

# SPROGMUSEET

Redaktør: Ole Stig Andersen



## Uyghur language

 Af [Wolfgang Scharlipp](#) 3. september 2009 • I kategorien [Enkeltsprog](#)

 [Maskinoversættelse til dansk [her](#)]


East Turkestan (Chinese: 新疆 (Xinjiang))

The uproar of [Uyghurs](#) against the Chinese administration in summer 2009 caused for the first time a bigger response among journalists world-wide. There have been uproars again and again during the last decades without any reaction in the West. This time doubtlessly the revolt of the Tibetans against the Chinese occupation during early summer has caused an interest in the Uyghur revolt.

As the Dalai Lama is a personality



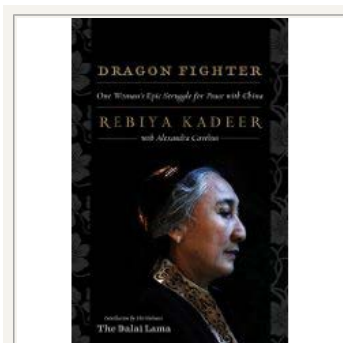
East Turkestan's flag is illegal in East Turkestan

respected world-wide and Nobel prize winner, the situation of the Tibetans has always gained more interest among Western journalists and a small part of politicians. It has always been very different with the Uyghurs who also fight against the destruction of their culture, but have neither a leader who represents them on an international level, nor seems hardly anything being known about who they actually are.

This became clear from the first reports in the news media, where they were referred to as for example "a [Muslim group in China](#)" or similar. In fact the Uyghurs are closely related to the [Turks](#) and are one of the most numerous Turkic ethnic entity, speaking a language that is closer related to the Turkish of Turkey than Kazakh or Kyrgyz are.

Before becoming Muslims in a long process lasting from the 11th to the 15th century they were mostly Buddhists and also after accepting Islam never became fanatically religious. The relation of Turkic peoples to religion had in general always a tendency towards tolerance. This will become clearer in a few lines further down. A growing interest in Islam can be explained as a reaction to a suppression that has been going on for decades unnoticed by the West.

Who wants to get a thorough information about the situation of the Uyghurs should read the [autobiography](#) of [Rebiya Kadeer](#), who lives in exile in the USA and can be regarded as a [spokeswoman](#) of her people.



Dragon Fighter, Rebiya Kadeer's autobiography

### Classical Uyghur



The Orkhon Stone, 7-800 AD

Uyghurs are mentioned for the first time in Turkish language in the [Old Turkish Stone Inscriptions](#) near the Orkhon river in Mongolia in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

At that time they were a turcophone tribal group under the government of the stronger tribal group "Türk" who gave later their name to all tribes speaking a dialect of their language. After having overthrown the power of the "Türk" around 745 they governed the Mongolian steppe and adjacent areas until they were defeated by the Kyrgyz coming from the North West.

Parts of the Uyghurs fled to the area which today is called "Eastern Turkestan" or since some time "Xinjiang" using the Chinese name. In the biggest oasis area, around Turfan, they founded a kingdom, living peacefully together with Iranians. They had come as Manichaeans, taking over Buddhism under the influence of Sogdians and Tocharians. A smaller Uyghur kingdom was founded in Kansu, where up to today the "[Yellow Uyghurs](#)" live, being followers of Tibetan Lamaism and speaking Yellow Uyghur, Tibetan and Chinese.

Manichaean, Nestorian Christian, but far more Buddhist literature in Uyghur language has come down to us, which are still continuously analyzed by scientists, mostly in Germany, Japan and China. The language of these Uyghur texts is called "Classical Uyghur" and every religion used its own alphabet. Only the so-called Old Uyghur alphabet is rather neutral and was also used for other texts than religious ones, like contracts or private letters.

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### Artikler om

## Modern Uyghur

As Classical Uyghur had taken over rather a lot of loanwords, loanblends and loan translations mainly from Iranian and Tocharian, Modern Uyghur, although still being under Iranian influence, accepted many Persian loanwords, but even more Arabic words coming into the language via Persian due to Islamic influence, which found its culminating point in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

For some time the Uyghur alphabet and the Arabic alphabet were used side by side. There are manuscripts which are not only identical in their text but also written in an interlinear form, i.e. one line in Uyghur, the following line in the Arabic alphabet, not only the text being identical but even the orthographical system.

Before 1937 Uyghurs used the Chaghatay writing system, the graphic system of the [Chaghatay language](#), the common Central Asian Turkish language written in the Arabic alphabet, but differing from Ottoman in the West, the Ottoman Empire. In that year the attempt was made to render the linguistic Uyghur peculiarities with the Chaghatay-based writing system.

Chinese influence had been very weak during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when only 5% of the population in Eastern Turkestan/Xinjiang were Chinese. According to a census 1949 less than 300 000 Chinese people lived in that area, today the majority of ca. 19 mio. inhabitants are Chinese, making the ca. 9 mio. Uyghurs a minority, the rest of the population being mainly Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.

Among all Non-Chinese peoples of Eastern Turkestan Uyghur is spoken as the Lingua Franca, while the knowledge of Turkic languages among the Chinese population is almost non-existent.

## Dialects

There are different opinions about the dialectal classification of Uyghur. The difficulties in classifying the dialects have their origin certainly in the lack of research. Another problem is that the population of Eastern Turkestan/Xinjiang live small towns and villages often far from each other. This isolation has created dialects in many regions having again several sub-dialects which partly vary only little from each other on the one side and on the other showing surprising differences in phonetics, loanwords and even vocabulary.



East Turkestan's provinces

The most widely accepted opinion is that Uyghur has three dialect groups:

1. The Central group which is divided into a northern and a Southern sub-group. The Northern one is for example spoken in the capital [Ürümqi](#), in [Ili](#), [Turfan](#) etc., the Southern one in [Kashgar](#) and along the Southern edge of the [Tarim Basin](#).
2. The Khotan dialect group is spoken in [Khotan](#) (Hoten), Cherchen and Charklik.
3. The dialect of [Lopnur](#) in the South-East of the country (the area where China tests its nuclear weapons).

## Standard Uyghur

Standard Uyghur, the official language and language of all publications is based on the Northern dialect. It is very similar to [Uzbek](#) and much closer to the Turkish of Turkey than [Kazakh](#) and [Kyrgyz](#) are. The greatest difference is found in the high number of verbal compositions which Turkish has to a much smaller degree. Some examples will follow later.

## Some remarks to phonetics

Many phonetic peculiarities are typical for most of the Central Asian Turkic languages (ST. in the following for Standard Turkish of Turkey).

- The pronoun for the first person singular is *men* in contrast to Turkish *ben*, a result of regressive assimilation in which the final /n/ influenced the /b/.
- Instead of the /v/ in the beginning of a Turkish word in Uyghur we find /b/, like in *barmak*, ST.: *varmak* to arrive; *bermek*, ST.: *vermek* to give etc.
- The voiced guttural in anlaut position in Turkish is unvoiced in Uyghur: ST.: *girmek* to enter, Uyghur: *kirmek* etc.
- The so-called present participle ends in ST. in –an, while Uyghur has kept the Old Turkish form –gan, as in the example: *kalgan* remaining; ST.: *kalan*.
- Simple forms of conjugation are similar to ST., some are identical: ST.: *girdim* I entered, Uygh.: *kirdim*; from *girmek/kirmäk* to enter.

Such forms give the impression that there is no difficulty in mutual comprehension. But on the other hand there are differences which create problems, one of them being the conjugational system.

## Serial verbs

Typical for Uyghur, as also for other Central Asian Turkic languages is the combination of verbs, sometimes of three, four or even five. In such a case the first verb ends in a suffix that expresses neither tense nor person while the following verb, that modifies the semantics of the first one, has all the endings of a finite verb.

Let's look at two simple examples: the two verbs "almak" to take and "kälmäk" to come, create the verbal compound *elip kälmaq* meaning "to bring (here)". The verbal stem *al-* takes the suffix *-(i)p*, denoting an infinite verb, i.e. expressing no notion concerning tense, person or anything else but being the first part of a verbal compound. The *al-* has changed to *el-* under the regressive influence of the suffix. Thus we have the actual meaning

aktuelle sprog Alfabeter Anmeldelser arabisk

Biblen bogstaver børn Danmark Dansk Dialekter

engelsk esperanto Formidling fransk identitet

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| juli 2009      |  |
| juni 2009      |  |

"to take something and come with it".

Another example: *okumak* "to read", giving up its infinitive suffix and replacing it by *-(i)p* followed by the verb *bärmäk* "to give" create the compound *okup bärmäk* which means "to read to/for someone, in the sense of the German "vorlesen".

Certain verbal combinations have in the history of the language and their frequent use become part of the conjugational system, expressing different tenses, aktionforms and aspects, which are not yet all analysed and described due to the lack of research. The verbal system of the Central Asian Turkic languages is very rich and the results of research about them are mostly published in either the respective Turkic language or in Russian.

There are also some developments in morphonology which differ from the West-Turkic (*Oguz*) languages. We had met one example above in the case of *al- > el-*, where the palatal quality of the /i/ in the suffix *-ip* results in a regressive assimilation of the anlaut /a/ of *almak*. Several other features of morphonology differ from Western Turkic languages/dialects. But even among the Uyghur dialects, especially certain verbal compounds can express different semantics from the same form in another Uyghur dialect. Most of these phenomena have not been described yet.

## The Vocabulary

The biggest part of the vocabulary is pure Turkish, although there are many old loan words from mainly Iranian languages, like *nan* for "bread", which can be regarded as "uyghurized" words. There are more Arabic loanwords, which came in the old times via Persian than there are in ST. as in Turkey most of these loanwords were systematically replaced by old or newly created Turkish words within the framework of the [Turkish Language reform](#) from 1932 on.

Such an official reform has never taken place in Uyghur. Due to an increase in the Chinese population of Eastern Turkestan/Xinjiang and a systematic sinicization Chinese loanwords had become abundant. Especially during the time of Mao and after most terms of the communist theory were Chinese loanwords.

Among the Uyghur population of Kazakhstan many Russian words were accepted which partly found their way also into the Turkic languages of "China". While Chinese loanwords are getting less, these are more and more replaced by Russian words, because these are regarded as international terms. For example the word for "telephone", formerly being Chinese *dian hua*, is often replaced by *tilpun* which is the Uyghur pronunciation of *telefon*. Other examples are *aptonom* < russ. *avtonom*, *aptomobil* < russ. *avtomobil* etc.



## Alphabets

Few languages in the world have been written in so many different alphabets as the Turkic languages. Taking only Uyghur in modern times into regard we should begin by mentioning the attempt to make the Arabic alphabet suitable for writing Uyghur, as mentioned above, a system that underwent constant changes. In the years between 1950 and 1960 a [Cyrillic](#) based alphabet was introduced, as was done to all Turkic, and most other, languages in the Soviet Union. In 1960 it was replaced by a Latin based alphabet which included the letters of the Chinese [pin yin](#) alphabet, which was supposed to replace the Chinese Characters in China and was used for experiment in some minority languages. A practical idea behind it was certainly also the idea to facilitate the introduction of Chinese words into these languages. After the Cultural Revolution Uyghur was allowed to the *kona yezik*, the Old Alphabet, which was modified again by introducing modified Arabic signs which facilitate reading.

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## Læs også:

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