
Xixia Imperial Tombs

(China)

No 1736

1 Basic information

Official name as proposed by the State Party

Xixia Imperial Tombs

Location

Xixia District
Yinchuan City
Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region
China

Brief description

The nominated property is a necropolis located in the foothills of the southern Helan Mountains, in what is now the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. It is the imperial cemetery of the emperors of the Xixia Dynasty, comprising nine imperial mausoleums, 271 subordinate tombs, a northern architectural complex and thirty-two flood control works. This archaeological burial site bears witness to the religious and socio-political history of the Xixia Empire, which lasted over ten imperial reigns, from the 11th century to the 13th century, until it was destroyed by the Mongol army of Genghis Khan in 1227. Founded in 1032 by the Tanguts, nomadic herdspeople who settled in what is now Ningxia Hui, the empire was inhabited, in addition to the Tanguts, by Han Chinese, Tibetans, Uighurs, Khitans and Jurchens. On the Silk Road, the Xixia Empire was crossed by merchants, caravans, monks and nomads, and developed a multicultural civilisation based on the Chinese imperial model, of which Buddhism was an essential part.

Category of property

In terms of categories of cultural property as set out in Article I of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

Included in the Tentative List

29 January 2013 as the “Western Xia Imperial Tombs”

Background

This is a new nomination.

Consultations and technical evaluation mission

Desk reviews have been provided by ICOMOS International Scientific Committees, members and independent experts.

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the nominated property from 10 August to 16 August 2024.

Additional information received by ICOMOS

A letter was sent to the State Party on 20 September 2024 requesting further information about religious beliefs, the boundaries of the nominated property, conservation and management, protection, management and interpretation.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 4 November 2024.

An interim report was provided to the State Party on 19 December 2024, summarising the issues identified by the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel.

Further information was requested in the interim report on: integrity and authenticity, conservation measures, the risk management plan, the tourism strategy and the local communities.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 27 February 2025.

All additional information received has been incorporated into the relevant sections of this evaluation report.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

12 March 2025

2 Description of the nominated property

Note: The nomination dossier and additional information contain detailed descriptions of this property, its history and its state of conservation. Due to limitations on the length of evaluation reports, this report provides only a short summary of the most relevant aspects.

Description and history

The nominated property is a necropolis containing the remains of nine imperial mausoleums, said to be those of seven Xixia emperors, and those of the father and grandfather of Emperor Li Yuanhao (1038-1048), founder of the Xixia Dynasty (1038-1227). The necropolis also includes 271 subordinate tombs, a northern architectural complex and thirty-two flood control works, dikes and open drains.

Located in the foothills of the Helan Mountains, a mountain range marking the western boundary between the Gobi Desert and the floodplain of Ningxia, which drains into the Yellow River, the necropolis extends over a gently sloping, rocky plain, cut into by gullies and sparsely vegetated. The necropolis and its imperial mausoleums are distributed from south-west to north-east alongside the Helan Mountains, which form a broad landscape setting.

Each of the nine imperial tombs has its own unique characteristics, with the exception of twin tombs 1 and 2. A general spatial organisation can nevertheless be discerned: an imperial tomb occupies an area of eight to sixteen hectares and is contained within a first rectangular enclosure, flanked by triple towers. The entrance to the funerary complex is marked, to the south, by two *Que*

towers. On each side of the south-north composition axis, the two stele pavilions, arranged symmetrically on either side of this axis, were built in this first enclosure. A third pavilion is sometimes placed to the south of the eastern pavilion. A gate with triple towers gives access to a secondary, rectangular enclosure, the axis of which is marked by a short alignment of two rows of statues. Abutting this enclosure to the north, lies the main enclosure, flanked by towers with gates on all four sides. The southern gate is formed of a central pavilion, also flanked by towers.

In the south-west quarter of this enclosure lies a sacrificial hall; extending away from this is a long, straight mound covering an access ramp to the underground burial chamber, which is set slightly to the south of the stupa of the mausoleum. A central mound may mark the geometric centre of the composition.

The subordinate tombs are unevenly distributed around the imperial mausoleums. They are of three kinds:

- Simple tombs, comprising a long, straight mound covering an access ramp to an underground vault, set in front of the stupa;
- Tombs with a main enclosure and a gateway on the south side, which also include, in addition to the arrangements of the simple tombs, a sacrificial hall and a central mound;
- Tombs with main and secondary enclosures, which also include, in addition to the arrangements of the tombs already described, *Que* towers, stele pavilions and a sacrificial hall.

The simple tombs are individual tombs, while the enclosure tombs may contain up to three vaults. As with the imperial tombs, some of the secondary tombs are protected by flood control works.

The function of the northern architectural complex appears to be linked to the operation of the funerary complex. It consists of a large rectangular space, enclosed by walls and organised into a series of peripheral and central courtyards, delimiting the spaces in which are located the remains of various buildings, which may have served as a Buddhist sanctuary or a sacrificial hall, as well as buildings used for administration.

An ensemble of flood control works was created alongside the development of the funerary site. Twenty-six dikes and six drainage ditches, with a cumulative length of more than three kilometres and more than two kilometres respectively, were identified on the site.

The analysis of the other remains of this necropolis and of the objects unearthed during archaeological excavations have made it possible to identify the style, appearance and construction and decoration techniques of its buildings.

Rammed earth, mud bricks and wood are the main materials used to construct the buildings of the funerary

complex. Stone is occasionally used, particularly for the facing of the dikes and for some dry stone subordinate tombs. Glazed terracotta is widely used for roofing and ornamentation.

The state of conservation of the remains on the site does not allow us to describe with certainty the buildings that comprise it. Sometimes, only the foundations remain. Studies of the larger remains enable us to describe the architectural arrangements of the stupas.

The Xixia stupas are massive buildings, usually octagonal in shape or, more rarely, circular. They have a solid internal structure made of rammed earth. They are conical in shape, with five to seven storeys narrowing towards the top, and are punctuated by glazed tile roofs, supported by wooden brackets. Wood is also used for the posts and beams forming the structure of the sacrificial halls or as structural reinforcements for the walls and towers of the mausoleum enclosures.

More than 7,000 ornaments, mainly made of terracotta or stone, have been unearthed at the foot of the buildings. These include zoomorphic motifs, lotus-shaped bases or roof finials, *jialingpinjia*, *dvarapala*, small columns decorated with dragons, fragments of Buddha and Bodhisattva statues, steles and *jingchuang*. They demonstrate the importance of Buddhist funerary traditions in the Xixia Empire.

The off-centre position of the buildings of the main enclosure, which leaves the geometric centre of the enclosure empty and reserved for the spirits, confirms the retention of ancestral Tangut beliefs, co-existing with the Buddhist faith. Another specific feature of the Xixia Imperial Tombs compared with the funerary architecture of the Chinese Tang and Song Dynasties is the position of the burial chamber, which is not placed directly below the stupa.

The furnishings found in the tombs, the zoomorphic statues and the remains of domestic animals evoke the pastoral origins and livestock rearing traditions of the Tanguts. However, the influence of the Tubo, Uighur, Tatar, Khitan and Jurchen peoples is indiscernible or only slightly apparent; the State Party confirmed this in the additional information sent to ICOMOS in November 2024.

The nominated property has an area of 3,899.00 ha, and a buffer zone of 40,569.50ha.

The Tanguts were originally nomadic herdspeople from the north-west of present-day China, in the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu and Ningxia. Under pressure from neighbouring populations, they migrated and settled in the foothills of the Helan Mountains, on the west bank of the Yellow River, from the 10th century onwards. Li Jiqian and Li Deming were the first monarchs to reign over the Tanguts, but it was in 1038 that the Xixia Empire was proclaimed, during the reign of Li Yuanhao.

The position of the territory of the Xixia Empire on the Silk Road increased its wealth and allowed it to develop a policy of trade with the interior regions, the western regions and Eurasia. For this purpose, a network of roads with regular postal relay stations was created. By building a powerful army, it ensured its longevity, expanded its territory and ensured the safe movement of people and goods.

Sedentarisation, the diversity of the population that made up the Xixia Empire and contact with travellers using the Silk Road allowed the Xixia civilisation to flourish in the spheres of literature, art, music and architecture. Institutions and administrations based on the Chinese imperial model were also developed, as well as a writing system based on Chinese characters, into which official documents were transcribed. Finally, Buddhism constituted a fundamental component of the Xixia civilisation.

In 1227, after numerous offensives, the Mongol army of Genghis Khan put an end to the Xixia Empire and destroyed its capital. The funerary complex was not spared. The Tangut Dynasty lasted 189 years and saw ten emperors reign.

Reduced to ruins, the Xixia Imperial Tombs, as well as the Xixia civilisation, would be forgotten for the next 700 years.

It was at the instigation of the Museum of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region that the archaeological study of the remains of the funerary complex began in 1972, followed by periods of research and conservation work that have continued until the present day.

State of conservation

Most of the site has been preserved in its natural desert state, cut into by gullies. A small area of the site, less than three percent, is built on and occupied by a cemetery, or structures necessary for protection and management and for the museum functions of the site.

Of the nine mausoleums, eight have retained the majority of their component structures. The facings and the wooden and terracotta components have disappeared, revealing the internal structure of the rammed earth buildings. Due to the materials used and the destruction, the tombs are only partially intact, with sometimes only the foundations remaining. The burial chambers of the mausoleums have been looted and large pits dug, destroying part of the layout of the tombs. The imperial mausoleums, which have been regularly monitored and maintained since the end of the 1980s, are generally in a stable state of conservation.

The subordinate tombs, the northern architectural complex and the flood control works are between a stable to degraded state of conservation. Their remains are less robust and more fragile than those of the mausoleums, due to the initially smaller scale of the rammed earth buildings.

The destruction caused by army of Genghis Khan, followed by 700 years of abandonment, destroyed the structures and facings that preserved the core of the brickwork and exposed the rammed earth to the elements.

Since 1986, the State Party has been carrying out regular campaigns to consolidate all the remains, prioritising the imperial mausoleums.

In response to the ICOMOS interim report, the State Party specified that the 7,100 objects unearthed between 1972 and 2022 during various excavations had been deposited with several institutions, such as the Xixia Museum, where they are being studied and restored.

Since 2016, the Yinchuan Xixia Imperial Tombs Management Office has been implementing a site rehabilitation programme (the Xixia Imperial Tombs Environmental Remediation Project Design Scheme) that includes demolition, rehabilitation and redevelopment affecting the natural landscape, and facilities, as well as the transport infrastructure and networks. A demolition programme was implemented by local authorities, in consultation with stakeholders, between 2014 and 2019. During this period, the occupants of some businesses and homes were displaced and relocated.

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation of the nominated property is stable overall, given that these are essentially fragile archaeological remains.

Factors affecting the nominated property

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the main factors affecting the nominated property are the climate and the effects of climate change, urban pressure and tourism, as well as mining or agricultural activities. There is also a moderate earthquake risk.

The nominated property is subject to varying degrees of flooding, rain and wind erosion, salinisation, growth of parasitic plants and biological effects. Increased precipitation and the consequent gully formation, as well as temperature fluctuations due to climate change are intensifying damage to the remains.

The earthquake risk appears to be reduced by the nature of the soil. However, the frequency of earthquakes in the Ningxia Region means that this data should be taken into account when monitoring the nominated property.

Other factors are likely to affect the nominated property and weaken the quality of its environment, such as urban pressure, particularly existing buildings to the north of Mausoleum No.6, the Taomengou mining operation, which extends over more than twenty square kilometres, and the vineyards to the east of Mausoleum No.3.

ICOMOS has asked for more details on the potential adverse impacts of the air force base on the integrity of the nominated property, both in its letter requesting additional information and in its interim report. The State Party has provided conclusive responses to these concerns; however, it will have to ensure that air traffic does not increase, to avoid any negative impacts on the nominated property caused by vibrations, and ensure monitoring of this.

ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is generally good and that factors affecting the nominated property are under control overall. Climate and the effects of climate change should be considered as a priority.

3 Proposed justification for inscription

Proposed justification

The nominated property is considered by the State Party to be of Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural property for the following reasons:

- Xixia Imperial Tombs are the largest, most prestigious and best-preserved archaeological site of the Xixia Dynasty, which lasted nearly 200 years.
- The nominated property bears witness to the role played by the Xixia Empire in the economic, political, cultural and spiritual exchanges generated by the Silk Road from the 11th to 13th centuries in north-west China.
- The nominated property, in terms of its landscape, architectural and technical make-up, and in spiritual or religious terms, is the result of the interactions between the various ethnic groups that made up the population of the Xixia Empire.

Based on the nomination dossier and the additional information, and according to the State Party, the key attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value are: the choice of the site and the spatial organisation of the funerary complex; the distribution of the spaces constituting the mausoleums, the architecture of the imperial tombs and that of the subordinate tombs; as well as the materials and techniques employed to build and decorate the tombs of the necropolis of the northern architectural complex and the flood control works.

Comparative analysis

The comparative analysis has been developed on the basis of a typological, chronological and thematic framework. It has examined properties in China, East Asia and throughout the world, inscribed on the World Heritage List, included in the Tentative Lists of States Parties, as well as other properties.

The comparative analysis is carried out according to four typologies: the other remains of the Xixia Dynasty; the imperial mausoleums of the principal dynasties of ancient China; the funerary sites of East Asia and, in particular, the properties included on the World Heritage List or

Tentative Lists; and, lastly, the World Heritage funerary sites in other regions of the world.

As regards the remains of the Xixia Dynasty, the analysis aims to demonstrate that no other site preserves imperial mausoleums and that other sites are not as representative in terms of scale and scope. The funerary sites representing the dynasties that reigned in China are analysed from two perspectives: diachronic and synchronic.

The analysis of sites from the 2nd century BCE to the 20th century in China, four of which are inscribed on the World Heritage List: the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor (1987, criteria (i), (iii), (iv) and (vi)), the Imperial Tombs of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (2000, 2003 and 2004, criteria (i), (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi)), the Capitals Cities and Tombs of the Ancient Koguryo Kingdom (2004, criteria (i), (ii), (iii), (iv) and (v)) and Yin Xu (2006, criteria (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi)), shows the contribution of each of these sites to the general history of Chinese civilisation and their multi-ethnic nature, and underlines the importance of the contribution of the Xixia site to this group of properties already recognised through inscription on the World Heritage List.

The analysis of burial sites from the 10th to the 13th centuries and the seven dynasties or peoples present in the territory of present-day China aims to demonstrate the importance of the nominated property as a site representative of Tangut culture.

The analysis of the burial sites inscribed on the World Heritage List in East Asia focuses, in addition to the four Chinese properties mentioned above, on the Gyeongju Historic Areas (Republic of Korea, 2000, criteria (ii) and (iii)), the Baekje Historic Areas (Republic of Korea, 2015, criteria (ii) and (iii)), the Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group: Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan, (Japan, 2019, criteria (iii) and (iv)), the Complex of Koguryo Tombs (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2004, criteria (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv)) and finally, the Historic Monuments and Sites in Kaesong (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2013, criteria (ii) and (iii)).

The analysis highlights the contribution of the nominated property to the burial sites of Asia, as it is intended to fill a gap.

The analysis then focuses on fourteen burial sites inscribed on the World Heritage List in other regions of the world, all of which bear witness to ancient dynasties and civilisations. In this context, the nominated property is presented as contributing to the enrichment of the typology concerned.

Lastly, the World Heritage property of the Site of Xanadu (China, 2012 (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi)), the legendary capital of the Mongol Kublai Khan, is compared, although it is not a burial site.

The analysis concludes that the nominated property is the largest, most historically important and most significant of the Xixia Dynasty, that it provides evidence of a civilisation that developed between the 10th and the 13th centuries in north-west China, and that this civilisation is not represented among the World Heritage properties.

ICOMOS considers that the rationale behind the comparative analysis is relevant and that the selection of sites for comparison is appropriate within the geo-cultural region.

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

Criteria under which inscription is proposed

The property is nominated on the basis of criteria (ii) and (iii).

Criterion (ii): *exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the Xixia Imperial Tombs, due to their spatial organisation and their architectural, technical and stylistic arrangements, through the expression of a spirituality that combines Buddhism with Feng Shui traditions, provide evidence of a multicultural civilisation based on agro-pastoralism and trade, resulting from exchanges between the ethnic groups populating the region of the Ningxia plains that developed between the 11th and 13th centuries in north-west China.

ICOMOS has requested clarification on how the tombs would reflect the beliefs and funerary customs of the Tanguts and the other communities that were part of the Xixia Dynasty. In the additional information of November 2024, the State Party indicated that the influence of these other communities was limited in the imperial mausoleums: however, there were some examples that could be linked to the traditions of the Khitan or Jurchen peoples. ICOMOS considers that the State Party has not provided sufficient information to demonstrate the interaction between the various ethnic groups that made up the population of the Xixia Empire. ICOMOS nevertheless considers that the architectural style of the Xixia Imperial Tombs reflects a mixture of influences from multiple sources, ranging from the traditions of the Song and Tang dynasties to the beliefs and funerary customs of the Tanguts, where adherence to Buddhism and surviving ancestral religious and cultural traditions predominated. These characteristics are fully expressed in the spatial organisation, architectural arrangements and decorative elements of the tombs and buildings that make up the Xixia funerary complex.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is demonstrated.

Criterion (iii): *bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the imperial mausoleums, the subordinate tombs, the flood control structures and the site of the northern architectural complex illustrate the spiritual and cultural originality of the Xixia Dynasty and the Tangut people. A multicultural civilisation in contact with the Silk Roads, which developed through cultural and commercial exchange in north-west China for nearly 200 years, from the 11th to the 13th century.

ICOMOS considers that the additional information provided by the State Party in November 2024 is not sufficient to demonstrate the multi-cultural dimension of the Xixia civilisation. However, the nominated property constitutes important evidence of the Xixia culture and its imperial lineage, which was established by the Tangut people and flourished in north-west China for nearly 200 years, from the 11th to the 13th century. The archaeological remains preserved attest to an original civilisation whose population was mainly composed of the Tanguts, an initially nomadic people, who, when they settled, developed a specific funerary culture of which Buddhism was an essential part, combined with Confucian practices, the geomantic principles of Feng Shui and surviving ancestral animist beliefs.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is demonstrated.

ICOMOS considers that the attributes identified by the State Party express the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. They provide pertinent details of all the characteristic features of the nominated property and their association with the site in question.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets criteria (ii) and (iii).

Integrity and authenticity

Integrity

The nominated property encompasses, within the boundary defined by the State Party, a set of elements consisting of the imperial mausoleums, the subordinate tombs, the flood control works and an architectural complex associated with the tombs. All of these elements are necessary to express the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. The dimensions of the burial site, which encompass all of the tombs recorded to date and its immediate desert setting, are sufficient to fully represent the features and processes that convey the significance of the nominated property. The site is regularly maintained, and work to protect against factors affecting the nominated property has either been carried out or is scheduled.

In the additional information of November 2024 and February 2025, the State Party specified that no remains

had been uncovered during the construction of the air force base, and that landscaping was reducing its visual impact. This landscaping work is continuing. Regarding the risk of air polluting emissions from aircraft or vibrations during take-off and landing, the State Party indicated that air quality measurements had confirmed that the air force base was having no negative impact on the conservation of the nominated property. Monitoring of the conservation of the nominated property has confirmed that the operation of the air force base was not affecting the stability of the structures. This monitoring will be regularly carried out as part of the management of the nominated property.

ICOMOS considers that the integrity of the nominated property has been demonstrated.

Authenticity

The nominated property was a funerary site from the 11th to the 13th century and is preserved in a state of both exposed and buried archaeological remains.

The nominated property is established within a preserved natural desert setting. Its visual and spiritual connection with the Helan Mountains is also preserved. The long period of abandonment of the site after the Mongol attacks in the 13th century and the lack of subsequent occupation have ensured, despite occasional looting of the funerary chambers of the imperial mausoleums, a high level of authenticity of the nominated property in relation to its context and its original purpose. Each tomb, whether a mausoleum or a subordinate tomb, the flood control works and the architectural complex, are preserved in place in their original location and have retained enough materials to remain coherent.

The State Party specified in the additional information of February 2025 that the attribution of each mausoleum was based on a report published in 1995 (*the Xixia Imperial Tombs: China Field Archaeology Report*), and that there was no consensus on this hypothesis within the scientific community, given the current status of the archaeological research.

The original construction techniques and materials were respected during the conservation work, with a moderate amount of modern additions. All the works are documented; archaeological material unearthed during the work and excavations is preserved and displayed in the site museum or in cultural institutions.

ICOMOS considers that the authenticity of the nominated property has been demonstrated.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity and authenticity of the nominated property have been met.

Boundaries

The land of the nominated property is owned by the State and represents an area of 3,899 ha. There is no longer a permanent population residing within the nominated property. The buffer zone has 78,000 inhabitants. There is an active military air force base neighbouring the site.

The boundaries of the nominated property are bordered by the Yinfa motorway to the south-west and motorway 110 to the south-east, the foothills of the Helan Mountains to the north/north-west and the air force base and its ring road to the north/north-east.

Most of the nominated property has been preserved in its desert state, cut into by gullies. Less than three per cent of the area of the site is built on and is occupied by a cemetery or structures necessary for protection and management and for the museum functions of the site. The boundaries of the nominated property contain all the identified remains of the funerary complex.

The additional information provided in November 2024 by the State Party specifies that the western boundary of the nominated property, at the foot of the Helan Mountains, was drawn by connecting the peaks of the hills forming the smallest foothills of the Helan Mountains. ICOMOS also notes that the satellite photograph of February 1966 does not show any significant legible remains of ancient residences or royal tombs on the site of the air force base neighbouring the nominated property. The State Party indicates as well that, in the event of discoveries of remains related to the Xixia funerary complex, these will be preserved *in situ* and the boundaries of the conservation area of the National Priority Protected Site of the Xixia Imperial Tombs modified accordingly.

The proposed buffer zone takes into consideration the spiritual symbolism presiding over the establishment of the imperial funerary complex sheltering under the peaks of the Helan Mountains to the west and on a part of the piedmont plain that slopes towards the Yellow River.

Evaluation of the proposed justification for inscription

In summary, ICOMOS believes that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of the property for inscription on the World Heritage List and that criteria (ii) and (iii) are demonstrated. The main factors affecting the nominated property are wind erosion, the effects of flooding and intense rainfall events related to climate change, the air force base and urban and tourism pressures. ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is generally good and that monitoring is effective. However, the State Party should strengthen its ongoing monitoring and maintenance of the archaeological remains, particularly through preventative monitoring, the development of consolidation measures and the preparation of a comprehensive conservation plan for the subordinate tombs. The conditions of integrity and authenticity are met, and the proposed boundaries are appropriate.

4 Conservation measures and monitoring

Documentation

The Yinchuan Xixia Imperial Tombs Management Office is responsible for collecting and conserving the archives. It has put together a complete database of archives.

The documentation consists of old historical works, works on Xixia literature, photographic reports and ortho-photographic mapping of the remains and a photographic inventory of the furnishings that make up the museum's collections, monographs, restoration reports and the work of researchers or university articles.

In the additional information of February 2025, the State Party specifies that sixty conservation projects have been implemented at the site. These works have all been documented graphically and photographically; they have been mapped, and the techniques used have been specified.

Conservation measures

The conservation and management plans for the Xixia Imperial Tombs (2019-2035 and 2023-2035) provide for scientific studies, documentation of the nominated property, ongoing monitoring, routine maintenance of the remains and occasional restoration work. The additional information provided by the State Party in February 2025 details the work carried out based on the damage observed, the conservation techniques used and the materials and products used. These observations are accompanied by photographic and cartographic illustrations.

From 2002 to 2016, conservation work was carried out under the supervision of experts and university researchers, for each of the mausoleums. Several series of measures were carried out to ensure their stability and preservation. In addition, from 2016 to 2017, conservation and maintenance work were carried out on 44 of the 271 subordinate tombs. The conservation techniques include strengthening the earthen cores and comprehensive treatment of the surfaces to address structural instability and surface erosion. These techniques take into account and integrate the geographical and weather conditions of the site, the local materials, and research into traditional construction techniques.

In the additional information sent in November 2024, the State Party indicates that Mausoleums No.7 and No.8, as well as the northern architectural complex, have been excavated, producing significant results in terms of understanding of the remains; the publication of the results was scheduled for 2024. The excavation of Mausoleum No. 9 will follow this publication, under the *"Archaeological Work Plan for Xixia Imperial Tombs"* programme (2024-2033).

A detailed, phased overall programme remains to be drawn up for the research and conservation of all the subordinate tombs.

A permanent monitoring programme has been implemented near the mausoleums, associated with the restoration of land and the gullies created by flooding. Flood protection works were created in 1998 and 2003 for Mausoleum No.3 and in 2013 for Mausoleums No.4 and No.6.

The landscape setting has been restored by removing weeds, re-establishing endemic species and preserving the screens of tall trees that protect against wind erosion.

Access to the site is controlled by a security system; the areas of the nominated property and of each mausoleum are fenced and regularly patrolled.

Monitoring

A real-time monitoring system for the funerary complex is organised into four themes: preservation and protection of the nominated property; factors affecting the nominated property; management assurance; and use and research. Each theme has two levels of monitoring, for which the methodology, the frequency of measures and the responsible body are defined.

In the additional information provided in November 2024, the State Party indicates that to manage the monitoring of these indicators, a general information and monitoring system has been in operation since July 2024. The purpose of this system is to enable or facilitate: the organisation of documentary and archival data; the management of data on the conservation of the nominated property, including state of conservation reports; the management of data concerning the safety and security of, and visits to, the nominated property; the identification of factors affecting the nominated property, associated with alert indicators based on predefined evaluation criteria; access to data for scientific research institutions and organisations; and public access to information on the nominated property.

Currently, the monitoring of the nominated property only includes real-time monitoring of the nine imperial mausoleums and eight subordinate tombs: two tombs in each of Zones I to IV. The real-time monitoring relates to their natural and climatic environment, safety and visitor management as well as monitoring the stability of each of these elements.

ICOMOS considers that the system for monitoring the state of conservation, as described, aims to take into consideration all the attributes expressing the proposed Outstanding Universal Value.

ICOMOS considers that it would be advisable that the monitoring system is adapted for easy integration of its outcomes into the Periodic Reporting questionnaire.

ICOMOS considers that it would also be useful to implement a research and conservation programme for all the subordinate tombs.

5 Protection and management

Legal protection

In 1988, the nominated property was declared a National Priority Protected Site and, in the same year, a National Key Scenic Area. In 1991, the regional authorities declared it a conservation area.

The nominated property benefits from the highest level of protection: the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics (1982, revised in 2017). Under its terms, activities related to the excavation, restoration and preservation of major heritage sites are strictly regulated.

Other legislative texts contribute to the protection of the site: the Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People's Republic of China (revised in 2019), the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics (revised in 2017), the Administrative Measures for the Protection and Management of World Heritage Sites (2006), the Administrative Measures for the Inspection and Management of China's World Cultural Heritage Sites (2006) and the Administrative Measures for Cultural Heritage Conservation Works (2003).

Legal texts of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and the Yinchuan Municipality are also included in this system, such as the Rules of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region for the Implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics (2006, amended in 2021), the Regulations of Yinchuan Municipality for the Conservation of Xixia Imperial Tombs (revised in 2016) and the Regulation on the Protection of the Famous Historical and Cultural City of Yinchuan (revised in 2023).

The Helan Mountains constitute a National Nature Reserve (1988), for which the following apply: Forest Law of the People's Republic of China (revised in 2019), Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Nature Reserves (revised in 2017), and the Regulations of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region on the Liupan Mountain, Helan Mountains, and Luoshan Mountains National Nature Reserves (amended in 2017).

The National Nature Reserve encompasses all the mountain ranges located in the nominated property as well as most of the mountains located in the buffer zone.

Management system

The management system identifies four competent administrative authorities that are responsible for managing the nominated property: central government, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the Yinchuan Municipality and the Yinchuan Xixia Imperial Tombs Management Office. They are responsible for ensuring compliance with the legislative and regulatory framework of the nominated property.

In the additional information provided in November 2024, the State Party specifies that the Yinchuan Municipal Government adopted in August 2024 a Coordinated Management Mechanism for the Conservation of the Cultural Heritage at the Xixia Imperial Tombs, bringing together all of the civil and military services for the protection and management of the nominated property (Yin Zheng Ban Fa [2024] No. 63).

In accordance with the regulations of the Yinchuan Municipality, the Yinchuan Cultural Heritage Bureau is the competent department for the protection and management of the Xixia Imperial Tombs in general, under the scientific and technical supervision of the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

The Yinchuan Xixia Imperial Tombs Management Office is responsible for the daily implementation of measures to protect and manage the tombs.

In the additional information received in November 2024, the State Party reported that in July 2024, by municipal decision (Yin Zheng Han [2024] No. 87), the company Xixia Imperial Tombs Cultural Tourism Development Co. Ltd, which is responsible for managing visitor services, was attached to the Yinchuan Xixia Imperial Tombs Management Office.

The Office has a team of twenty-eight people, ten of whom have university degrees in history, museology, urban planning, archives and records management, historical literature, etc. This team is able to perform the daily tasks for which it is responsible. The State Party indicates that it is aware of the relatively low staffing levels relative to needs, the high average age of the staff, and the skills that should be developed in the field of archaeology.

Stable funding for the conservation and management of the nominated property is provided by grants from the State and regional and local authorities, as well as revenue from entrance fees.

The management system assigns to the Yinchuan Xixia Imperial Tombs Management Office the supervision of the programming and consuming of credits. These credits are dedicated to the protection and maintenance of the heritage constituting the nominated property, the development of the infrastructure necessary for the operation of the site and its conservation, including flood protection structures or the improvement of the natural environment of the nominated property and its buffer zone. They are also used for the construction of the site museum and security systems, the promotion of the site and for scientific research, personnel expenses and the professional training of managers and agents.

Potential partners to support the Bureau's missions come from the National Cultural Heritage Administration and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Cultural Heritage Bureau, national professional research institutions, higher education institutions and technical design units.

The Conservation Plan of Xixia Imperial Tombs (2019-2035) was approved and published by the People's Government of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in January 2024. It builds on and complements previous planning initiatives, such as the Plan for the Xixia Imperial Tombs Archaeological Park (2013-2025) and the Territorial Spatial Master Plan of Yinchuan Municipality (2021-2035). In addition, the Territorial Spatial Master Plan of Yinchuan Municipality (2021-2035) integrates the conservation of the Xixia Imperial Tombs with the ecological protection of Helan. It also takes into account the protection of the mountains and the cultural heritage.

The plan covers the nominated property and its buffer zone. It is organised into three phases: short term (2023-2025), medium term (2026-2030) and long term (2031-2035).

Developed on the basis of previous plans, the Conservation and Management Plan of Xixia Imperial Tombs (2023-2035) provides for a conservation zoning plan along with management rules, evaluates the state of conservation of the nominated property and provides for enhanced measures as well as the implementation of actions for protection, management, use and research. It also defines a strategy for the coordinated development of heritage protection and its local economic and social aspects. Finally, it provides for a set of measures to take into account natural risks or risks related to visits and urban pressure.

The additional information received in November 2024 specifies the content of the work plan for archaeological activities from 2024 to 2033, including the excavation of the subordinate tombs to gain a deeper understanding of their features and their historical and social significance, and the study of the flood protection structures.

The additional information of February 2025 indicates that interventions at the site are based on a series of research programmes, notably the following: Integrated Technologies for Protecting Earthen Sites in Arid Environments and Application Demonstration (2014-2016); Research on the Degradation Process and Conservation Technologies of Earthen Sites under Multi-Field Coupling (2020-2023); and Research on Freeze-Thaw Damage Mechanisms and Monitoring Technologies for Earthen Sites (2023-2026).

The additional information of November 2024 indicates that Heritage Impact Assessment has been incorporated into the instruction process for construction projects. This information also specifies that the Yinchuan Municipality has signed a Joint Management Agreement for Cultural Heritage Conservation with the competent authorities of the B4/JK-4 zone, under which the future management and use of the zone will give priority to the safeguarding of the site, the protection of the landscape and the preservation of views.

Visitor management

The presentation and interpretation of the Xixia Imperial Tombs takes the form of a thematic tour through the museum. An online platform and videos complete the experience.

Since 2015, the museum, along with the tourist service facilities that adversely impact the landscape of the site, have been successively relocated. Functional and aesthetic improvements have been made to the remaining facilities. The new museum displays 6,662 objects from excavations conducted at the site. It presents the history of the Xixia Imperial Tombs by means of models, photographs, multimedia resources and thematic exhibitions.

The tourist services adjacent to the mausoleums include small exhibition rooms, toilets and rest areas, including for children and people with reduced mobility. Six main tourist service stations are located at the site.

New pathways have been created, preserving the archaeological areas. Passageways provide access to the various enclosures without damaging the above-ground remains.

In the additional information of February 2025, the State Party specified that the Specialized Plan for Cultural Tourism of Xixia Imperial Tombs has two aims: to develop the link between the nominated property and other sites related to Xixia culture; and to distribute tourism pressure across all sites to better manage the capacity of the nominated property.

Community involvement

The population is regularly informed by local government of the progress of the nomination process. People can provide comments and suggestions regarding the protection and management of the nominated property on the official website of the Xixia Imperial Tombs.

In October/November 2023, the Yinchuan Xixia Imperial Tombs Management Office launched a public inquiry into the Conservation Plan of Xixia Imperial Tombs (2019-2035). Some of the suggestions have been adopted. In November and December 2023, a public inquiry was held regarding the Conservation and Management Plan of Xixia Imperial Tombs (2023-2035), but without any input from the local population. Since 2022, the Office has been calling upon volunteer residents from the buffer zone to contribute to security and promote the conservation of the nominated property.

The development of tourism has also generated low-skilled jobs for local communities and villages in the sale of tourist products and the provision of tourist services (security guards, maintenance staff, bus drivers, etc.).

Regarding the resettlement of residents and businesses initially located within the nominated property, the State Party advised in the additional information of February 2025 that, following negotiations, four households, a

livestock farm, and four businesses had been relocated in 2016 and 2019. Those entitled were compensated and resettled in the buffer zone, where they have pursued or improved their activities. Five businesses were relocated outside the buffer zone between 2014 and 2016 and compensated after negotiations with the Yinchuan Municipal Government. The wine growing business has relocated its activity outside the buffer zone, with the agreement and support of the municipal authorities; the vineyard will be closed in 2029, at the end of its operating contract.

Effectiveness of the protection and management of the nominated property

In summary, ICOMOS considers that the legal protection of the nominated property is complete and that the management system is sound. ICOMOS considers that the proposed Conservation Plan of Xixia Imperial Tombs (2019-2035) and the Yinchuan Xixia Imperial Tombs Management Office are well designed and potentially effective, provided that research programmes and conservation work continue and are extended to all the subordinate tombs and surviving structures within the nominated property; that the measures of the Specialized Plan for Cultural Tourism of Xixia Imperial Tombs are regularly assessed; and that human and material resources are guaranteed or even developed to respond to the concerns raised by the State Party regarding the insufficient numbers and the age of the staff responsible for managing the nominated property. The involvement of residents in conservation and decision-making has to be ensured and sustained for the long-term conservation of the nominated property.

6 Conclusion

The Xixia Imperial Tombs are a huge necropolis in north-west China, located in the foothills of the Helan Mountains, a mountain range marking the western boundary between the Gobi Desert and the Ningxia floodplain, which drains into the Yellow River. The necropolis comprises nine imperial mausoleums of the Xixia Dynasty, several hundred of subordinate tombs and an architectural complex.

This archaeological site illustrates the spiritual and cultural originality of the Tangut, nomadic herdspeople who settled in contact with the Silk Road and who, thanks to cultural and commercial exchanges, prospered for nearly 200 years, from the 11th to the 13th centuries, and developed a culture based on Chinese imperial models, of which Buddhism is an essential part, combined with Confucian practices, the geomantic principles of Feng Shui and surviving ancestral animist beliefs.

The comparative analysis demonstrates the historical importance of the Xixia Dynasty and of Tangut culture.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property is a remarkable example testifying to the Tangut civilisation

and its funerary culture. ICOMOS considers that criteria (ii) and (iii) have been demonstrated and that the conditions of integrity and authenticity of the nominated property have been met.

ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is generally good and that the monitoring is effective. As this is a collection of archaeological remains, ICOMOS considers that the ongoing monitoring and maintenance of all the remains is imperative. The factors affecting the nominated property are wind erosion, the effects of flooding and intense rainfall events related to climate change, the air force base and urban and tourism pressures.

ICOMOS considers that, while the legal protection and management system are adequate, their effectiveness will depend on coordination between national and local heritage agencies. The State Party has implemented measures to ensure this coordination. The continuation and development of training to strengthen the skills of the individuals assigned to these tasks is essential. Lastly, community involvement must be continued through the implementation of participatory mechanisms.

7 Recommendations

Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the Xixia Imperial Tombs, China, be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criteria (ii) and (iii)**.

Recommended Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

Brief synthesis

The Xixia Imperial Tombs are a necropolis of the Xixia Dynasty, located in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region of north-west China, in the foothills of the Helan Mountains, and formed from the 11th to 13th centuries. Comprising nine imperial mausoleums, 271 subordinate tombs, a northern architectural complex and thirty-two flood control works, this necropolis is a unique testimony to the Xixia Dynasty and its imperial lineage, which lasted nearly 200 years and was established by the Tanguts, nomadic herdspeople who settled in a region crossed by the Silk Road, and brought together a diverse population composed, in addition to the Tanguts, of Han Chinese, Tibetans, Uighurs, Khitans and Jurchens.

Through contact with merchants, caravans, monks and nomads, the Tanguts developed a civilisation based on the Chinese imperial model, of which Buddhism was an essential part. This is evidenced by very large, diverse architectural sites, as well as a wealth of objects excavated at the property, including fragments of stelae in Tangut script.

Criterion (ii): The Xixia Imperial Tombs bear witness to cultural and religious influences from multiple sources,

ranging from the traditions of the Song and Tang dynasties to the beliefs and funerary customs of the Tanguts, where adherence to Buddhism dominated and ancestral traditions persisted. These characteristics are fully reflected in the spatial organisation, design and architecture of the Xixia funerary complex.

Criterion (iii): The Xixia Imperial Tombs illustrate the spiritual and cultural originality of the Xixia Dynasty and the Tangut people. This civilisation developed for nearly 200 years in contact with the Silk Road through cultural and commercial exchange in north-west China, from the 11th to the 13th century.

Integrity

The property contains the only imperial tombs identified in the territory of the Tanguts that are associated with a set of subordinate tombs and supplementary constructions and works, allowing for a complete representation of the property and its architectural features in its historical setting. The remains forming the necropolis are in a generally good state of conservation, and the main factors affecting the property are the effects of climate change, tourism and urban growth. The boundaries are adequate, and the buffer zone provides an additional layer of protection.

Authenticity

The property is located in an unspoiled natural desert setting. Its visual and spiritual connection to the Helan Mountains is also preserved. Each tomb, whether a mausoleum or a subordinate tomb, the flood control works and the architectural complex are preserved in place in their original location and have retained enough materials to remain coherent.

Protection and management requirements

The property has been a National Priority Protected Site since 1988. Its perimeter was declared a conservation area by the regional authorities in 1991. All interventions on the property are governed by the national regime for the protection of cultural relics. A series of laws and regulations complete and strengthen this system.

Four competent administrative authorities are responsible for managing the property: the central government, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the Yinchuan Municipality and the Yinchuan Xixia Imperial Tombs Management Office, to which is attached the Xixia Imperial Tombs Cultural Tourism Development Co. Ltd. These authorities are tasked with ensuring, each at its own level, compliance with the legislative and regulatory framework for the conservation and management of the property.

To this end, these authorities have adopted the Conservation Plan of Xixia Imperial Tombs (2019-2035), approved and published by the People's Government of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in January 2024. This plan builds on and supplements previous planning

arrangements, and provides for a conservation area plan with management rules.

The Conservation and Management Plan of Xixia Imperial Tombs (2023-2035) assesses the state of conservation of the property and provides for enhanced measures as well as the implementation of actions for protection, management, use and research. It also defines a strategy for the coordinated development of heritage protection and its economic and social aspects at the local level. Finally, it provides for a set of measures to take into account natural risks as well as urban or tourism-related pressures.

In addition to these specialised conservation plans, the Territorial Spatial Master Plan of Yinchuan Municipality (2021-2035) integrates the conservation of the Xixia Imperial Tombs within the ecological protection of Helan. It also takes into account the protection of the mountains and the cultural heritage.

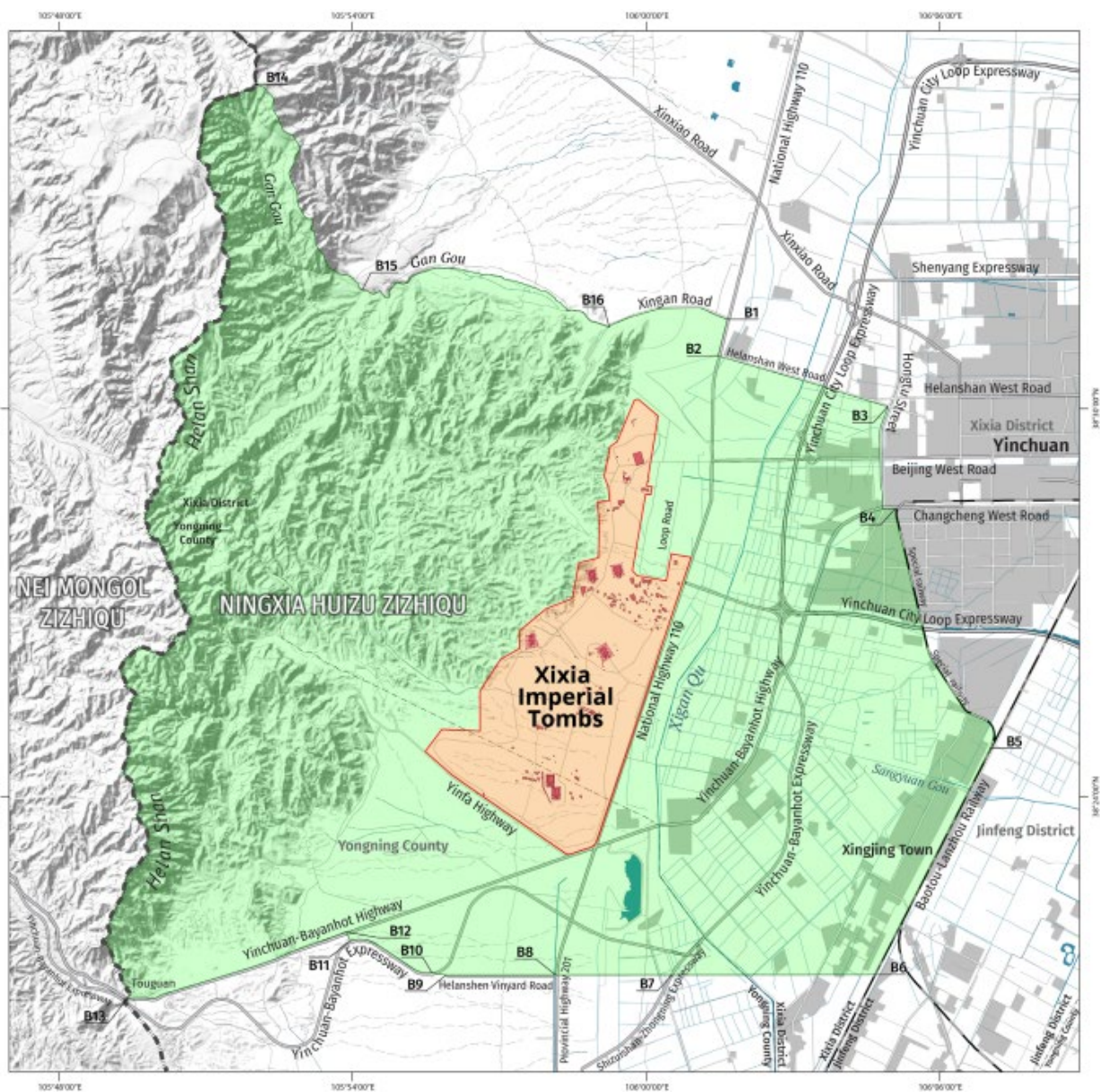
These provisions provide legal, institutional, and management guarantees for the protection of the conditions of integrity and authenticity of the property.

Additional recommendations

ICOMOS further recommends that the State Party give consideration to the following:

- a) Extending conservation works to all the subordinate tombs and remaining structures on the property,
- b) strengthen the ongoing monitoring and maintenance of the archaeological remains, particularly through preventative monitoring, the development of consolidation measures and the preparation of a comprehensive conservation plan for the subordinate tombs,
- c) Continuing the measures to control the effects of the operation of the air force base and ensuring that air traffic does not increase in order to avoid any negative impacts on the property caused by vibrations,
- d) Continuing research programmes related to climate change and its effect on the archaeological remains, including the subordinate tombs and structures,
- e) Publishing research reports and the results of archaeological excavations on a regular basis,
- f) Providing the human and material resources required to ensure the management of the property,
- g) Regularly assessing the implementation of the measures of the Specialized Plan for Cultural Tourism of Xixia Imperial Tombs,

- h) Considering the involvement of residents in decision-making mechanisms.



Map showing the boundaries of the nominated property