



Brief History of Uyghur Literature

Dolkun Kamberi

(Radio Free Asia, Washington DC, USA)

Early and medieval Uyghur works of literature were inscriptions and manuscripts about social activities, including folk poetry and translations of Buddhist and Manichean books. During the last 100 years of archeological expeditions in the Uyghur region, many of the narrative, poetic, love stories, epic and religious manuscripts written in medieval Uyghur have been unearthed around the Turpan and Tarim basins. The cultural heritage of early folk poetry and proverbs from Mähmut Kashgari's *Divan Lughatit Turk* and in other medieval Uyghur texts allude to the moral education, friendship, generosity, the liberal hospitality, and rich life experience Uyghur Turks, as well as their philosophic ideas. Uyghur folk poetry and folk songs very often consist in rhymed quatrains. Thousands of them are to be found in Mähmut Kashgari's *Divan*, in the medieval Turpan texts, and in other manuscripts.

Many centuries ago, when the famous medieval Uyghur king took the throne, he made a great proposal for his kingdom's future. In verse, he made a speech to his officials and people: "I became a king for you. Please pick up your bows and shields. Make the blue wolf our totem. Let the symbol become our good fortune. Let arms and armor be a forest. Let wild horses speed on our prairie. Let rivers and streams run in our land. May the sun be our emblem, the blue sky, our flag (banner)." He then wrote a declaration, decreed that it be sent to all four corners of the earth. The declaration states, "I am a Uyghur king, the globe needs me, and I should be a king of the world's four corners."

This medieval Uyghur king's presentation at his kingship ceremonial gathering among to only eight lines of verse, plus another line of declaration, the king's order to send these eight lines out to all other states. But its content is

so rich that it includes every aspect a state needs. To my knowledge, this is the shortest and best speech by any khan, king, emperor, chairmen, or president throughout world history. Its topics include strengthening the military, developing animal husbandry and the irrigation system for agriculture; faith, the environment, politics, and the Uyghur kingdom's foreign policy. Back then, every strong leader had the same foreign policy: expand and conquer. This is what we have learned throughout history from the great conquerors, such as Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan.

Many centuries later, in 1933, a new Uyghur flag was designed, and I ask myself if the flag designer had not perhaps read this paragraph of the medieval manuscript in Uyghur. In any case, his design of the new state flag corresponds very closely to the medieval Uyghur king's proposal. The first contemporary flag of the Republic of Eastern Turkistan is blue but instead of the sun it features the moon. Most modern scholars believe that the original meaning of the word "Uyghur" is "unity," "union," "coalition" or "federation." We can trace back the name Uyghur to the ancient handwriting of Uyghur Turkic inscriptions, to the documents of medieval Uyghur and Manichaean scripts, to writings in Persian, Khaqannid and Chaghatay, and we find it in today's modern Uyghur scripts. In addition to these scripts, more than one hundred forms of transliteration have been used for the word "Uyghur" throughout the different periods of history and in diverse Chinese texts. Qāshqāri used the word "Uyghur." He claimed that, "The State of Uyghur has five cities. Those cities are 'Solmi', which Zulqarnāyin [Alexander the Great] let them build, 'Iduqut' 'Jan Baliq', 'Bāsh Baliq', and 'Yengi Baliq'.

The Chinese "Twenty-Four Histories" contains historiographies of the "Western States" in which any sinologist could research the history of the Uyghur, their religious system, and socio-economic background. But if scholars intend to pursue the entire subject of Uyghur cultural history deeply and carefully, they should also examine the medieval Uyghur literature that has been unearthed in Uyghur territory. That Uyghur literary heritage may indeed provide the ultimate historical records for studying the Uyghur people. One very important source of medieval Uyghur literature is Yusuf Has Haji's *Qutadghu Bilik* (*Knowledge Brings Happiness*). The work claims that no matter who you are, you must study hard to gain knowledge, as only knowledge can bring happiness to people and society. It states that, "The knowledgeable man carrying stone may turn it into gold; the illiterate man carrying gold may turn it into stone." The text asserts that the world is composed of earth, water, air and fire – the four fundamental elements that constantly contradict yet unite, are moved and renewed. The work is based on four great philosophic values: "Justice and the legal system," "Fortune and Happiness," "Intelligence and Wisdom," and "Awakened mind and Future." The author uses each of the four figures to raise the subject of seeking social happiness, which for him represents one aspect of society. The first figure to speak in the dialogue is the King, who the author names Kün Toghdī (Sunrise), and who represents justice and the legal system. The second one is the prime minister, who the author names Ay Toldī (Full Moon) and who represents happiness and fortune. The third character is the son of the prime minister, who the author names Ögdülmish (Sage), which means wisdom and knowledge. The fourth figure is Odghurmish (Enlightenment), and it represents self-cultivation and an awakened mind as well as satisfaction.

By reading Uyghur literature, we learn that the Uyghur are indigenous to Central Asia. They have developed a unique culture and made significant contributions to Central Eurasian culture, history, literature, medicine, architecture, music, song, dance, and fine arts. Archaeological excavations and historical records show that Uyghur territory is the most important repository of Uyghur literary treasures. Examining early and medieval Uyghur works of literature, including religious manuscripts, historical and biographical inscriptions, it is easy to see that the Uyghur language, which was used in the 8th century during the Uyghur Khanate, is exactly the same as that used in the Orkhun-Yenisey inscription, called ancient Türk. In addition, there is no great difference between the literary language of the Iduqut Uyghur Khanate and the Uyghur literary language of the Qarakhanniyid. This coincidence proves that the ancient Türkic literary language, which was in use before the 8th century, was indeed the literary language of the Uyghur. As we know, up until the 14th century the literary language of ancient Uyghur was in common use among Turkic peoples.

Shāmsidin Sami, the author of *Qamusul'Alam*, wrote that, "the Uyghur people being the most advanced in cultural development, their language was the common literary language among the Türkic peoples, since at the period during which the Chaghatay Khan was in power, the Uyghur language, called Chaghatay Tili, was famous."¹ In the famous *Diwan* of Uyghur scholar Mahmud Kashgari, both Uyghur and Chinese historiographical sources show that due to cultural transitions in the 9th and 10th centuries, some of the Turkic people migrated westward to the lands between Syr-River (Darya) and the Amu River (Darya), and east of the Caspian Sea.

From medieval Uyghur literary works we learn that the Uyghur have traced their ancestry literarily to the legendary hero Alp Ar Tonga and Oghuz Khan (see Oghuz Name). That is verified through Turkologist's studies of the Uyghur manuscripts unearthed in the course of the last hundred years of archeological exploration in the Uyghur region. Furthermore, scholars have acknowledged that one of the most important elements is the language of medieval Uyghur, which served as the literary language for all the various groups of Turkic people during the Uyghur Empire, and the Great Khannid (Qarakhannid), Iduqut Uyghur Khannid and Chaghatay Khannid periods. We have inherited countless literary works belonging to these eras. In addition, traditional Uyghur literature shows the cultural history of the Uyghur people, their civilization, and their arts, as well as their well-established political systems, education, customs, and high-level of morality and faith, all of which made the Uyghur into the leading group among Turkic peoples in Central Eurasia during medieval times. These peoples developed and cultivated the Uyghur language and writing system, continuing to use Uyghur script throughout history until the Mongolian Empire. There is only one example of a Muslim Uyghur people using a non-Arabic script in a part of Uyghur territory until 16th century.

The continuation of the medieval Uyghur cultural tradition occurred for sometimes after the completion of the Islamic cultural transition from medieval Uyghur during the beginning of the Qarakhannid (Great Khannid).² This involved, for example, using Uyghur literary language in medieval Uyghur script as the sole language of state until, via Persian, Arabic script was finally adopted. We clearly see that Qāshqāri expresses a rather different orientation on the question of linguistic scholarship, one that goes back to Uyghur Buddhist ideology, which spurred on the Uyghur philologists in their classical period. This movement is a stock of epic and historical traditions, which the linguist tried to coordinate with their inherited language of Uyghur Buddhist manuscripts. Let us briefly examine Uyghur literature to determine whether these traditions can be interpreted as an attempt to continue traditional Uyghur culture.

Uyghur Literature can be divided into five major historical periods. The first period comprises Uyghur oral literature, idioms, idiomatic phrases, folk stories, folk songs, and the different stories that have come down to us through oral narrative tradition, including ancient mythologies and legends. These were all recorded in written manuscripts in later periods, as well as in documents written in other languages. The second period comprises mostly pre-Islamic literatures, whose influence spread from non-Altaic languages. Some of them we could identify thanks to loan words from Tocharian and Soghdian. The third period stretches from the 10th to the 15th centuries C.E. These mostly record Islamic literatures, which are strongly influenced by the Arabic and Persian languages. The fourth period lasts from the 16th century to the end of the 19th, while the fifth period stretches from the end of the 19th century to the present.

The current generation of Uyghurs has inherited many excellent Uyghur literary works, including ancient inscriptions, and many unearthed Uyghur medieval manuscripts. Of high academic standard, one of the unique encyclopedic works is Mahmud Qāshqāri's *Diwani Lughatit Turk*. Qāshqāri made a great contribution to Turkological and comparative linguistic studies. If we compare the Qarakhannid Turkic language, Orkhun-Runic Turk and medieval Uyghur in Buddhist documents, we can say that all three were basically the same. In all probability we are able to affirm that the Qarakhaqannid language is the continuation of Orkhun-Runic Turk and of medieval Uyghur, at a different stage of development. The Qāshqār dialect of

contemporary Uyghur still preserves some of the important linguistic characteristics of the Khaqannid language that do not exist in other contemporary Turkic languages.

1000 years ago, 11th century Uyghur scholar, Mähmut Qäshqäri, who for the first time used historical comparative methods to research and to classify all the world's Turkic languages, made a great contribution to historical comparative linguistics. He made a careful analysis and comparison of the Turkic languages of his time. In his *Divani-Lugatit Turk*, he pointed out that, "there is very little difference in the original vocabularies of Turkic people, differences occur only with some letter alternation or lost letters." From the examples of words that Qäshqäri gives, we can see that: "letter alternation or loss" means "phonetic alternation or loss". Hence during Mahmud Qäshqäri's period, the differences among Turkic language dialects had mainly to do with phonetic alternation. He concluded that there were five main alternations. First, between the Y and J or (ch); second between M and B; the third between T and D; and fourth between Z and Y; and the fifth between Y and N. According to these five phonetic alternations, and other suffix phoneme alternations between Turkic language dialects, Mahmud Qäshqäri divided the Turkic languages of his time into two different language groups; the eastern Turkic language, and the western Turkic language. The eastern Turkic language group was mainly represented by the Uyghur-Qaraluq language, and the western one, by the Oghuz-Kipchaq language. He also writes of the eastern language group as a Turkic, or Khaqannid, language. He claimed that, "The most beautiful language is the Khaqannid language, and the people in the city of Qäshqär speak "Khaqani Turkic."³

The literary form of folk poetry from Qäshqär's *Divan* continually spread far and wide among Central Asian people. Uyghur proverbs, oral literary traditions, poetry, folk songs, distinctive regional customs, and their language constitute the uniqueness of Uyghur literature. New poems are constantly being written and old ones rewritten, altered to fit contemporary contexts, the writer's frame of mind, or to satisfy new needs or new feelings. A close examination of Uyghur poetry and proverbs reveals observations about men and things, Uyghur folk customs, their social activities, natural history, and literary and traditional culture.⁴ Uyghur poetry and proverbs embody the crystal truth of real life experience, based on long and painful ordeals, and this very popular oral literary tradition continues to be so among ordinary Uyghur people.

Beside excellent, representative early medieval Uyghur literary works, such as *Tonyukuk*, *Kul-tekin*, and the *Bilge Uyghur Khaqan Inscriptions*, others that have come down to us include: *Maitrisimit*, *Chashtani Ilig Beg*, *Oghuz Name*, *Altun Yaruk*, as well as many more literary manuscripts, which are generally well-known to new Uyghur generations. Uyghur literary works that continue the tradition of works that have stood the test of time include: *Qudatghu Bilik* and *Atabetul Hakayik*, as well as Sakaki's Lutefi's, Alisher's, and Nawayi's works, and those of many contemporary Uyghur poets. Medieval historical records and the history of Uyghur literature tell us that Uyghur civilization has a long history and its own traditions. One thing is certain: Uyghur literature including oral narratives, legendary myths, and other literary art forms all serve as invaluable sources of supplementary information for understanding Uyghur culture and for providing insights into the evolving stylistic and cultural trends of the Uyghur people.

Orkhon inscriptions from the Turkic Empire, also known as the Orkhon-Yenisey inscriptions, were discovered in the late 19th century in the Orkhon and Yenisey River Valley in Mongolia. They are one of the earliest examples of writings in any Turkic language—the inscriptions tell the story of reunification of the East and West Turkic Empires. The inscriptions date back to the early 8th century. They are written in runic form, an early form of old Uyghur script that once served as the literary language for all Central Asia. The Orkhon-Yenisey alphabet was eventually replaced by medieval Uyghur script, and the Uyghur language continued to transform as it became the literary language of many Turkic peoples, spreading widely during the period of the Iduqut Uyghur Khanate during the mid-8th to 9th centuries, that of the Qarakhannid Khanate (9th to the 13th centuries), as well as that of the Chagatai Khanate, which lasted up until the late 17th century.

I have deciphered and translated many ancient Orkhon inscriptions, and medieval Uyghur Buddhist and Manichaean manuscripts, undertaking a careful analysis of, and comparison between, medieval Uyghur and the literary language of the Qarakhanid period. Using a comparative linguistic approach to my study, I find that the so-called Khaqannid language is a continuation of medieval Uyghur. The Khaqannid language used by Mahmud Qāshqāri and Yusuf Has Hajji has kept original medieval Uyghur characters and adopted some new linguistic elements from Arabic-Persian. From the development of Uyghur history, we can clearly see that after the decline of the Uyghur Empire in the middle of the 9th century CE (AD), the majority of the Uyghur people's faith started to change from Buddhism to Islam. Uyghur finally completed the transition from Buddhism to Islam around 960 CE (AD), after Sultan Sutuq Bughrakhan adopted Islam as the state religion. Islamic religious identity replaced ethnic identity, and the Uyghur federation, which included the Qaraluq and other many Uyghur tribes, identified themselves as Qara-Khanid, which means "belonging to the Great Khan." The only exception was some Uyghur who lived in the East, that is, in the Turpan basin and the Gansu corridor, and who were still practicing their Buddhist faith until the 15th century CE (AD).

In conclusion, I have learned that Mahmud Qāshqāri and Yusuf Has Hajji's works actually belong to the transitional period between ancient Uyghur languages and the Chaghatay language. That is why we only find about 480 Arabic-Persian loan words in the more than thirteen thousand lines of classic epic in the *Qudatghu Bilik*, but more than 200 Arabic-Persian loan words from only about 484 lines of "Etabetul-Heqayiq," which were written during the 13th century CE (AD). This indicates that the literary language of Chaghatay was not only developed on the basis of ancient and medieval Uyghur, but also enriched its vocabulary by adopting a lot of loans words and some grammatical forms from Arabic and Persian. In this brief essay, I hope that I have been able to share my thoughts about the richness and diversity of Uyghur literature, which can be traced far back through the ages and seen as a continuous literary tradition, one that evidences a vibrant, evolving culture and civilization.

¹ Khāmit Tömür, *Chghatay Tili* [Chaghatay Language] (Qashqar: Qashqar Uyghur Nāshiryati, 1987), p. 2.

² The word "Qara" has two meanings, both in medieval and contemporary Uyghur. The first meaning is "great"; the second "black." The correct translation of the Qara-Khanid is not "Black Khanid," as some historians have rendered it in the past, but "Great-Khanid."

³ Mahmud Qāshqāri, *Divani Lugatit Turk* (Xinjiang helq Neshriyati: Urumchi, 1983), p. 41.

⁴ See Dolkun Kamberi and Jeffrey Yang's 'Focus on Uyghur Poetry' section in *Some Kind of Beautiful Signal*, Issue 17, 2010, pp. 244-291.

The Central Asia Program at The George Washington University aims to promote high-quality academic research on contemporary Central Asia, and to become an interface for the policy, academic, diplomatic and business communities. It calls for a multidisciplinary approach and provides a platform for different, and even sometimes contradictory, points of view on contemporary Central Asia. The CAP strives to bring together counterparts from the United States, Europe, Russia, Asia and Central Asia by promoting various forms of interaction and initiating joint projects.

www.centralasiaprogram.org.

©Central Asia Program 2014