

The Language Choices and Script Debates among the Uyghur in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China*

Bahargül Hamut (Ürümqi, China) and Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (Berne)

Abstract

The overwhelming majority of the more than 10 million Uyghur – Turkic Muslims who inhabit Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China – speaks the Uyghur language. Currently, Uyghur is written with the help of a modified Arabic script, just as it was in Xinjiang before the 1920s. Yet the majority of the twentieth century abounded in linguistic experiments and frequent switches between Cyrillic-, Latin- and Arabic-based alphabets. This paper focuses on changes made to written Uyghur following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. It also discusses the current prospects of Uyghur script in Xinjiang in light of three significant developments: The government's plan to broadly introduce "bilingual education" (*shuangyu jiaoyu*) for the Uyghur; the growing emphasis on the use of standard Chinese in Xinjiang's public space and in official communication; and the growing use of Latin-based transliterations in Internet and mobile-phone communication.

1 Introduction

Spoken by the Uyghur who inhabit Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China, the Uyghur language belongs to the broader family of Turkic languages. This language family has about 180-200 million speakers in Eurasia (Moser/Weithmann 2008: 173). Uyghur is to a significant degree intelligible with Uzbek and, to a smaller extent, with other Turkic languages spoken in Xinjiang and in Central Asia, like Kazakh and Kyrgyz. Some degree of understanding is also possible with speakers of modern Turkish. According to the 2010 Census, the total population of Xinjiang is 21.8 million. With a population of 10 million¹, the Uyghur officially constitute the province's largest *minzu*.² The next largest *minzu* is the Han Chinese, with more

* We would like to thank Sabine Strasser, Anke von Kügelgen, Talant Mawkanuli, Amir Sheikhzadegan, two anonymous reviewers, and Elke Hentschel for their input and helpful comments. Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi is grateful for the financial support provided by the Swiss National Science Foundation and UniBern Research Foundation for her fieldwork in Xinjiang.

¹ The estimates of how many Uyghur live outside of Xinjiang differ significantly. Dwyer (2005: 12) suggests a population of approximately 400,000 Uyghur in Central Asia and Mongolia. Shichor (in Gladney 2004: 383) estimates the number of Uyghur abroad at 500,000, while Uyghur advocacy websites claim 10 million Uyghur living in diaspora. Besides Central Asia and Mongolia, large Uyghur communities are located in Turkey, the United States, Germany and Canada.

² *Minzu* are officially designated population categories; the term is translated either as "nation" or "nationality" (in Stalinist terms) or, more recently, as "ethnic group." There are 56 *minzu* in China.

than 8 million people, followed by Kazakh, Hui/Dungan, Kyrgyz, Mongols, Russians and other *minzu* (Toops 2013: 21). Each of these groups has a distinct spoken language, except for the Muslim Hui/Dungan who speak Chinese. To further complicate the linguistic situation, six scripts are currently used in Xinjiang's public space: Arabic (for the writing of Uyghur and other Turkic languages³), Chinese characters, Cyrillic script to write Russian, Mongol script to write Mongol, Latin alphabet for Pinyin romanization⁴, and Manchu script as used by the Xibe/Sibe.

Over 85 per cent of the current Uyghur population inhabit southern and eastern Xinjiang. Divided from the north by the mountains of Tengri Tagh/Tianshan⁵, southern Xinjiang is an arid basin occupied almost entirely by the extensive Taklamakan Desert. Now the site of modern towns and cities, the oases located at the rim of the desert were long ago fed by the melt-water from the glaciers of Tengri Tagh and the Kunlun mountains at the Tibetan border. Xinjiang is rightly referred to by Millward (2007) as "Eurasian Crossroads." Ancient trading routes, including various branches of the Silk Road, used to pass through the area of the Tarim Basin in the south and the Dzungar Basin in the north, connecting China with Central Asia, India, and Europe.

Historical records indicate that the writing systems in what is today south and east Xinjiang experienced several significant changes. Among the scripts used by the region's inhabitants were the East Turkic Runiform script and Old Uyghur script, the Manichaean script, and Brāhmī. Between the tenth and sixteenth centuries, with the gradual eastward Islamicization of the Tarim Basin, Turfan and Qumul/Hami, the Arabic-based script gradually replaced the Sogdian-based Old Uyghur script. The inhabitants of the domain of the Idiqut Khan, which comprised Turfan and the easternmost oasis of Qumul, were the last population to adopt the new Arabic-based script. The Arabic-based script that entered Tarim Basin from Central Asia was adjusted a number of times to make it a better fit for Turkic languages. The most significant reforms were introduced in the thirteenth century. This reformed literary language, referred to as Chagatai, had been a *lingua franca* among the Turks of Central Asia until the 1920s, when state borders and different power regimes began to intersect this literary continuity. The Uyghur in Xinjiang continued to use the Chagatai orthography until the 1930s, yet already in the 1920s did Uyghur intellectuals begin to voice a need for further script reform (Bellér-Hann 1991: 72). Following this, a series of script experiments were launched that accompanied the popularization of the Modern Uyghur Language (*hazirqi zaman Uyghur tili*).⁶ While Uyghur was initially to be written with a modified version of Chagatai, plans were powerfully influenced by linguistic projects implemented in Soviet Central Asia. As a result, Xinjiang authorities began experimenting with the idea of introducing a Latin-based script. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, authorities further experimented with the introduction of a Cyrillic-based script for the Turkic languages used in Xinjiang (Baldauf 1993: 702f.; Chen/Wang 2002:

³ Also, the Iranic Wakhi and Sarikoli (classified as Tajik in China) use the Arabic script, as do some Daur/Dagur. Other Daur/Dagur also use the Mongol script.

⁴ Pinyin is the official romanization of Standard Chinese.

⁵ The former toponym is Uyghur; the latter, Chinese. We provide both Uyghur and Chinese toponyms only where the two differ significantly; otherwise we use Uyghur place names. To transcribe Uyghur toponyms we use the 2008 Uyghur Computer Writing, with the exception of some names that are known in the West by other transliterated forms, e.g. Kashgar and Hotan.

⁶ see Yolboldi, Musa and Exmet (1983: 16); Bögü (2002: 2).

27–29). Ultimately, none of these plans was implemented on a large scale until the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, with Xinjiang within its borders.

This paper focuses on the changes introduced to Uyghur writing after 1949, and it discusses the future prospects for Uyghur script and spoken language in Xinjiang in the context of three significant developments. These developments include the government's plan to broadly introduce "bilingual education" (*shuangyu jiaoyu*) for the Uyghur, second, the growing emphasis on the use of standard Chinese (Putonghua⁷) in Xinjiang's public spaces, education and in official communication, and third, the growing use of Latin-based alphabet by Uyghur in Internet and mobile-phone communication. These developments are explored through data collected by Bahargül Hamut during topic-oriented conversations on Uyghur language-related chat-groups on the Internet and mobile phones, and through participant observation among various script users in Urumchi between 2011 and 2013. Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi contributed to this study with data collected during ten months of anthropological fieldwork conducted between March 2011 and October 2012.⁸ Her field study focused on the town of Aqsu in southern Xinjiang, and on the regional capital of Urumchi. Her data were primarily collected through participant observation of language practices among Uyghur research participants in Aqsu, and through informal conversations on language and script preferences with Uyghur individuals representative of the main linguistic categories among the Uyghur in Aqsu and Urumchi.

2 Uyghur writing since 1949

After the 1949 founding of the PRC and the establishment of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955, two major script reforms of the Uyghur language were launched. While the first in 1956–1957 was a rather short-lived experiment, the second, implemented between 1965 and 1982, influenced the Uyghur language and Uyghur-language education for a significantly longer period of time.

In reaction to script reforms that introduced Cyrillic for the writing of Turkic languages in Soviet Central Asia, in 1956 the PRC's State Council and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Language and Script Committee⁹ launched a short-lived campaign to introduce the Cyrillic script for the writing of Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Mongol languages in Xinjiang. However, this policy was abandoned after just one year (Bellér-Hann 1991: 73). The central government's attention next moved to the creation of Latin-based scripts for China's ethnic minorities. These were to be modeled on the Pinyin romanization of standard Chinese. After a two year consultation of the first draft that was put forth in 1956, the State Council officially

⁷ Putonghua literally means "common speech." It is based on the vocabulary of the northern Han language, Beijing pronunciations and grammar based on literary works written in baihua. Baihua refers to a colloquial language broadly used in China's pre-20th century colloquial prose. For centuries, texts in baihua did not count as literature. Literature was associated with the *guwen* (old script), often referred to as "classical Chinese."

⁸ Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi's fieldwork was generously supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Project no. 100013_132387/1) and the UniBern Research Foundation (Project no. 4/2011).

⁹ In Uyghur: Xinjiang Uyghur Aptonom Rayonluq Til Yéziq Komitéti, in Chinese: Xinjiang Weiwu'er Zizhiqu Minzu Yuyan Wenzhi Gongzuo Weiuyuanhui; briefly Xinjiang Til Yéziq Komitéti or Yuweihui.

adopted the Latin-based Pinyin romanization for standard Chinese (*Hanyu Pinyin Fang'an*) in February 1958 (Dwyer 2005: 75). The following year, a draft proposal for the creation of Pinyin-based scripts for minority *minzu* in the PRC was put forth. It stipulated that the Latin alphabet should become the basis for all newly created scripts for minority *minzu*. The *minzu* who had previously used other writings, including the Uyghur, Dai or Yi, were to switch to Latin-based alphabets as well (Chen/Wang 2002: 28; Harrell/Ayi 1998: 64). After a testing phase between 1960 and 1964, the Chinese central government officially endorsed a policy to replace the various scripts used by ethnic minorities within China's borders with Latin-based scripts in January 1965. In Xinjiang, the Language and Script Committee issued regulations for the introduction of a Latin-based script for the writing of the Uyghur language. This so called New Script (*yéngi yéziq*) was modeled on the Pinyin orthography and was to replace the former Arabic-based script, which soon came to be referred to as the Old Script (*kona yéziq*). Through the process of implementation, the political motivations for the targeted uniformization, the lacking substantiation by scientific research, and the insufficient practical considerations became obvious (Chen/Wang 2002: 30). The effectiveness of implementing the New Script in education was additionally compromised by the excesses of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), during which Uyghur schools in Xinjiang were either closed or offered only irregular teaching.¹⁰ Still, in the second phase of the Cultural Revolution, the Latin-based script gradually came into broader use; in 1976, it was formally endorsed by the Language and Script Committee (Dwyer 2005: 20).

Major changes to the language and educational policies in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities were brought about by shifts in leadership following the death of Mao Zedong, by post-1978 economic and social reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping, and especially by the wave of redress towards minority *minzu* under Hu Yaobang following his 1980 visit to Tibet. The promise to minority *minzu* that they might freely use and develop their own languages and scripts was again revived, along with the legal promise to guarantee these rights (Heberer 1989: 129). In Xinjiang, this shift was manifest in 1982 with the re-introduction of the Old Script (modified Arabic) as the official script for written Uyghur. While the Law on Regional Autonomy was officially endorsed in May 1984,¹¹ new orthography rules for the Arabic-based script had already been officially sanctioned by January. The new orthography included two new letters that would clearly distinguish all the vowels used in spoken Uyghur. While the spoken language has eight vowels, in the pre-1984 orthography there were only six letters to represent them. Four vowels – o, ö, u and ü – were represented with two letters: o and ö with *بو* and u and ü with *ئو*. Following the introduction of the new orthography, the four vowels were each represented with a distinct letter: نو (o), ئو (ö), ئو (u), and ئو (ü).¹² The orthography was modified twice after 1984 – once in January 1997, and again in September 2009. Among their other objectives, these later changes attempted to regulate ways of registering the vowel reduction characteristic of the Uyghur language.

¹⁰ On how the Cultural Revolution changed the theory and practice of policies toward the minority *minzu*, see Heberer (1989: 25–29).

¹¹ Article 10 of the Law on Regional Autonomy states, "Autonomous organs in the areas of national autonomy should ensure that minority nationalities living in their areas enjoy the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages..." (LRA 1989: 414).

¹² See Osmanov and Abdurishid 1987 and Yaqub et al. (1990–1999) to learn more about the new orthography.

Since the late 1990s, the growing popularity of modern communication technologies—including the Internet and mobile phones—launched a new round of discussions on the Uyghur script among Xinjiang's Uyghur scholars and non-scholars. In the late 1990s, the possibility of returning to the Latin-based script was hotly debated. In order to systematize the use of the Latin alphabet to code Uyghur, Uyghur linguists proposed a new Latin-based script named Uyghur Computer Writing (*Uyghur kompyuter yéziqi*) in 2000. Based on the International Phonetic Alphabet, it was meant to facilitate computer communication; nonetheless, it was debated, remodeled, and eventually abandoned. In 2008, a second attempt was made. This version of Uyghur Computer Writing was conceived by Uyghur linguists with the goal of making it a standard transliteration to be used in electronic communication channels.¹³ Since 2008, computer software has been developed to convert texts between Arabic-based Uyghur script and the new Computer Writing. Still, the popularity of the Computer Writing is low, particularly since it is not systematically taught at schools or universities. It is likewise only marginally used by computer and mobile phone users. Somewhat paradoxically, even Uyghur linguists tend to use other transliteration forms online and in mobile-phone communication. Though attempts to systematize the use of Latin-based transliteration are undertaken, the Arabic-based script remains the only officially-endorsed Uyghur script in Xinjiang and is used in the mass media, education and in state administration.

Since the late 1990s, Uyghurs have continuously debated questions of whether, to what extent and in what domains of life Latin-based script could, or should, replace Arabic-based writing. In the debate, there appear to be three major opinions: one favoring the use of Arabic-based writing (Old Script), one favoring the use of Latin-based writing (either the New Script or a new form of transliteration), and the third arguing for a differentiated use of both Latin- and Arabic-based scripts. This group supports the standardization of both writing systems and a clear distinction of their usage.

2 Script preferences among the Uyghur

2.1 Preference for the Arabic-based script

Among those who advocate for the exclusive use of the Arabic-based script in daily life and for electronic communication, elderly Uyghur who graduated from school before 1965 and, thus, before the shift from Arabic- to Latin-based script are arguably the most prominent. The opinions of these elderly Uyghur focus on the negative impact of the Latin-based writing; they believe it will erode Arabic reading and writing skills and eventually cause Arabic illiteracy among younger generations. Emphasizing the long history of Arabic in written Uyghur, this generation regards the Arabic script as part of Uyghur cultural heritage and a crucial marker of Uyghur identity. These Uyghur also underscore the importance of Arabic as the language of the Quran and thus a crucial component of Uyghur religious identity. Moreover, they believe Arabic based writing reinforces transnational religious continuities between the Uyghur of Xinjiang, other Turkic Muslims of Central Asia, and the international Islamic *Umma* in general.

¹³ This proposed transliteration is known as Uyghur yéziqidiki herplerni Latin herpléri bilen ipadilesh layihisi in Uyghur and Weiwu'erwen ladinghua fang'an in Chinese (lit. A draft of a Latin-based transliteration for Uyghur script). See Abduweli et al. (2009: 34–37).

The Arabic-based script is thus regarded by these individuals as an important component of transnational Turkic identity. A few of these research participants also stressed that the Arabic script connects the Uyghur people to the historical Chagatai literary canon of Central Asia. Though Uyghur is one of very few Turkic languages still written with an Arabic-based script,¹⁴ educated Uyghur are particularly aware of the pre-twentieth century literary continuity that paralleled the Islamic continuity in Central Asia. Though to a lesser degree, there is also an awareness of the partial intelligibility between the literary Chagatai and Ottoman Turkish, though this link was broken with the launch of Atatürk's script reforms in Turkey in 1928.¹⁵ At roughly the same time, the introduction of the Latin-based and, later, Cyrillic-based alphabets in Soviet Central Asia further reinforced the fragmentation. Today the use of Arabic-based script actually isolates the Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz of Xinjiang from other Turks across the border. Nevertheless, a historical understanding of this literary and religious continuity remains crucial to how educated Uyghur, but also other Uyghur engaged in transnational activities such as trade, position themselves in relation to China and Central Asia. That the old Arabic-based script is still used in Xinjiang is a point of pride; for this portion of the Uyghur population, it is a crucial component of the Uyghur identity as both Turks and Muslims.

The debate around the Arabic-based script directly relates to identity processes occurring in Xinjiang, processes that include negotiations over the importance of religion to being Uyghur. In contemporary identity politics, Islam is identified as a crucial ethnic marker, particularly as regarding processes of boundary making between the Uyghur and Han in Xinjiang.¹⁶ The Han, represented in this discourse as religion-less and knowing no fear of god, are conceived of as morally ambiguous and impure. As a contrast with the "godless" Han, Uyghur individuals tend to claim for themselves a higher moral standing and ritual purity. Perhaps in reaction to this discourse, one at least some Han are aware of, increasing numbers of Han have appeared to join Christian churches in Xinjiang. Conversations held with attendees of the Catholic church in Urumchi suggest that the number of devotees has risen significantly in the past decade. Nevertheless, the Arabic-based script remains central to identity negotiations of this portion of the Uyghur population. It reinforces ethnic boundaries vis-à-vis the Han, and at the same time strengthens historical and religious continuity that extends westwards.

2.2 Preference for a Latin-based script

The preference among Uyghurs for a Latin-based script is related to a combination of factors including age and education. For instance, many Uyghur who attended school between 1965 and 1982 never acquired the knowledge of the Arabic-based script. Instead, the Latin-based New Script was the writing they learned and used. Although some of these Uyghur learned Arabic script through family education or in special writing courses offered after 1982, they rarely achieved a fluency in writing similar to those Uyghur who were educated prior to 1965 or after 1982. Because they are more familiar with or faster at using Latin-based writing, these

¹⁴ Other examples are the Uzbeks or Kazakhs in Afghanistan.

¹⁵ The shift from the Arabic-based script to a modified Latin alphabet was decided upon and implemented with great zeal as a part of Atatürk's modernization and educational campaigns. It was also enacted to restrain the power of the Ulema.

¹⁶ On contemporary Uyghur identity politics and the making of ethnic boundaries, see Abramson (2013); Bellér-Hann (2002, 2011); Bovingdon (2010); Cesaro (2000); Erkin (2009); Rudelson (1996); Smith (2002).

Uyghur individuals tend to favor its use in daily life.¹⁷ At the same time, however, there is some embarrassment about not being fluent in the Arabic script, particularly among those Uyghur who did not learn it in an extra-curricular way. This embarrassment arguably constitutes part of these Uyghur's linguistic identity.

The second group that favors the use of the Latin-based script is the Uyghur who graduated from Chinese language schools. In areas where both Chinese language and Uyghur language schools are available, Uyghur parents are able to choose between these two types for their children. In Chinese schools, Uyghur language is not learned; instead, English is introduced as students' primary foreign language from third grade on. Uyghur students who graduate from Chinese schools (*minkaohan*) are proficient in standard Chinese, but some are less fluent in Uyghur and often completely unfamiliar with the Arabic script.¹⁸ Uyghur pupils who attend Uyghur schools (*minkaomin*) are generally proficient in Uyghur language and Arabic script, but are often unable to communicate in Chinese, despite many years of obligatory Chinese-language classes.¹⁹ School choice thus has important implications on identity negotiations as well as employment opportunities. Most Uyghur *minkaohan* ('minority students who take the graduation exam in Chinese') are often entirely unable to read the Arabic-based script, or else read it with difficulty. Because of this, these individuals naturally favor the use of Latin-based and Pinyin-modeled script when writing Uyghur. They also tend to mix Uyghur and Chinese words in their individual speech. As the number of Uyghur graduates from Chinese language schools grows, so also does the popularity of transliteration forms that imitate the Latin- and Pinyin-based New Script introduced in 1965. Yet at the same time, many of these Uyghur individuals regard the Arabic script as beautiful and as a crucial component of Uyghur cultural heritage and religious identity.²⁰ Like many of the Uyghur who attended schools between 1965 and 1982, some *minkaohan* feel embarrassed about their lack of fluency in the Arabic-based script. Because some *minkaohan* are more fluent in standard Chinese than in spoken Uyghur, they are occasionally excluded or looked down upon by other Uyghur (compare Smith Finley 2007).²¹ Still, these two categories of Uyghur individuals—the 1965-1982 school attendees and Uyghur graduates from Chinese-medium schools—do not actually object to the symbolic significance of the Arabic-based script for Uyghur identity, even if they feel significantly less comfortable with it or are entirely unable to use it.

¹⁷ Bellér-Hann (1991: 75) reports that paradoxical situations occur when Uyghur of the Latin-based generation and those of the Arabic-based generation have to exchange letters in Chinese, as this is the only written language they both understand.

¹⁸ In Uyghur, *minkaohan* are referred to as *xenzuche oqughanlar* or *minkaohan*.

¹⁹ In Uyghur language schools, standard Chinese is typically taught as a second language from third grade on, but the lack of Uyghur teachers fluent in Chinese, especially on the countryside in southern Xinjiang, is a key factor in the rather limited knowledge of Chinese among the Uyghur there. On *minkaohan* and *minkaomin* see Rudelson and Jankowiak (2004); Dwyer (2005), Smith Finley (2007).

²⁰ Even if at least some *minkaohan* read the Quran in Chinese.

²¹ Interestingly, Bellér-Hann (2000: 72) reports that some of her informants who could write and read in the Latin-based script described themselves as illiterate. This may suggest that literacy in the Latin script was for these adults not the "genuine" literacy, unlike literacy in the Arabic script.

2.3 Parallel use of a Latin-based and the Arabic-based scripts

This third category comprises large portions of Uyghur youth, Uyghur university students, graduates, scholars and intellectuals who graduated from Uyghur language schools (*minkaomin*), and those who gained fluency in the Arabic script elsewhere. Importantly, the Uyghur who belong to this category actively and intensively make use of on-line and mobile-phone communication: At the time of this research, chat rooms and other forms of communication via short written messages were particularly popular.

As they use computers and mobile phones, the majority of Uyghur youth and many other regular technology users tend to favor Latin script over Arabic script. These individuals argue that the Latin alphabet is more "practical," "faster," and more "convenient" than Arabic. The growing popularity of English loan-words, especially among Uyghur youth, students and academics, additionally strengthens this trend. Another reason for using the Latin-based script is that many of the Chinese-brand mobile phones that are sold in Xinjiang do not have Arabic-based fonts. Also, because some individuals may use relatively outdated mobile phones, it is not always possible for owners to install Arabic language applications. Thus, a combination of technological constraints and pragmatic considerations inform the linguistic practices of these Uyghur.

None of the transliterations used by mobile phone and computer users to code Uyghur is officially sanctioned. In addition to the New Script, other transliteration forms that draw on Pinyin romanization are also used. While some of these choices are pragmatic, which transliteration form a person decides to use is also related to that individual's identity negotiations. For example, some Uyghur use the Turkish language style transliteration in order to emphasize a transnational connection to Turkey. While the majority of computer and mobile phone users favors the Latin alphabet in electronic communication, some Uyghur insist on using Arabic. However, while this sometimes occurs in mobile phone text chats, the use of Arabic in email communication is extremely rare. Overall, email is generally a much less popular form of communication for Uyghur than text messages.

Though the Uyghur in this category favor the Latin-based script in computer and mobile phone communication,²² they continue to use Arabic-based script in other domains of life. Latin-based writing is thus neither the exclusive mode of written language, nor is it advocated as a replacement for Arabic. On the contrary, it fulfills a complementary function that corresponds with current technological and linguistic developments in Xinjiang, such as the growing use of foreign loan-words – particularly those from English. Among the Uyghur in this linguistic category, an awareness of the history of the Arabic-based script as well as its role in the transnational positioning of the Uyghur is often well-established. So also does attachment to the Arabic-based script represent and recognize Central Asian and Uyghur heritage and serve as a crucial component of Uyghur, Muslim and Turkic identity.

3 Bilingual education and the future of the Uyghur script

Benson (2004) rightly points out that in multi-ethnic Xinjiang, the language of school instruction has always been a complex issue. With the establishment of the Xinjiang

²² Compare Dwyer 2005: 22–25.

Autonomous Region in 1955, it was debated as to whether national unity could be fostered through so many different languages and scripts. As a result, in the 1950s the Education Bureau requested that Chinese language lessons be introduced in all non-Han schools—including Uyghur schools—and in 1964, the first experimental classes with Chinese as the language of instruction were established for Uyghur students. During the Cultural Revolution, minority languages and scripts were rarely used in education; they were nonetheless rehabilitated soon after. At the same time, however, the expectation for students to learn standard Chinese grew.. This emphasis increased further in the 1990s and particularly in the 2000s (Niyazi/Hasimu 1997). Like other integrationist policies implemented in Xinjiang since 2000, also the so-called bilingual education²³ (*shuangyu jiaoyu*) of the Uyghur has been broadly implemented. In the early 2010s, the emphasis on "bilingual education" aimed to make Uyghur pupils proficient in standard Chinese as they graduate from elementary school is growing. The bilingualization of Uyghur from a very young age is widely promoted by the Chinese government, and the financial support for the campaign is substantial (Abulizi 2010). In 2009 the government announced that until 2012, 500 million RMB would be invested in bilingual kindergartens and pre-schools in Xinjiang so that Uyghur children could transition to Chinese language education in early primary grades.²⁴

As bilingualization reform began gathering momentum in the mid-2000s, some Uyghur schools were merged with neighboring Chinese schools, particularly in Urumchi and other cities in northern Xinjiang. In the south some, but relatively less, Chinese and Uyghur schools were also merged. In the joint socialization the school merger provides, Uyghur pupils are expected to learn Chinese faster and better. The language of instruction in these merged schools is Chinese, and Uyghur teachers who previously taught in Uyghur are expected to either switch to instruction in Chinese or retire. The merging of Han and Uyghur schools was conceived of as one way to speed the bilingualization of Uyghur students. Yet conflicts between students abound, and teachers face immense challenging in managing these diversified classes. Hence, the success of school mergers remains questionable. A more common way to implement the bilingualization paradigm is to transform older Uyghur language into the so-called "bilingual schools" (*shuangyu xuexiao*). To a great extent, bilingual schools have already replaced the older Uyghur schools in Urumchi and in other northern Xinjiang cities. In southern Xinjiang, the transformation is also occurring, but it is much slower.²⁵

In Uyghur elementary schools that were transformed into "bilingual schools," instruction is conducted in the Uyghur language until third grade. At this point, standard Chinese should generally be introduced as the medium of instruction, and education in Uyghur language should be limited to a weekly Uyghur literature lesson (*yuwen*). Yet implementation of this policy differs starkly from one school to another. In some schools, Uyghur remains the language of instruction in various subjects beyond third grade. In others, it is replaced by Chinese in third grade, depending on teachers' qualifications and availability. In still other schools, the switch to Chinese occurs later on or is a gradual process. While bilingual schools are likely to entirely

²³ On "bilingual education" for minority minzu in China, see Zhou (1992); Stites (1999); Zhang (2008).

²⁴ See <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/>

²⁵ On changes in language education in the last decade and the introduction of "bilingual education" in Xinjiang, see Dillon (2004); Schluessel (2007); Li and He (2012); Li (2012).

replace Uyghur schools in future, the process is currently restricted to larger towns and cities due to the lack of qualified teachers. Accordingly, the implementation of "bilingual education" is highly inconsistent, with large disparities between urban and rural areas and between northern and southern Xinjiang. The resistance of Uyghur teachers, who must either re-train in order to be able to teach in Chinese or be sent into early retirement, likewise slows the implementation of the new policy. So also does the lack of Han-proficient teachers in the countryside.

The urban-rural divide in the implementation and reception of bilingual education is clear. The majority of the Uyghur, about sixty-five per cent (Bellér-Hann 2012: 204) live in the countryside, where the presence of Han—as well as Chinese language—is minimal, particularly in southern Xinjiang. As a result, many Uyghur farmers see little use in learning Chinese, since they rarely if ever use it in their daily life (compare Bellér-Hann 2000). Religion is another factor in determining educational choices, as rural Uyghur often hesitate to send their children to Chinese schools. These schools are often viewed as lacking religious and cultural sensitivity. Still, even in the countryside the attitude towards Chinese-medium education for Uyghur children is changing. This has occurred primarily due to the pressure of a job market that favors Chinese language speakers and discriminates against monolingual Uyghur speakers (compare Hopper/Webber 2009). Even if the acquisition of the Chinese language does not automatically lead to a job (Hann 2014), our research participants often expressed a belief that it would ultimately facilitate employment.

Since 2000, an emphasis on the bilingualization of the Uyghur has constantly been high; it likely increased in the late 2010s. Yet it seems that after 2011, arguably a peak year, an awareness that bilingualism as a linguistic standard is a distant goal that will not be achieved quickly appeared to grow. Indeed, the many linguistic and cultural issues triggered by bilingualization policies have effected a slowing down of their implementation in the past couple of years, and even some reversals of action. Some Han and Uyghur schools that were merged are once more divided. Likewise, some of the newly formed Han-Uyghur classes are once more separated, since teaching pupils with such different languages and cultural backgrounds turns out to be impossible in practice. In terms of handbooks, while initially all school materials for bilingual education were in standard Chinese, recently Uyghur language handbooks have also been prepared and published. Although the obligation to teach in standard Chinese is emphasized in the university, teachers report using both Uyghur and Chinese in Uyghur-dominated classes in order to explain more complex matters. Moreover, and very significantly, experimental "bilingual" classes for Han students in selected experimental schools were launched with one mandatory lesson of Uyghur language (or Kazakh or Mongol, depending on the area) per week. Thus, following its initial impetus, reform has become more negotiable and grounded in the complex and fragmented educational and linguistic practice.²⁶

Despite drawbacks in the implementation of bilingualization policies, in the past decade standard Chinese has grown in importance in Xinjiang. A working knowledge of Chinese has become critical to daily life in the cities, and also to the professional lives of many Uyghur. Urban Uyghur in both northern and southern Xinjiang particularly emphasize the importance of learning Chinese for better career opportunities. In the countryside, where there is rarely more than one school to choose from, but also where religion is strongly enmeshed in

26 Compare Anaytulla (2008); Wumai'er and Liu (2012).

educational choices, children still attend predominantly Uyghur schools. Though here the heritage language and script are practiced in education, limited fluency in Chinese, alongside structural obstacles created by the household registration system, increase the economic marginalization of rural Uyghur.

At the same time, interesting developments can be observed in cities as the bilingualization policies advance. For example, urban Uyghur parents who once wanted to secure the professional future of their children by enrolling them in Chinese schools now tend to transfer their children from Chinese schools to bilingual schools, particularly since 2009–2010 when bilingual schools became quite common in Urumchi and northern Xinjiang. There, our research participants argued, their children will at least receive three years of education in Uyghur and will later be in regular touch with the language and script during weekly Uyghur literature classes. If this trend continues, the category of *minkaohan* may diminish in the future. Instead, a linguistic category of Uyghur individuals familiar with the Arabic script and having a basic understanding of Uyghur literature – yet are at the same time fluent in Chinese – may form. At the same time, owing to the growing importance of Chinese language in professional life and administration, the use of Arabic script will likely become less prominent in public spaces. As access to the Internet and mobile phone communication grows, Latin-based transliterations will likely further marginalize the use of Arabic. Of course, as is already observable, the growing emphasis on Chinese language and bilingual education may also have unintended consequences. The current strengthening of Uyghur's linguistic self-awareness is one of them. These intertwined fields of political imperatives, ethnicity, identity, and practical considerations will continue to influence the future language choices of the Xinjiang Uyghur in complex ways.

4 Conclusions

The present paper explores the linguistic situation in Xinjiang at a crucial moment when domestic developments and transnational linguistic trends are transforming the language environment and language use of Uyghur individuals. While the policy of bilingualization promotes – and the domestic job market demands – fluency in standard Chinese, identity discourses emphasize the role of Uyghur language and Arabic script in maintaining ethnic boundaries and transnational Turkic and Muslim connections. At the same time, among the younger generation and among Uyghur-educated urbanites, the use of electronic communication devices results in a growing community of Latin-based script users.

School choices, and thus choices about the language of instruction, are difficult decisions for Uyghur parents to make, particularly as they must reconcile a wish for their children to participate in the economic development and modernization of the region with legitimate fears about the loss of heritage language and script in younger generations. While many urban Uyghur parents recognize the importance of Chinese language in professional life, the recent trend to favor bilingual schools over purely Chinese schools demonstrates that the Uyghur language and Arabic script are considered important identity markers of Uyghurness, even though their role in the public sphere may be diminishing. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that there are significant differences among Uyghur as to how important the Arabic-based script and the Uyghur spoken language are for Uyghur identity. While many of our *minkaomin* (Uyghur school graduates) research participants emphasized the importance of language and Arabic-based script for Uyghur identity, Uyghur *minkaohan* (Chinese school

graduates) often distanced themselves from assumptions about fluency in Uyghur and Arabic script as essential identity markers of Uyghurness. Additionally, in generational terms, opinions on the importance of the Uyghur language and script for being Uyghur differ. In everyday practice, younger generations tend to favor Latin-based scripts in the electronic communication channels that are a crucial part of their social interactions. Through these practices, the Latin-based script is being established as a third option in addition to Chinese characters and the modified Arabic. This changing and complex field of linguistic choices and obligations, freedoms and restrictions will have a significant influence on the future of the Uyghur language and script in Xinjiang.

References

- Abduweli, Tahir et al. (2009): "Uyghur yéziqidiki herplerni Latin herpléri bilen ipadilesh layihisi". *Til we terjime* 3: 34–37.
- Abramson, Kara (2013): "Gender, Uyghur Identity, and the Story of Nuzugum". *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71/4: 1069–1091.
- Abulizi, Younusi (2010): *Xinjiang Hanyu jiaoxue fazhan shi*. Urumchi: Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe.
- Anaytulla, Guljennet (2008): "Present State and Prospects of Bilingual Education in Xinjiang: An Ethnographic Perspective". *Chinese Education and Society* 41/6: 37–49.
- Baldauf, Ingeborg (1993): *Schriftreform und Schriftwechsel bei den muslimischen Rußland- und Sowjettürken (1850-1937): Ein Symptom ideengeschichtlicher und kulturpolitischer Entwicklung*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Bellér-Hann, Ildikó (1991): "Script Changes in Xinjiang". In: Akiner, Shirin (ed.) (1991): *Cultural Change and Continuity in Central Asia*. London/New York, Kegan Paul International in association with the Central Asia Research Forum, SOAS: 71–83.
- Bellér-Hann, Ildikó (2000): *The Written and the Spoken: Literacy and Oral Transmission among the Uyghur*. Berlin: Das Arabische Buch.
- Bellér-Hann, Ildikó (2002): "Temperamental Neighbours: Uighur-Han Relations in Xinjiang, Northwest China". In: Schlee, Günther (ed.) (2002): *Imagined Differences: Hatred and the Construction of Identity*. Münster/Hamburg/London, LIT Verlag: 57–81.
- Bellér-Hann, Ildikó (2011): "The Mobilization of Tradition: Localism and Identity among the Uyghur of Xinjiang". In: Canfield, Robert L./ Rasuly-Paleczek, Gabriele (eds.) (2011): *Ethnicity, Authority and Power in Central Asia: New Games Great and Small*. London/New York, Routledge: 39–57.
- Bellér-Hann, Ildikó (2012): "The 'Gateway to the Western Regions': State-Society Relations and Differentiating Uighur Marginality in China's Northwest." In: Rajkai, Zsombor/ Bellér-Hann, Ildikó (eds.) (2012): *Frontiers and Boundaries: Encounters on China's Margins*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz: 203–222.
- Benson, Linda (2004): "Education and Social Mobility among Minority Populations in Xinjiang". In: Starr, S. Frederick (ed.) (2004): *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*. Armonk/London, M. E. Sharpe: 190–215.
- Bovingdon, Gardner (2010): *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bögü, Ablimit Ehet (2002): *Chaghatai tilining izahliq lughiti*. Urumchi: Xinjiang Xelq Neshriyati.

- Cesaro, M. Cristina (2000): "Consuming Identities: Food and Resistance among the Uyghur in Contemporary Xinjiang". *Inner Asia* 2: 225–238.
- Chen Yunhua/Wang Chunyan (2002): "Dangdai Xinjiang liangci zhongda wenzi gaige chuyi". *Yuyan yu fanyi* 1: 27–33.
- Dillon, Michael (2004): *Xinjiang – China's Muslim Far Northwest*. London/New York: Routledge Curzon.
- Dwyer, Arienne M. (2005): *The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse*. Washington: East-West Center. (= *Policy Studies* 15).
- Erkin, Adila (2009): "Locally Modern, Globally Uyghur: Geography, Identity and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Xinjiang". *Central Asian Survey* 28/4: 417–428.
- Gladney, Dru C. (2004): "Responses to Chinese Rule: Patters of Cooperation and Opposition". In: Starr, S. Frederick (ed.) (2004): *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*. Armonk/London, M. E. Sharpe: 375–396.
- Hann, Chris (2014): "Harmonious or Homogeneous? Language, education and social mobility in rural Uyghur society". In: Bronx, Trine/Bellér-Hann, Ildikó (eds.) (2014): *On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society: Tibetans and Uyghurs in Socialist China*. Copenhagen, NIAS Press: 183–208.
- Harrell, Stevan/Bamo Ayi (1998): "Combining Ethnic Heritage and National Unity: A Paradox of Nuosu (Yi) Language Textbooks in China". *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 30/2: 62–1.
- Heberer, Thomas (1989): *China and Its National Minorities: Autonomy or Assimilation?* Armonk, M. E. Sharpe.
- Hopper, Ben/Webber, Michael (2009): "Migration, Modernisation and Ethnic Estrangement: Uyghur Migration to Urumqi, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, PRC". *Inner Asia* 11: 173–203.
- Li, Ruzhong (2012): *Shuangyu jiaoyu shi lun*. Urumchi: Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe.
- Li, Ruzhong/He, Xianghong (eds.) (2012): *Xinjiang shuangyu jiaoyu yanjiu wenji*. Urumchi: Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe.
- LRA, *Law on Regional Autonomy for Minority Nationalities* (1989 [1984]): In: Minority Rights Group (ed.) (1989): *World Directory of Minorities*. Harlow, Longman: 413–417.
- Millward, James A. (2007): *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Moser, Brigitte/Weithmann, Michael Wilhelm (2008): *Landeskunde Türkei: Geschichte, Gesellschaft und Kultur*. Hamburg: Buske.
- Niyazi, Halike/Hasimu, Muhabaiti (1997): "Zhangwo Hanyu ying chengwei shaoshu minzu daxuesheng bibeizhi zhiyi". *Xinjiang Daxue Xuebao* 25/1: 90–92.
- Osmanov, Mirsultan/Abdurishid, Sabit (1987): *Hazirqi zaman Uyghur edebiy tilining imlasi heqqide sawat*. Urumchi: Xinjiang Xelq Neshriyati.
- Rudelson, Justin (1996): "The Xinjiang Mummies and Foreign Angels: Art, Archaeology and Uyghur Muslim Nationalism in Chinese Central Asia". In: Gervers, Michael/Schlepp, Wayne (eds.) (1996): *Cultural Contact, History and Ethnicity in Inner Asia. Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia, No. 2*. Toronto, Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies: 168–183.
- Rudelson, Justin/Jankowiak, William (2004): "Acculturation and Resistance: Xinjiang Identities in Flux". In: Starr, S. Frederick (ed.) (2004): *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*. Armonk/London, M. E. Sharpe: 299–319.

- Schluessel, Eric T. (2007): "'Bilingual' Education and Discontent in Xinjiang." *Central Asian Survey* 26/2: 251–277.
- Smith, Joanne (2002): "'Making Culture Matter': Symbolic, Spatial and Social Boundaries between Uyghurs and Han Chinese." *Asian Ethnicity* 3/2: 153–174.
- Smith, Joanne (2007): "'Ethnic Anomaly' or Modern Uyghur Survivor? A Case Study of a *Minkaohan* Hybrid Identity in Xinjiang". In: Bellér-Hann, Ildikó et al. (eds.) (2007): *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*. Aldershot/Burlington, Ashgate: 219–237.
- Stites, Regie (1999): "Writing Cultural Boundaries: National Minority Language Policy, Literacy Planning, and Bilingual Education". In: Postiglione, Gerard A. (ed.) (1999): *China's National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling and Development*. New York/London, Falmer Press: 95–130.
- Toops, Stanley (2013): "Spatial Results of the 2010 Census of Xinjiang." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, San Diego, 21–24 March.
- Wumai'er, Ai'erken/Liu Xiuming (2012): "Kashi diqu shuangyu jiaoyu fazhan zhong cunzai de wenti yu duice yanjiu". In: Li Ruzhong/He Xianghong (eds.) (2012): *Xinjiang shuangyu jiaoyu yanjiu wenji*. Urumchi, Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe: 34–45.
- Yaqub, Abliz et al. (1990–1999): *Uyghur tilining izahliq lughiti*. Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe.
- Yolboldi, Nesrulla/ Musa, Enserdin/ Exmet, Turdi (1983): *Hazirqi zaman Uyghur tili*. Urumchi: Xinjiang ma`arip neshriyati.
- Zhang, Shuang (2008): "China's Bilingual Education Policy and Current Use of Miao in Schools". *Chinese Education and Society* 41/6: 28–36.
- Zhou Yaowen (1992): "Bilingualism and Bilingual Education in China". *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 97: 37–45.