

## Recent Finds in Ningxia Province Pertaining to Buddhism in the State of Xixia, 1038–1227

### Introduction

In recent years academic interest in Xixia culture has increasingly captivated the minds of sinologists and scholars working with the cultures and religions of Central Asia. This interest has been further stimulated by the finds of several hoards of cultural relics which have come to light in the PRC.<sup>1</sup> Although the interest in Tangut culture covers most aspects including its law codex, architecture, history and language, the overall importance of Buddhism has been generally acknowledged.<sup>2</sup> Most of the material relating to Buddhism and the material culture has been found in pagodas and *stūpas* in connection with preservation carried out by the Chinese authorities. In 1987 the Hongfo Stupa in Helan County first came to the notice of the local authorities, but only in the late summer of 1990 were extensive repairs and investigation done.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent survey of these finds, see Bai Bin, “Xixia wenwu kaogu de xin faxian jiqi yanjiu” [New Finds of Ancient Cultural Remains from the Xixia and Their Study], *Beifang wenwu* 4 (1991), pp. 48–56.

<sup>2</sup> For a highly useful study, see Shi Jinbo, *Xixia fojiao shilüe* [A Brief History of Xixia Buddhism], Yingchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ningxia huiyu zitaiqu wenwu guanli weiyuan hui chuanguong shi Helan xian wenhua ju, “Ningxia Helan xian Hongfo ta qingli jianbao” [Report on the Excavations of the Hongfo Stupa in Helan County], *Wenwu* (hereafter WW) 8 (1991), pp. 1–13.

The investigation of the twin pagodas in Jinshan, also in Helan County, began in 1986 and extensive repairs were carried out between April and October of the same year. In the course of the restorations, numerous relics were found.<sup>4</sup> The One Hundred and Eight Stupas in Qingtong County were restored in 1986–7, and here too a number of relics, mainly clay images, were found.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. *The Hongfo Stupa in Helan County*

The Hongfo Stupa, also known as the Wangdeng Stūpa, is located some twenty kilometres from the provincial capital Yinchuan, near the village of Hongxing in Helan County, Ningxia Province. Its three lower levels are octagonal, and it is otherwise built in a non-Chinese style reminiscent of Nepali and Western Tibetan dagobas. It is built entirely of bricks and was originally coated with a layer of whitish plaster. It measures almost thirty metres, although the top spire with the discs has long since fallen down due to earthquakes (see Fig. 1, p. 82).

The stūpa has yielded numerous cultural relics, including fourteen Buddhist paintings (*thañ-ka*) of which ten are in very good condition and the rest in various states of damage. They show various Tantric and esoteric images, including a Cakrasaṃvara *yab-yum*, the Thousand Buddhas, Tejaprabha, the Lord of the Constellations, Vairocana Buddha, and the Thousand-armed, Thousand-Eyed Avalokiteśvara. Among the damaged paintings there is one which features an image of what appears to be the Daoist god of the North, Zhenwu. Around two thousand wood blocks for printing, with roughly half of them in Tangut characters and the rest in Chinese, were also retrieved from the stūpa. Several of the blocks have been severely damaged, but the vast majority are in fair condition.

A number of fragments of terracotta Buddhist images have also been found. They include six full heads and two face masks of Buddhas, eighteen smaller heads of the *arhats*, two face masks of *dvarapālas* (*dali jingang*), ten torsos of *arhats*, and numerous fragments of limbs, etc. Several of the images have Xixia scriptures inside them in the form of the usual so-called “empowered innards” (*fuzang*). A number of small wooden images were also recovered. They consist of a dancing female *devatā*, and a standing *bodhisattva*. In addition there are lesser items and fragments, including a small wooden stūpa, fragments of printed texts in Xixia, wooden tablets with writing on them, end tiles, and a bronze head of a dragon.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ningxia huiyu zitaiqu wenwu guanli weiyuan hui chuanggong shi Helan xian wenhua ju, “Ningxia Helan xian Baisi kou shuang ta kanze weixiu jianbao” [Report on the Investigation and Repair of the Twin Pagodas of Baisi kou in Helan County of Ningxia], *WW* 8 (1991), pp. 14–26.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ningxia huiyu zitaiqu wenwu guanli weiyuan hui chuanggong shi Helan xian wenhua ju, “Ningxia Qingtong xia shi yibai lingba ta qingli weixiu jianbao” [Report on the Excavation and Repair of the One Hundred and Eight Stupas at Qingtong Hill in Ningxia], *WW* 8 (1991), pp. 27–35.

## 2. *The Twin Pagodas at Baisi Kou, Helan County*

The pagodas stand in the grounds of the now ruined Bai Temple some eighty metres apart at Baisi Kou in Jinshan, Helan County, *c.* fifty kilometers from Yinchuan.<sup>6</sup> Each pagoda is *c.* thirty-six metres high with thirteen stories, built of bricks, and with a spire with ten discs resting on a large, stylized lotus base. Both have octagonal ground planes, and are built in a Chinese style well documented in most of North China from the late Tang onwards. On the supporting beams inside the western pagoda and on the door frames there are *dhāraṇīs* written in stylized Sanskrit.

A number of books were found, including standard Buddhist literature as well as Tantric texts written in Xixia and Sanskrit. Both pagodas feature numerous terracotta plaques with various Buddhist images in relief including *arhats*, monks, Tantric protectors and *ḍākiṇīs*. A small wooden image of a Tantric *yab-yum*, as well as a vase and artificial flowers were also found. The find also contained a few pieces of furniture, including a carved altar table, and a large, low chair of the type used by Buddhist abbots when instructing the assembly.

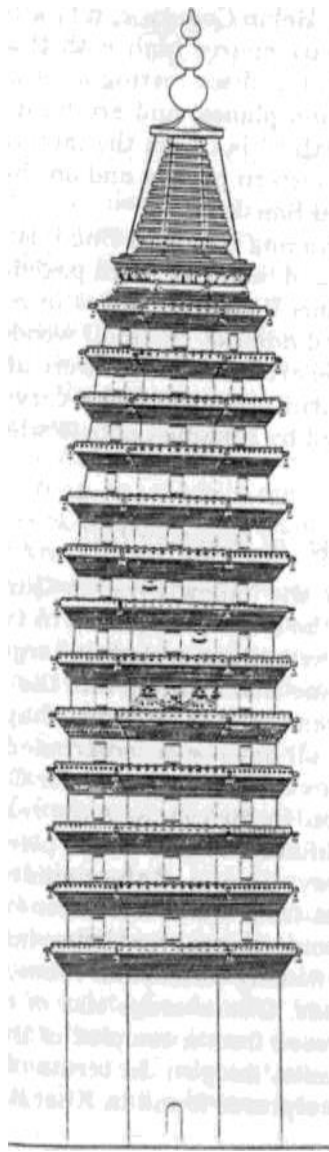
## 3. *The One Hundred and Eight Stupas at Qingtong Hill*

Situated on a low sloping hill above the Yellow River in Qingtong County, Ningxia province. From the bottom the *stūpas* are placed in twelve layers in a triangular shape, with the top *stūpa* built on a slightly larger scale placed on top of the slope, with a small shrine chamber dug into the hill behind it.<sup>7</sup> The *stūpas* are not identical, but come in four different shapes in addition to the large, topmost one. However, all have been constructed in accordance with the *dagoba* format. The complex as such is unique for China, although similar groups are known from Tibet. In the course of the restoration of the *stūpas*, several small sculptures, miniature *stūpas* (three pieces), and reliefs were found, all made of painted clay. In one of the miniature *stūpas* the Chinese recovered one printed sheet from a *dhāraṇī-sūtra* (very damaged), with images of many Buddhas. Among the recovered clay images were four figures of heavenly officials clad in flowing ceremonial robes, three of which are holding a tablet with both hands. The average size of these images is thirty centimetres. Although recovered from a complex of Buddhist *stūpas*, they bear much resemblance to Daoist images. In terms of style they are relatively close to the larger clay sculptures found in Kharakhoto.

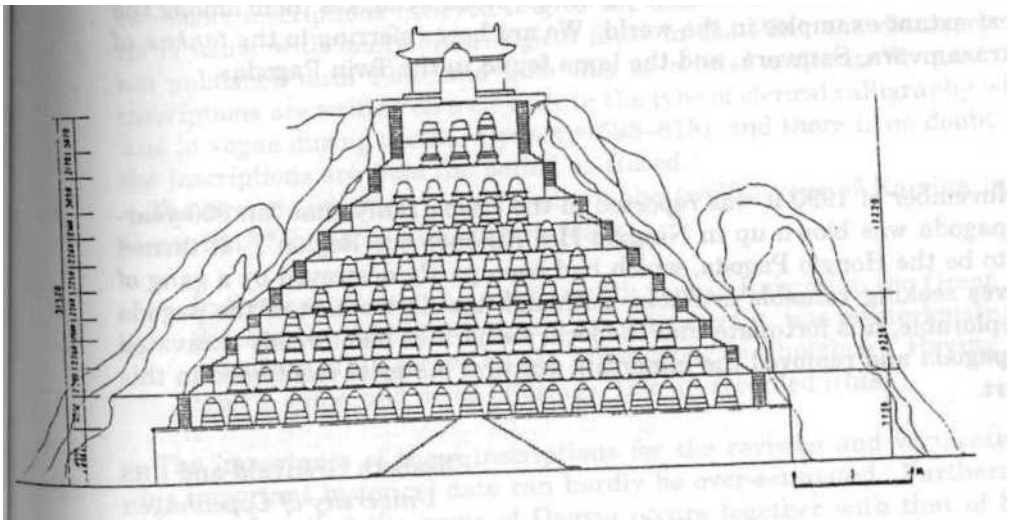
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<sup>6</sup> See Fig. 2, p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> See Fig. 3, p. 89.



*Fig. 2: The Western Pagoda at Baisi Kou.*



*Fig. 3: The One Hundred and Eight Stūpas at Qingtong Hill*

## Conclusion

From the material excavated from the pagodas and *stūpas*, we are now able to get a good idea of the type of Xixia Buddhism which the material represents, something which is further evident by comparing it with earlier finds from Kharakhoto and the imperial *stūpas* in Yinchuan.

The numerous items speak a rather uniform language in terms of Buddhist practices and beliefs, and it is obvious that we are dealing with a culture in which esoteric Buddhism, or rather Tantric Buddhism, played a highly prominent role. While this may also be argued on the basis of the older Buddhist material from the Xixia, the recent finds presented here further underscore this fact. What is perhaps the most interesting aspect of these new finds, in addition to their sheer number and types, is their age, which in the case of some of the Tantric paintings probably makes them among the oldest extant examples in the world. We are here referring to the *tanikas* of Cakrasaṃvara, Saṃvara, and the lama found in the Twin Pagodas.

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In November of 1990 it was reported in the *China Daily* that “an 800-year-old pagoda was blown up in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region”.<sup>8</sup> It turned out to be the Hongfo Pagoda, which had been partly destroyed by a gang of thieves seeking valuable artifacts. Although the destruction of the pagoda is deplorable, it is fortunate that the local authorities had already excavated the pagoda and removed the important cultural material mentioned in this report.

Elisabeth Grønvald and HHS  
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<sup>8</sup> *China Daily*, 18th Dec. 1990.