tse'u mkhar rgya'i dmag gis bskor nas rang gi dmag dang 'thab cing yod zer/ de'i phyi de nyin par dmag zlog gi dge sbyor chen po byas/ dro rting a gnyid pa'i rmi lam na/ khyi than gyi dmag tshur bshams/ mi nyag gid mag phar bshams nas snang ba'i dus dus mdun gyi nam mkha' la dpal nag po chen po gtso bo ye shes kyi mgon po phyag bzhi pas gtsor mdzad pa'i 'khor bya rog gi gdong pa can la sogs pa dpag tu med pas nam mkha' gang ba tsam du byas nas/ pha ta'i dmag thog tu drangs nas song/ bya rog mang po yang de'i dmag yod sa na phar la dma' phar zhing song/ rgyal po chen po rnam thos sras gser gyi khrab gon nas/ nam mkha' la bzhugs pa 'khor dpag tu med pas bskor nas snang/ nga'i g.yas phyogs na rta ngang pa btsibs nas gser gyi khrab gon pa zhig gis mda' bkang nas snang ba la/ mda' phra sbom dral bu sbom shos tsam zhig la gser gyi rdo rje gsum pa zhig snang/ mda' bkang bam thong bas gnyid yed kyis song bas gnyid sad/ de nas phyis gser yig pa yong nas/ pha ta'i dmag g.yul log pas de bzhin song zer/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 313–314).

The Tibetan toponym "Kle'u che'u" is a phonetic transcription of the Chinese garrison city, Lanzhou (Chin. 蘭州). Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Lanzhou was a site of immense strategic gravity, serving as a primary theater for the tripartite geopolitical struggles between the Song, Jin, and Western Xia dynasties. Following the Jin's displacement of the Northern Song, Lanzhou became a contested frontier between the Jin and Western Xia, changing hands multiple times during protracted military engagements. By 1219, Lanzhou fell under Western Xia control; subsequent Jin attempts to reclaim the city proved futile due to their military resources were rapidly depleted by the Mongols. [66]

The narrative initially depicts "Chinese forces" besieging the Lanzhou fortress, yet shifts abruptly to portray Western Xia troops engaged with Khitan. This superficial inconsistency is reconciled by the era's complex demographics: after the fall of the Northern Song in 1127, the Jin Dynasty inherited much of northern China, governing a vast Han Chinese population and maintaining a multi-ethnic military comprised of Jurchen, Khitan, and Chinese soldiers. Given the Southern Song's retreat from the northwest, the descriptor "Chinese forces" in this context most plausibly refers to Chinese formations operating within the Jin military structure.

Moreover, the Khitan commander identified as "Pha ta" phonetically corresponds to "Heda" (Chin. 合達)—the abbreviated name of the Jin General Wanyan Heda (Chin. 完顏合達, d. 1232). As a pivotal military figure in the late Jin Dynasty, Wanyan Heda commanded the northwestern frontier between 1217 and 1231, overseeing strategic sectors in Hexi (Chin. 河西) and Shaanxi (Chin. 陝西). In this capacity, he frequently engaged Western Xia forces and spearheaded the defense against multiple Mongol incursions. The fact that contemporary Chinese sources frequently refer to him simply as "Heda," corroborates this phonetic identification.

According to Ras pa's account, he invoked Mahākāla to fortify the Western Xia military—a recurring motif throughout his biography. This portrayal of mobilizing Mahākāla for martial purposes significantly predates similar narratives found in later historiography. For instance, the Chinese and Tibetan sources such as the *Fozu Lidai Tongzai* and the *rGya bod yig tshang* chronicle Mahākāla's miraculous interventions during the Mongol conquest of the Song and the retreat of Haidu's forces. These later episodes are typically associated with the Yuan Dynasty figures, including Guoshi Dam pa and his mentor 'Phags pa. In terms of chronology, Ras pa predates both of

[66] Zhao 1983: 83–84.

them and therefore can be regarded as an early pioneer of Mahākāla-centered war rituals, with his narrative constitutes an early prototype of this specific genre of tantric military technology. This is further corroborated by the Khara-Khoto archives, where scholars have recovered numerous Tibetan and Chinese manuscripts related to Mahākāla, providing material evidence for the circulation of these rituals during the Western Xia period.[67]

9. Deposition and installment of the crown prince

Amid prolonged external threats, the Western Xia was increasingly destabilized by internal fractures. The biography of Ras pa corroborates these tensions, documenting a critical dispute surrounding the Crown Prince:

> In a dream one night, two wrathful water buffaloes were seen pulling a chariot across a lake. On it sat a prince and another man. It seemed that the prince had been exiled. Meanwhile, beyond the Yellow River, the Hor army advanced. After the army was repelled, at the border, a *ḍākiṇī* with golden tusks, leading seventy-two *ḍākiṇīs*, carried [him] upward to Ha la dgyer. Two yellow parasols were arranged to be raised, yet they remained lowered. It seemed the prince had been condemned to exile and abandoned. Soon, a wild man seized the prince and carried him away. A voice called out, "Be the emperor!" —but the prince did not hear it and departed.
>
> Another night, [I] dreamt of entering the royal palace and seeing a royal throne. I heard a voice say, "Sit here," and I sat. At that moment, three figures in golden armor appeared before me. The one in the middle took something from the figure on the right, held it aloft, and gave it to the one on the left.
>
> As there were two princes, the sign indicated that the younger—not the firstborn—would obtain the empire. Later, even when the younger prince was taken to Tsong ka, the vision recurred in my dream, exactly as seen over the lake. This time, however, only one figure appeared on the chariot. It appears the prince was seized along the road and enthroned as the emperor.
>
> The emperor was taken to reside at Ling chu. Three envoys bearing golden letters arrived, leading an army to Gha, declaring they would execute twenty-three people led by sPyan snga [Sho ho]. Yet, I had the commanders swear an oath and spared their lives. In the past, though fallen emperors were not executed, they

[67] Hou 2022a: 400–429.

> never regained their thrones. However, because I prayed to the Guru, the Three Jewels, the Dharma protectors, the Glorious Mahākāla, and the Four Great Kings, they grant protection [to the emperor]. Thus, in the autumn of the Bird year (1225), when he returned from Tsong ka to Gha, his son restored the throne to him.[68]

To contextualize Ras pa's account, it is essential to consult contemporary Chinese historiography. According to these records, years of joint military operations alongside the Mongols against the Jin Dynasty had severely depleted the Western Xia's national reserves, precipitating a volatile internal schism over foreign policy. In opposition to Emperor Shenzong's unwavering pro-Mongol stance, an influential faction of officials advocated for a strategic pivot toward an alliance with the Jin—a realignment intended to serve as a buffer against the surging Mongol threat.

This deep-seated division reached a breaking point in the spring of 1223, when Emperor Shenzong commanded his heir, Deren (Chin. 德任), to spearhead a new assault on the Jin. Deren, however, countered with a plea for de-escalation, urging Shenzong to seek a diplomatic resolution. When Shenzong summarily rejected this counsel and insisted on the campaign, Deren took the radical step of requesting to relinquish his title and enter the monastic order. Incensed by this act of defiance, Shenzong imprisoned Deren in Lingzhou (Chin. 靈州) and

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[68] *"yang nub cig gi rmi lam na mtsho zhig gi steng na tshur la khro chu'i glang bu gnyis kyis shing rta gcig 'dren zhing snang ba la/ de'i steng na rgyal bu dang mi gnyis snang/ rgyal bu de 'byin pa yin par snang gsungs/ yang dma' chu phar kar hor gyi dmag byung ba la/ dmag mar bzlog nas so mtshams su mkha' 'gro ma gser gyi mche ba can gyis gtso bo byas nas mkha' 'gro ma bdun bcu rtsa gnyis kyi bskyal nas yar 'ongs nas ha la dgyer byon pa dang/ gdugs ser po gnyis 'babs skos shig byas nas ma phub/ rgyal bu de 'byin skos shig byas nas bzhag pa de la lta bar snang gsungs/ de nas cher ma lon par mi rgod kyis rgyal bu phyung nas khyer/ rgyal bu la rgyal po gyis zer pa la ma nyan par phyir song/ yang nub cig gi rmi lam rgyal po'i pho brang du byon zer nas rgyal po'i gdan zhig snang ba la/ 'di la bzhugs zer nas bsdad pa zhig rmis/ de tsam gser khrab gon pa gsum mdun na snang ba la g.yas phyogs ma de la dkyil ma des lag nag cig snang ba de yar bstabs/ g.yon gyi de la gcig byin pa zhig rmis gsungs/ rgyal bu gnyis yod pa la rtsa na yod pa des rgyal sa mi 'thob par phyi so na yod pa des rgyal sa 'thob pa'i rtags snang bas/ phyi nas rgyal bu phyi sor yod pa de tsong kar khyer ba'i dus su yang rmi lam na/ mtsho'i steng na de kho na du byung ba la/ de'i dus su shing rta'i steng na mi gcig las mi snang gsungs/ de'i dus na rgyal bu lam du bzung nas rgyal por mnga' gsol ba snang/ de nas rgyal po ling cur bzhugs su bcug nas gser yig pa gsum gyis dmag ghar khyer nas yong bas/ spya[n] [s]ngas dbu mdzad mi nyi shu rtsa gsum gsod zer ba la/ ngas dmag dpon rnams la mna' skyel du bcug nas ma bsad pa yin/ sngar gyi rgyal po rnams rgyal sa shor nas 'grongs pa ma yin pas rgyal sa phyir thob pa med pa yin pa la ngas bla ma dkon mchog dang/ chos skyong ba'i srung ma dang/ dpal nag po chen po dang/ rgyal po chen po sde bzhi la sogs pa rnams la gsol ba btab nas bsrungs pas/ bya'i lo'i ston tsong ka nas ghar bzhud/ bus rgyal sa phul ba yin/"* (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 316–317).

designated his second son, Dewang (Chin. 德旺), as the new successor.[69]

From his campaign in Khwarazm, Chinggis Khan astutely perceived these shifting allegiances from Western Xia and dispatched secret instructions to Bolu (Chin. 孛魯) to initiate countermeasures. Later that year, Mongol forces advanced to the Tangut border, openly accusing the court of treachery. Under the weight of this military duress, Emperor Shenzong hastily abdicated in favor of Dewang, who ascended the throne as Emperor Xianzong (Chin. 獻宗, r. 1223–1226).[70]

10. Enthronement of the last Tangut emperor

In the autumn of 1225, while residing at Tsong ka, Ras pa was summoned by two envoys carrying silver-sealed letters on behalf of the seriously ill Emperor Shenzong. He set out on his journey on the ninth of the first month of 1226 and reached Gha on the 28th of the same month. There, he performed an empowerment ceremony and delivered teachings to Shenzong, who passed away twenty days later. Ras pa presided over the funerary rites for a period of forty-seven days.

At this time, the Mongols intensified their invasion of the Western Xia. In the first month of 1226, Chinggis Khan appointed General Subedei (Chin. Subutai 速不台) to lead the assault. By the second month, Khara-Khoto had been captured. To escape the summer heat, Chinggis Khan established his encampment at Mount Hunchui in the fourth month. Meanwhile, Subedei's forces continued their advance, seizing Suzhou in the fifth month, Ganzhou in the sixth, and Xiliang in the seventh. As city after city fell, the Western Xia swiftly collapsed under the relentless offensive. Overwhelmed by the mounting crisis, Emperor Xianzong succumbed to illness and passed away in the seventh month of 1226.

For the death of Emperor Xianzong and the accession of the last emperor of Western Xia, Ras pa's biography records the following:

> One day in a dream, I beheld countless butter lamps, flags, and parasols being ascending west of Gha. And there, in the midst of the sky, a non-human figure carried a person in a sedan chair, drawing near. To the right, a group of monks appeared and declared: "This is a bodhisattva abiding on the earth. Will his coming bring stability to the empire?" "I dreamed that [the bodhisattva] fell to the west of the imperial palace. When I woke up, I perceived that another emperor was about to arise, and I

[69] *Jin Shi*, *Juan* 134: 2875, 2876.
[70] Martin 1942: 210; Shi and Zhang 2014: 194–195.

> wondered, 'Will this one be stable?' Thus, the thought arose in me that it would not be stable. Then, after the Precious One went upwards, the emperor passed away, and gNam phe yo was enthroned.[71]

The Tibetan appellation "gNam phe yo" refers to Li Xian (Chin. 李睍), the final sovereign of the Western Xia and nephew of Emperor Xianzong. He remains an enigmatic figure; the historical record is so fragmented that both his era name and posthumous title have been lost.[72] Despite this obscurity, the *Secret History of the Mongols* notes that the Tangut ruler was initially addressed as "Ilukhu Burqan." This title, however, drew the ire of Chinggis Khan, who—seeking to diminish the emperor's status—rechristened him "Sidurqu" (Chinese: Shiduerhu 失都兒忽), meaning "the Subdued" or "the Obedient."[73]

This linguistic conflict over nomenclature is significant. The term "Burqan" (Buddha) directly correlates with indigenous Tangut imperial ideology, in which rulers were sacralized as the "Buddha Son of Heaven" or the "Bodhisattva King." By stripping Li Xian of the "Burqan" title, the Mongols were not merely renaming a foe but deconstructing the Tangut claim to divine protection. Conversely, the Tibetan depiction of the last emperor as a "bodhisattva abiding on earth" who "descended from the sky" serves as a crucial external corroboration of Western Xia's well-established Buddhist identity and the persistent aura of sacral kingship that surrounded its final days.

11. Fall of Western Xia

Following the funeral of the late emperor, Ras pa departed from the capital for Tsong ka, where he took up residence at mKhar lung lHa khang. Several days later, as Mongol forces advanced, he witnessed masses of people fleeing across the Yellow River to safety. By then, Ras

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[71] "*nyin cig gnyid log pa'i rmi lam na gha'i nub phyogs kyi nam mkha' na mar la dar dang gdugs dpag tu med pa phyar nas nam mkha' la mi zhig mi ma yin gyis khyogs la btegs nas 'byon shin snang/ g.yas phyogs na ban sde zhig snang ba na re/ 'di sa la gnas pa'i byang chub sems dpa' yin te/ 'dis rgyal khams en cig e brtan nam zer/ rgyal po pho brang gi nub phyogs su babs pa zhig rmis/ gnyid sad pa dang yang rgyal po zhig 'byung bar snang ba la 'dis e brtan nam zer lugs kyis mi brtan par snang snyam pa byung gsungs/ de nas rin po che yar byon rting la rgyal po 'das nas/ gnam phe yo rgyal sar bton nas snang zer ba de la lta bar snang gsungs/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 317–318).

[72] *Jin Shi* documents: "In the second month of the third year [of the Zhengda Era] (1226), Zunxu died; in the seventh month, Dewang died. The name of their successor has been lost to history. The following year, the Xia state perished." (Chin. 三年二月, 遵頊死. 七月, 德旺死. 嗣立者史失其名. 明年,夏國亡.) *Jin Shi*, *Juan* 134: 2876.

[73] Su 2013: 144–146.

pa had already foreseen the inevitable fall of Western Xia to the Mongols and decided to leave the country. He set out on the second day of the seventh month 1226 and, upon reaching 'Bu snying sgang, received a summons from Be ri that drew him toward Central Tibet.

Upon returning to his homeland, Ras pa visited the monasteries of his teachers: sTag lung, 'Bri gung mthil, Yer pa, and mTshal gung thang. After a sojourn in Central Tibet, he resolved to journey back to Western Xia. Owing to the distance and the delays in communication, he remained unaware of the actual state of the war and devised a contingency plan: "Should the Mongols not be in Western Xia, I shall return; if they are present, I shall proceed to mDo khams."[74]

Traveling eastward, Ras pa reached 'Ba' rom in the Nag chu region. On the night of the eleventh day of the eighth month, while resting by the shores of Dar mtsho Lake, he experienced a dream that foretold the assassination of the Tangut emperor and the imminent collapse of the Western Xia regime. Subsequently, a silver-sealed envoy intercepted him on the road and declared, "There is no place left for you in Western Xia."[75] He advanced no further and instead took up residence in a fortress known as mDo' gam ku sa glu mkhar.

In the eighth month of 1226, following his summer retreat,Chinggis Khan personally resumed command of the campaign against the Western Xia. Mongol forces swiftly overran the Tangut heartland, capturing Yingli and Xiazhou before besieging the strategic city of Lingzhou. In an attempt to break the siege, Emperor Li Xian dispatched General Weiming Linggong (Chin. 嵬名令公) with a relief force of one hundred thousand troops. During the winter, however, the Mongols crossed the frozen Yellow River and decisively defeat the Tangut army, leading to the fall of Lingzhou. With Lingzhou lost, the capital Zhongxing was left exposed. Chinggis Khan promptly ordered its encirclement. In the sixth month, a powerful earthquake struck the city, followed by epidemic disease and severe shortages of food and water. With more than half of the military and civilian population dead or incapacitated, Western Xia was rendered defenseless. After six months of resistance, the last emperor surrendered in the seventh month of 1227, formally ending the dynasty. In accordance with Chinggis Khan's final wishes, Tolui executed the last emperor. The Mongol forces then carried out a large-scale massacre, devastating much of the city. The slaughter was eventually halted through the intervention of Chahan (Chin. 察罕), a

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[74] "*de nas mi myag yul du hor med na der 'gro/ hor yod na mdo khams su 'gro snyam tsam na/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 328–329).

[75] "*de nas phyir 'ong pa dang lam na rngul yig pa 'ongs pa dang phrad/ me nyag yul du 'gro sa med zer ba/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 329).

senior Tangut official serving in Mongol military, whose counsel spared the remaining inhabitants from annihilation.[76]

The biography of Ras pa offers a poignant glimpse into the fall of the Western Xia capital. Arriving at rMa rkyang khog in the late summer of 1227, Ras pa experienced a vivid and prophetic dream of revisiting the imperial center, Gha:

> "I dreamed that I went to the Gha of the Western Xia emperor." When asked, "What is that structure?" [Ras pa replied:] "In the dream, when I arrived at the Gha fortress, I saw that all the city gates were crooked. The royal palaces were partially collapsed and scorched as if by fire. Only one section on the left side remained intact. There was not a single person to be seen in the entire city of Gha. The Western Xia emperor also seemed to be absent. Aside from the two young sons of *then gzhi*,[77] no one else was there. It appeared that the emperor had already passed away, and the impression I got was that the land had been lost long before."[78]

As Ras pa was not physically present during the siege of Gha, his account of the city's destruction was likely based on secondhand reports rather than direct observation. Lamenting the fate of Western Xia, he also turned to reflect on his own years of service at the imperial court. Ras pa recounted that he arrived in Western Xia in the twelfth month of the Dragon year (1196), at the age of thirty-six, and remained there until his departure in the seventh month of the Dog year (1226), when he was sixty-six. Looking back on three decades of service, he offered a retrospective assessment of his career alongside a meditation on the inevitable collapse of the Western Xia state:

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[76] Martin 1942: 214–227; Shi and Zhang 2014: 195–200; Wen 2024: 133–141.

[77] The meaning of the term *then gzhi* remains unclear. As Hans van Ess suggested during a colloquium at the Institute for Indology and Tibetology, University of Munich (January 26, 2026), it may represent a transliteration of the Chinese term *Tianzi* (天子), meaning "Son of Heaven"—in this context, referring to the executed Tangut emperor Li Xian.

[78] "*phag lo zla ba bdun pa'i nyi shu bdun gyi nyin par rma rkyang khog tu slebs pa'i nub mo rmi lam zin pas/ mi nyag rgyal po'i gha na phyin pa rmis gsungs/ de ci tshugs gda' nas zhus pa la/ gha mkhar na phyin pa la mkhar sgo kun yang yo zhig nas snang/ rgyal po'i pho brang kun yang la la bshigs/ la la bsregs/ g.yon phyogs na shas gcig lus nas snang/ ghar mkhar na mi yang ye mi snang/ mi nyag rgyal po yang mi bzhugs par snang/ then gzhi'i bu tsa chung chung gnyis min pa mi snang/ mi nyag rgyal po bgrongs pa dang/ yul shor ba snga nas yin par snang ba la dus der shes par byung gsungs/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 330–331).

Such a great sin, a sin for which one will experience the ripened consequence, was committed because he is the Dharma King of Western Xia. Furthermore, I abide in the Buddha's teachings, and I am the leader of all monks. For the sake of the Buddha's teachings, and because the Western Xia Emperor has taken me as his preceptor and placed his trust in me, even though it is a great sin, I have performed these great activities for their sake, to protect the empire.

If that is the case, some people might wonder why the Mongol army was not repelled. [The reason is that] from the time of the third generation of the Western Xia emperors, many Mongol territories were destroyed and much harm was done, thus creating karmic debts. Moreover, there are differences in the accumulation of merit, which is why the power of rulers also varies. The Mongols are adherents of heretical views, and therefore they are harmful to the Buddhists.

This is the ripening of each sentient being's karma, and it cannot be prevented by anyone. The Blessed One also said that karmic ripening cannot be averted. It is not that all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and all-powerful Dharma protectors, cannot protect one; rather, it is because each sentient being must inevitably experience the ripening of their own karma that they are unable to prevent it. Yet, it is not that they were not protected. For twenty-seven years after the Mongols appeared, they were protected by Dharma protectors. Even after the Emperor of Western Xia was killed, he (Chinggis Khan) too died, and thus it was certain that he experienced the ripening of his karma.[79]

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[79] "*de ltar bu'i sdig pa kham po che rang gis rnam par smin pa myong ba'i sdig pa byas pa de/ mi nyag chos kyi rgyal po yin pas/ sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa la gnas pa dang/ nga yang ban de thams cad kyi dpon yin pas/ sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa'i ched dang/ mi nyag rgyal pos nga la slob dpon du bzang nas dpon du bzung nas blo gtad pas/ rgyal khams bsrung ba'i ched du sdig pa che yang de dag gi ched du 'phrin las khams po che byas pa yin/ 'o na de ltar yin na hor gyi dmag mi bzlog pa ci yin snyam pa'i mi yod srid pas/ mi nyag rgyal rabs gsum pa nas/ hor gyi rgyal khams mang po brlags nas gnod pa mang po byas pas lan chags pa dang/ bsod nams kyi tshogs kyi khyad par che chung yod pas/ rgyal po la yang nus pa che chung yod pa yin/ hor 'di yang phyi rol mu stegs kyi cha 'dzin yin pas nang pa la gnod pa yin/ sems can so so'i las kyi rnam par smin pas gang gis kyang dgag par mi nus so/ /bcom ldan 'das kyis kyang las kyi rnam par smin pa ma gtogs so gsungs/ sangs rgyas dang byang chub sems dpa' thams cad dang/ chos skyong ba'i srung ma nus pa can thams cad kyis mi srung ba ma yin te/ sems can so so'i las kyi rnam par smin pa myong bar nges pas de dgag par ma nus yin/ 'o na yang ma bsrungs ba ma yin/ hor byung nas lo nyi shu rtsa bdun chos skyong gis bsrungs pa yin/ mi nyag rgyal po bkrongs nas kyang kho yang yin pas las kyi rnam par smin pa myong bar nges pa yin/*" (*Ti shri ras pa'i rnam thar*: 314–315).

Ras pa's narrative serves as a sophisticated synthesis of karmic fruition (Tib. *las 'bras*) and Tantric ethics, providing a multifaceted legitimation for his role in the Western Xia resistance. His defense of his actions—and the empire's fall—unfolds across three primary logical layers:

First, the paradox of sin and sacred duty. Ras pa begins with a candid confession, acknowledging the "great sin" he incurred by performing violent rituals to protect a worldly state. However, he immediately justifies this burden through the status of his patron. By portraying the Western Xia sovereign as a Dharma King who placed his absolute trust in the clergy, Ras pa transforms his ritual defense from a mere political act into a religious necessity. In his view, committing a personal sin to preserve the protector of the Buddha's teachings is not only reasonable but an act of profound preceptor-disciple loyalty.

Second, the polemic of the "heretical" enemy. To further align his violent rites with the Dharma, Ras pa characterizes the Mongol forces as "heretics" (Skt. *tīrthika*)—external adversaries whose very existence posed a mortal threat to the Buddhist faith. By this means, he invokes a specific Vajrayāna ethical framework. Within this paradigm, rites of repulsion (Tib. *bzlog*) and "liberation" (Tib. *bsgrol ba*) are reinterpreted as acts of supreme compassion. Driven by Bodhicitta, Ras pa contends that these rituals protect the Dharma and prevent the aggressors from accumulating further negative karma through their persecution of Buddhists, thus fulfilling the Mahāyāna tenet of acting "for the benefit of all sentient beings."

Third, inevitability and cosmic justice. Finally, Ras pa explains the fall of Western Xia through the overarching law of karma, shielding his spiritual efficacy from the appearance of failure. He argues that the Mongol conquest was not a failure of ritual power, but a "karmic ripening" (Tib. *las sbyor*) for the harm the Tanguts had inflicted upon Mongol territories in previous generations. Yet, this karmic law remained impartial: Ras pa presents the ultimate death of Chinggis Khan as the final proof of cosmic justice. Just as the Tanguts paid their debt through the loss of their empire, the Mongol Khan met his end as the inevitable fruition of his own violent path.

Crucially, Ras pa's account weaves the historical trauma of the Mongol conquest into the metaphysical certainty of Buddhist law. His narrative transforms the fall of the Western Xia from a mere military defeat into a profound cosmic drama—a story of karmic debt, ritual duty, and the eventual liberation of both the "Bodhisattva Emperor" and his "heretical" enemy. By transmuting political extinction into religious meaning, the biography served as a narrative bridge across the wreckage of empire.

IV. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the biography of Ti shri Ras pa Shes rab seng ge constitutes far more than a hagiographic record of spiritual lineage; it is a vital, albeit complex, political archive of the Tangut Empire's twilight years. By navigating the interpretive challenges inherent in the *rnam thar* genre, this research has successfully deconstructed the religious narrative to reveal the underlying geopolitical realities of a collapsing empire. Through a systematic synthesis of Tibetan hagiographical data with Chinese dynastic records, this study establishes a rigorous chronological and contextual framework that rescues Ti shri Ras pa's career from the realm of legend, repositioning his biography as a primary historical document that offers a rare internal perspective on the Tangut court.

The research reveals that during the existential crisis of Mongol expansionism, the Tangut court did not merely patronize Buddhism for spiritual merit; rather, it strategically instrumentalized Tibetan Buddhism as a "transcendent technology of state defense." This convergence of Tantric pragmatism and geopolitical urgency saw the integration of esoteric rituals—most notably battlefield propitiations of the protector deity Mahākāla—directly into the empire's military and administrative apparatus. Furthermore, this study argues that the institutionalization of the State Preceptor and Imperial Preceptor systems represented a functional bureaucratic-liturgical synthesis. These figures served as indispensable administrative pivots who unified sacred liturgy with the practical exigencies of imperial survival. In doing so, Ti shri Ras pa's career provided the institutional blueprint for the "Priest-Patron" relationship that would eventually define Mongol-Yuan governance.

Ultimately, by elucidating this Tibetan-Tangut-Mongol nexus, this research fills critical lacunae in traditional Sinitic historiography. It reframes the Western Xia not as a peripheral actor, but as a sophisticated cultural and political laboratory. It was within this Tangut context that the model of Tantric Statecraft was perfected, providing the essential institutional and ideological precursors for the subsequent Yuan Dynasty.

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