

THE UYGHUR TRANSFORMATION IN MEDIEVAL INNER ASIA:

FROM NOMADIC TURKIC TRADITION
TO CULTURED MONGOL ADMINISTRATORS

By

Connor Joseph Bell
B.A., University of Louisville, 2004

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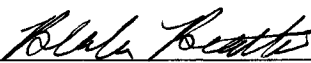
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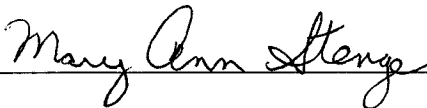
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by the following Thesis Committee:



Thesis Director





DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family
for creating a nurturing environment,
emphasizing the value of education,
and encouraging inquisitiveness.

ABSTRACT

THE UYGHUR TRANSFORMATION IN MEDIEVAL INNER ASIA:

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April 8, 2008

The study of Uyghurs is a fragmented field where periods are favored and others are neglected leaving the historical context of each period underdeveloped. Little effort is made to weave a narrative of the Uyghurs throughout their history and to explore the thread that unites them even today as they continue to draw upon a rich heritage. The Uyghurs underwent a profound transformation in the medieval era. By examining primary and secondary historical sources, a record surfaces that points to the forces behind this transformation. After establishing the Uyghurs' roots in the nomadic Turkic tradition, Chinese, Sogdian, and Manichaean forces begin to shape them in the period of their qaghanate (744-840 CE). After the qaghanate, a nearly three hundred year diaspora begins where the Uyghurs not only continued to be shaped by the aforementioned forces, but also Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, and the Indo-European natives of the Tarim basin.

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INTRODUCTION

Inner Asia¹ has, through the ages, been in a unique position: located between multiple great ancient and medieval civilizations. To the south was India, to the west was the Roman empire and later the advancing Muslim polities, and to the east, China, which has long loomed over inner Asia. Since the late nineteenth century, scholars have turned their attention to this previously understudied region for its own unique civilizations and historical importance to all the surrounding empires.

These modern scholars have adopted the term “Silk Road,” which was originally invented by a late nineteenth-century adventurer, Ferdinand von Richthofen. This romantic term can be misleading though, as it really represents a larger and more complex “network of roads” throughout inner Asia.² As more attention has been focused on inner Asia in the twentieth century, it becomes increasingly clear that the region served as an important conduit economically, and because of this became an area of conflict between these surrounding civilizations. The peoples of inner Asia have experienced a tremendous amount of change in the region as powers within and without ebbed and flowed. Meanwhile, another critical facet of the Silk Road that is not implied by its name, was the cultural exchange occurring as religions and ideas flowed in all

¹ The more inclusive term ‘inner Asia’ as opposed to ‘central Asia’ will be used as it represents a larger chunk of the map and therefore acknowledges that processes were broader and contain even more interconnections than initially are presented at the surface. These interconnections and processes in many ways shaped the entire Eurasian and north African continents.

² Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999), 1-2.

directions through inner Asia. Both the economic and cultural exchanges had a tremendous influence in shaping global history. Finally, not only did the location of inner Asia allow it to serve as an important conduit for all of these external forces, but its own internal geography shaped historical processes in the region.

In such a fluid region, many groups surfaced and left their mark before disappearing. The Xiongnu, Scythians, Huns, Hephthalites, Juanjuan, Samanids, Qarakhanids, Khwarazmians, Qara Khitai, and more all faded from memory and ethnic and political identities were reshuffled and forsaken for new ones as ethnic intermixing and religious conversion reshaped these cultures. However, one of these groups has managed to maintain some semblance of an identity up until modern times.

The Uyghurs have been quite unique in maintaining their identity and heritage for over 1300 years.³ This is even more interesting given the incredible transformation that they underwent. By exploring elements of the history of the Uyghurs it will resolve questions of how and why they underwent such a dramatic transformation.

When the Uyghurs first surfaced in the historical record, they were a part of a nomadic Turkic tradition that many of the steppe peoples of inner Asia participated in. Out of the ashes of the second Turkic qaghanate (683-734 CE)⁴ they were once a part of, the Uyghurs formed their own qaghanate. The Uyghurs considered it a continuation of that tradition. During the Uyghur qaghanate period (744-840), the Uyghurs spoke the same language, used the same runic script, and lived in the same area. Aside from the

³ I hesitate to use the term *ethnic* identifier and will address this complex issue shortly. However, it seems to be an understood way to discuss things and I do not want to spend the bulk of the thesis discussing the complexities of ethnicity.

⁴ The first qaghanate began in 552 CE and the second qaghanate ended in 734 CE. There is a general lack of care given to the political terminology of inner Asian populations. I find the term 'empire' to generally be overused and nation, state, or nation-state to be unnecessarily anachronistic. Qaghanate is the term I have chosen to use to identify these earlier Turkic polities which were often simply tribal confederations.

different name, the Uyghur qaghanate was indistinguishable from the Turkic qaghanates and was in many ways the “Third Türk empire.”⁵ Because of this, an understanding of the nomadic Turkic tradition and the history of the two Turkic qaghanates must first be explored. It was initially the core identity of the Uyghurs and all change would occur from this starting point. This nomadic Turkic tradition was comprised of the nomadic lifestyle, nomadic strategy, the tribal structure, and the shamanic religion.

Over the course of the Uyghur qaghanate, from 744 to 840 CE, this nomadic Turkic tradition would begin to be transformed by three primary external influences: Chinese civilization, Indo-European Sogdian merchants from the Transoxanian commercial centers of Bukhara and Samarkand, and the Manichaean religion they brought. The gradual process of transformation that began in the period of their qaghanate also played a part in the destruction of that qaghanate. They were eventually dispersed by the more rugged Qirghiz tribes who had retained the nomadic Turkic tradition that the Uyghurs had once embodied.

Upon the destruction of their qaghanate the Uyghurs moved in several directions, which all revealed different aspects and degrees of transformation. Not only did Chinese, Manichaean, and Sogdian influences continue to be felt, but the new influences of Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity,⁶ and other Indo-European populations, notably the Tokharians, began to shape some groups of Uyghurs. These influences would continue to push the Uyghurs farther away from their nomadic Turkic tradition. They increasingly moved closer to the society that would come to be seen as the largely sedentary, cultured

⁵ Denis Sinor, “The Uighurs of Mongolia and the Kyrgyz,” in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia, Vol. IV, Part I*, ed. M.S. Asimov and C.E. Bosworth (Paris: UNESCO, 1998), 192.

⁶ Nestorian Christianity had a presence in inner Asia but is left alone in this study as sources were hard to come by, but that does not mean it did not have an impact in some way on the Uyghurs.

administrators of the Mongol empire⁷ in 1209. This transformation happened less than five hundred years after they arrived on the political landscape of inner Asia.

It is important to make clear that there is no evidence that this transformation was ever so complete that the Uyghurs lost all traces of their nomadic Turkic tradition. While the focus of the study is on the elements of transformation within Uyghur culture, they continued to retain some features of their nomadic Turkic tradition, primarily a semi-nomadic lifestyle for some of the population. The purpose of this work is to explore the forces that pushed them farther and farther from this nomadic Turkic tradition. At the conclusion of this study, the Uyghurs will no longer be distinguished by pointing to their nomadic Turkic character, as they would have been when they initially surfaced. Instead, they were identified as custodians of a rich multicultural inner Asian tradition and would serve an important administrative role in the Mongol empire. It was this change, in how they were described and separated from other civilizations in the region, that reveals their noteworthy transformation.

Important Preliminary Challenges

The Question of Ethnicity

The first important challenge to explore before undertaking this work is the question of ethnicity. There is still debate as to who the Uyghurs fundamentally were as they arose as simply one tribe within the nomadic Turkic tradition of the Turkic qaghanates. What separated the Uyghurs from the other Turkic tribes? Certainly language had something to do with this, but even this is a somewhat debatable issue.⁸

⁷ Now this is an inner Asian polity that truly can be called an empire!

⁸ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East*. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 13-38.

According to Peter Golden, a historian focused on examining linguistic evidence to explore the evolution of the Turks, language alone does “not make nations, but nations...frequently make languages” in a process that is complicated by the fact that a distinction must be made between the diverse Turkic groups who came to rule over a very ethnically complex native population that was generally non-Turkic.⁹ The process of mixing with these populations was exactly what transformed the Uyghurs, but in turn the question of what constituted the Uyghurs themselves became increasingly difficult to define.

As modern Uyghurs and their communist Chinese rulers seek to understand both the history of the Uyghurs and the relationships between the Uyghurs, native Indo-European populations, and the Chinese, this topic has become highly politicized. Significant study of this issue has been undertaken since the Tarim basin region became renamed in 1955 the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region.¹⁰ This topic is outside the scope of this study; it is best to simply say that the modern Uyghurs continue to draw upon the rich tradition not only of the Uyghur qaghanate, but also the Uyghurs who later moved into the Tarim basin following the dissolution of that qaghanate.

Following the period of the Uyghur qaghanate, the question of ethnicity becomes more confusing in two ways. First, in the qaghanate period, the Uyghurs were identified

Peter Golden attempts to grapple with the question of language and its relationship with ethnicity in his introduction.

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Linda Benson, “Contested History: Issues in the Historiography of Inner Asia’s Uighurs,” in *Cultural Contact, History, and Ethnicity in Inner Asia*, ed. by Michael Gervers and Wayne Schlep (Toronto: Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies, 1996), 115. This work, with chapters by Benson, Jean-R. Duval (“Modern Uyghur, A Historical Perspective”) and the work of Justin Jon Rudelson both in a chapter in the above book (“The Xinjiang Mummies and Foreign Angels: Art, Archaeology, and Uyghur Muslim Nationalism in Chinese Central Asia”) and his own book *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China’s Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) are worth exploring for this fascinating but nuanced issue. This topic has become increasingly controversial and political in nature as the modern Uyghurs, now Muslim, struggle against the rule of the communist Chinese.

as Uyghurs, but were really a tribal confederation made up of non-Uyghur tribes. After being dispersed by the Qirghiz at the end of their qaghanate, how many of these splinter groups were truly Uyghurs? Which groups continued to be called Uyghurs by the available sources (potentially lumping several Turkic groups together under one term)? Unfortunately, the limitations of the sources cannot be completely transcended. If any discussion of Uyghurs as a people can continue, it must be with the understanding that they are a somewhat amorphous group. The second problem is that this ambiguity continued with the diaspora. It is unclear how many Uyghurs moved into the Tarim basin region as well as their degree of transformation. The aspect of transformation, in this case, was the intermixing with the Indo-European (generally Indo-Iranian) native population. The cultural transformation is the subject of this work, and is what can most responsibly be grappled with. However, it is likely that, over time, the term “Uyghur” became more of a political term that less and less served to link the Uyghurs to the nomadic Turkic tradition from which they evolved. The Uyghurs’ cultural transformation began in the qaghanate period and continued throughout the scope of this thesis and beyond. Culturally they were no longer what they once were, but they did Turkicise the area linguistically¹¹ and successfully rule over portions of the Tarim basin well into the Mongol empire.¹²

In some ways, then, it is imprecise to call the Tarim populations “Uyghurs” as it was really a more complex fusion between two (and maybe more) distinct peoples. The Chinese though, continued to identify the population as Uyghurs. Meanwhile, the

¹¹ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 77.

¹² Abe Takeo, trans. Leon Horvitz, “Where Was the Capital of the West Uighurs?” *Silver Jubilee Volume of the Zinbun-Kagaku-Kenkyusyo, Kyoto University* (1954): 450. Takeo places the year at 1270 when the independent Uyghur control of the region ended, sixty-one years after the Uyghurs submitted to the Mongols.

Muslim sources reference the Toquz Oghuz periodically, which is Turkic for “nine tribal groupings.”¹³ This is on the surface a more nuanced term, as it acknowledges that the Uyghurs were merely the rulers of a tribal confederation. However, it was in use both during the qaghanate, and also more often to identify the Turfan Uyghurs of the Tarim Basin after the diaspora. Unfortunately this is complicated by the fact that still more Muslim sources apply it to Turkic tribes in general residing in the eastern Tarim basin and not necessarily to the Uyghur confederation. Regardless of the variety of interpretations of the meaning of the term Toquz Oghuz, the only relevant source utilizing the term, the *Hudud al-Alam*, a Persian geography of the late tenth century, seems to apply it to the general population in the eastern Tarim Basin.¹⁴

Ultimately, one must acknowledge these points of confusion and move forward utilizing the term Uyghur to describe the tribal confederation when it came together as the nomadic Turkic qaghanate in 744. From there the sub-tribes of the confederation were somewhat lost in sources, and “Uyghur” came to describe the body as it existed in its prime as well as the splinter groups that were dispersed in 840 throughout inner Asia. Admittedly, it is a somewhat anachronistic term that has been retrofitted simply due to the lack of any other alternative. If Uyghur studies are to continue beyond the scope of the qaghanate period and the modern Uyghurs of the Tarim Basin, then this retrofit is required.

Imposing Order on the Chaos

Any study of inner Asia is a complex undertaking for several reasons. First, one must acquire a degree of understanding of all regions surrounding inner Asia. This is

¹³ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 156.

¹⁴ Anonymous, *Hudud al-Alam: The Regions of the World, A Persian Geography, 982 AD*, trans. and ed. by V. Minorsky (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1982), 263-70.

because the majority of the sources are coming from those civilizations, notably the Chinese to the east, and the Arabic and Persian sources to the west. These were the great historians of the medieval era that made at least some effort to chronicle events along their borders, primarily as these events related to their own interests. Still, these sources were all imperfect and must be carefully grappled with and responsibly interpreted.

The other element of complexity is that the region itself is incredibly fluid. Inner Asia served as a conduit for cultural exchange and commerce. It was also a region of frequent conflict between native populations and surrounding empires, surrounding empires jockeying for control of the region, as well as sedentary populations dotting inner Asia and the border empires and the nomads often coming out of the steppe of northern inner Asia. Because of this frequent conflict the geopolitical landscape of inner Asia was also in regular flux. The only consistent aspect of inner Asian history was, in fact, its lack of consistency.

Some efforts must necessarily be made to impose order upon the chaos of the region in order to analyze it. This order is somewhat artificial and a simplification of much more complex processes, but a framework is required in order to navigate and analyze any aspect of inner Asia. Throughout this work, I have been forced to make simplifications in order to set something aside and not delve into a myriad of sub-points and tangents that any inner Asian study could fall prey to.

Historiography

Another part of the chaos of inner Asia is in navigating the sources. The first point of confusion in navigating the sources is the challenge of terminology. The primary sources routinely called people and places by different names, and the secondary sources

continued this confusion, even compounding it as different types of transliteration have been used over the years. Navigating through secondary sources that date as far back as the late nineteenth century means navigating through the evolution of Romanization for Chinese, Persian, Arabic, and Turkic languages. Secondary studies also generally continued to use the terminology of the primary sources that were the focus of their work. One brief example of the variety of perspectives that must be grappled with is that the Uyghur qaghan who first embraced Manichaeism in 762 was known as Bögü Qaghan according to Peter Golden's Turkic-centered work. However, to Colin MacKerras' work from a Chinese perspective, he was known as I-ti-chien or Mou-yü Khaghan.¹⁵ These issues complicate the research process, as thoroughness requires searching for a variety of different spellings. Additionally, it adds another step to the project at hand as it necessitated settling on one spelling or another. This challenge, which some academics never face, actually increased my understanding of the languages involved, as well as the historical evolution of transliteration. Nevertheless, it should be stated openly that, particularly early on, this was another layer of complexity to studying the region. Every effort has been made to be consistent.

The early medieval period of inner Asia is particularly understudied in the historical realm. Sources are relatively scarce before the Mongol period as the Turks left very few records. Also, archaeology in the region is daunting due to climate, the vastness of the region, and the challenges of dealing with the Chinese government. The majority of available documents from the period are of a religious nature. So while philologists

¹⁵ The spelling Khaghan was purposely left in to show that even political terminology has undergone changes in transliteration. Further, I-ti-chien and Mou-yü are of an outdated form of Romanizing the Chinese language known as the Wade-Giles system and would now be translated using the Pinyin system into Idijian and Mouyu respectively. While perhaps some connection between Bögü and Mouyu can be seen, it is still a significant variation.

churn out works that are studied most often by religious experts or anthropologists, little effort is made to place the time and region in a historical context and attempt some analysis and argumentation. Because of this, a historian must have a keen eye and some understanding of interdisciplinary approaches. It is challenging to attempt a historical approach when working with such a minimal amount of purely historical secondary work. It is also challenging wading through the biases and perspectives of so many foreign primary sources. This is necessary because, initially there was very little written from within inner Asia and even now very little is available in English. Still, given the importance of the subjects under consideration, it is remarkable how much can be gleaned from the minimal primary sources.

Chapter 1: Uyghur Origins In the Nomadic Turkic Tradition

The challenge in exploring this period of inner Asian history is the scarcity of translated sources, particularly in the pre-Mongol era. These limits have forced me to rely on two primary sources in exploring the nomadic Turkic tradition. The first source of importance was the Orkhon inscriptions, runic inscriptions from the era of the second qaghanate (683-734 CE). These inscriptions, possibly done by Chinese stonecutters, were found near a lake, west of the Orkhon River in modern Mongolia. The inscriptions were chronicles of the qaghanates. Some of the history is probably of an allegorical nature and must be read carefully. However, there were three inscriptions that were particularly useful. The Kül Tegin inscriptions recounted relations with their sedentary Chinese neighbors as well as the history and process of unification within the early periods of the qaghanate. It also introduced the Turkic policy of conquest in order to unify and strengthen the qaghanate. The second inscription, the Bilgä Qaghan

inscriptions has many gaps due to damage in the stone, but nevertheless expands on the Kül Tegin's history and account of the Turks' rise to power. Finally, the Tonyukuk inscriptions offered a valuable perspective on the importance of a unified nomadic Turkic tradition to maintain a healthy qaghanate. These inscriptions were the first document of the Turkic perspective and reveals that the second qaghanate had a clear understanding of their own identity as well as the history and errors of the first qaghanate (552-630 CE).

The second important source were the writings of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (602-664) and his biographer Huili. In 629, Xuanzang set out for India, seeking doctrinal clarity for the growing Buddhist community in China. He returned in 645 after traveling 10,000 miles to India and back. His journey took him throughout inner Asia and his observations were unique as he was one of the earliest travelers who left behind a record.¹⁶

These writings helped to create a picture of the complex and multicultural Tarim basin of the seventh century. This was a region that was regularly fought over and vacillated between Tang Chinese, Turkic, and later Tibetan and Uyghur control during the period of the qaghanate. Between all of these polities as well as the Indo-European natives and Indo-European Sogdian traders that were active in the region, it began, in this period, to assert an influence on the Turks that predated the rise of the Uyghurs. However, to the north, generally the Turks maintained their nomadic tradition despite brief flirtations with these foreign influences. This region became very important later as one group of Uyghurs sought refuge in the region and founded the Turfan Uyghur kingdom following the destruction of their qaghanate.

¹⁶ Sally Hovey Wriggins, *The Silk Road Journey With Xuanzang* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 2-11.

In addition to examining these primary sources, this chapter has also relied on several secondary sources from scholars who have consulted a wider range of primary sources. David Christian and Svat Soucek provided a skeletal framework for reconstructing the history of the early Turkic qaghanates. While they are not specialists, they still engaged a wide array of secondary sources that are unavailable in English and which draw from extraordinarily rare and valuable primary sources. These synthetic studies were illuminated by the more in-depth analysis of Thomas Barfield, Denis Sinor, and Peter Golden. These specialists not only provided a historical narrative, but also explored the relations between the Turks and their sedentary neighbors. This relationship was critical for understanding the nomadic Turkic tradition. Considerable knowledge of the Turks is based on understanding the relationship with their sedentary neighbors and contrasting the two populations. Finally, the anthropological approaches of both Anatoly Khazanov and Dale Eickelman explored both tribal structures and the pastoral nomadic lifestyle and their relationship with their sedentary neighbors in a more abstract sense.

Chapter 2: The Uyghur Qaghanate (744-840 CE)

Any primary source analysis of the Uyghur qaghanate is complicated by the fact that many sources on the qaghanate, particularly with regard to the religious history, remain unavailable in English. There were some runic inscriptions discovered on some steles in the Uyghur capital of Qarabalghasun as well as texts found in Turfan that have only been translated into German.¹⁷ This has meant relying on some important secondary sources as a means of accessing important primary source information.

¹⁷ Colin Mackerras, "The Uighurs," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 319 n4, 321 n7, 330 n30.

The Mongol historians Juvaini and Rashid al-Din, both of whom wrote in the thirteenth century, at times explored the history of inner Asia before the Mongol empire. Primarily, earlier subject matter related to the formation of the empire or established the history of regions directly before being conquered by the Mongols. While some references were made to the Uyghurs in the period of their qaghanate, what they wrote was essentially mythical in nature.

Two primary sources proved critical. First, and foremost were the Tang dynasty's records. This was the first period when Chinese dynastic histories become useful, as the Uyghurs were such a threat to the Tang. As the Uyghur threat along the northern border grew in this period, the Chinese became more interested and wrote about their political relationship with their northern neighbors. The impressive Tang era also had a stability and strength generally that allowed these dynastic histories to be written. Between the Han and Tang, and later after the Tang but before the Yüan, the histories were considerably weaker generally, particularly with regard to documenting events outside of China.¹⁸ The Tang records remain the strongest of the era and what was relevant to the Uyghur qaghanate was translated by the preeminent English speaking historian of the Uyghur's qaghanate period: Colin Mackerras. In his *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories: A Study in Sino-Uighur Relations, 744-840*, Mackerras translated both the *Xin Tang Shu* and the *Jiu Tang Shu*¹⁹ as they relate to the Uyghur qaghanate. While the *Xin Tang Shu* was generally more concise, the compilers did have

¹⁸ The Yüan dynasty was the Mongol empire's dynastic title when they finally overtook China.

¹⁹ Xin Tang Shu being the New Tang History, Jiu Tang Shu being the Old Tang History. I will generally refer to the Jiu Tang Shu as it was compiled closer to the events being recorded. Overall, the histories agree with one another, but I will occasionally refer to the Xin Tang Shu if the description is more detailed than its predecessor or contains further detail that the Jiu Tang Shu did not provide.

access to some work that was not available to the compilers of the older chronicle.²⁰

However, the *Jiu Tang Shu* is dated more accurately than its later counterpart.²¹

The most noteworthy challenge in dealing with Chinese imperial records is that they only recount the Uyghurs in their relations to the Tang Dynasty. The Tang were not interested in creating a comprehensive study of the various facets of the Uyghur qaghanate. The focus of the Tang histories was on the political rather than cultural history of the Uyghurs. Because of this focus, according to Mackerras, less than half of the period of the Uyghur qaghanate occupies ninety-five percent of the *Jiu Tang Shi*.²² There were significant biases that affected Tang coverage of the Uyghur qaghanate. The details provided in these histories were the marital alliances, trade relations, and military campaigns of the Uyghurs primarily as a result of their assistance given to the Tang in combating the An Lushan rebellion, a crisis that crippled the Chinese. It is, quite simply, an incomplete record and has little to offer, particularly regarding the role of Manichaeism in the Uyghur qaghanate.

The second primary source of the period was the fragmented surviving record of an Arab traveler, Tamim ibn Bahr, who journeyed into the heart of the Uyghur qaghanate in approximately 821 CE.²³ While his own work has not survived, there are quotations in a geographical dictionary by Yaqut as well as a manuscript by Ibn al-Faqih.²⁴ These fragments worked to create some sort of picture of the culture and economy of the Uyghurs, aspects that were not explored in the Tang records. This perspective was

²⁰ Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories: A Study in Sino-Uighur Relations 744-840*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²² Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories*, 3.

²³ Colin Mackerras, "The Uighurs," in *CHEIA*, 328.

²⁴ V. Minorsky, "Tamim ibn Bahr's Journey to the Uyghurs." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 12, no. 2 (1948): 276.

crucial to furthering the understanding of the Uyghurs in their imperial period. In fact, it became increasingly obvious that a great deal of knowledge of this period must be gleaned from a shallow record.

Even secondary sources available in English are remarkably limited. Considerable analysis of the Uyghur's imperial period, as well as Manichaeism's relationship with the qaghanate, were only available in Frenchman Paul Pelliot's writing and numerous Japanese and German scholars' work. Colin Mackerras became increasingly important to my studies, not only for his analysis in his translations of the Tang histories, but also for a well-written Uyghur study in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*. This work took into account otherwise unavailable primary and secondary studies. Some of Mackerras' analysis can be seen in both David Christian's and Thomas Barfield's brief treatment of the Uyghurs as well.²⁵ These studies are synthetic in nature, bringing together some of the most important secondary studies for brief chapters in broader histories of Central Asia. At times, they are useful in providing some historical context as well as checking MacKerras' study as my research became very reliant on his work.

Étienne de la Vassière's *Sogdian Traders: A History*, is an invaluable secondary study that provides a baseline understanding of the Indo-European Sogdians. Vassière utilized a wealth of primary sources of both Near Eastern and Chinese perspectives ranging from business documents to dynastic histories, from travelogues to geographies. He faced the similar challenge of lack of internal sources aside from the *Ancient Letters* of the Persian Achaemenid empire (559-330 BCE). However, due to the date of these

²⁵ Both of these serve to update and, in places, expand on the classic secondary source synthesis of René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*, trans. Naomi Walford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970).

texts, they provided more useful in exploring the foundations of Sogdiana and are less relevant to this study, which explores the Sogdians in their prime. At their peak, the Sogdians served as an important link between east and west via their trade activities as well as the prime transmitters of religions moving east, including Manichaeism. The Uyghurs cultivated a relationship with the Sogdians during their brief period of strength in the steppe. This relationship would continue later in the diaspora period as well.

Another challenge was that religion was often treated and studied very separately from the bulk of historical research. Some background on Manichaeism was required and this was found primarily in the work of a few Manichaean scholars.²⁶ Only one book explored Manichaeism specifically in the Uyghurs' region, Samuel Lieu's *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*. This book offers a few important insights on the religion in the region, but is imprecise in its efforts to set the historical context or explore the evolution of Manichaeism in the medieval era. Because of this, Manichaeism is portrayed as an unchanging element of an unchanging Uyghur people. This ambiguity and minimal historical knowledge proved frustrating at times. The religious historical work of Richard Foltz was beneficial to this study in filling out the Manichaean role in inner Asia. His *Religions of the Silk Road* was an admirable attempt to place the importance of religion back within the historical context of inner Asia.

These challenges meant that details were difficult to acquire, so, a responsible work necessitated an impressionistic study of the Uyghur qaghanate. In-depth analysis on the transformative influence of Manichaeism, as well as the influences of Sogdian and Chinese culture within the Uyghur qaghanate is not possible. Some aspects of change

²⁶ The works I utilized were most valuable for their introductions on Manichaeism. Outside of these introductions, they were largely focused on theology of irrelevant aspects of the Manichaeans in history.

can be pointed to, and these influences are likely to have played an important role in the evolution of the Uyghur qaghanate. However, it remains undeniable that Manichaeism as well as Sogdian and Chinese culture had a lasting effect on the Uyghurs in the qaghanate period. Not only did Manichaeism affect the Uyghurs, but largely due to their influence, the religion persisted in China for another six hundred years.²⁷

It was also important to approach the idea of religious conversion with a respectful attitude towards the possibility that there may have been a genuine belief in a new religion. Still, there were certainly other factors that played a part in the Uyghurs' adoption of the foreign religion. It was easier to hypothesize about these possibilities, and it is these less abstract factors that must be the focus of an academic study. To be clear though, while discussion of religious conversion will not detail genuine belief, it should be assumed a definite factor in the conversion process.

Chapter 3: The Uyghur Diaspora (840-1209 CE)

In some ways this period of inner Asian history is the most difficult to explore. Chinese records are weak as the Tang were declining and China was not fully unified again until the Ming dynasty in 1368. From the decline of the Tang to the Ming, the Chinese were fractured and dealing with both internal crises and the consistent pressure from the northern "barbarians." The Chinese became more inward looking and less concerned with outside affairs as they focused on strengthening and stabilizing themselves. There were two critical exceptions to the generally weak Chinese records. The first was a series of letters composed by a Tang chief minister, Li Deyu, who was responsible for interacting with the short-lived Uyghur splinter group along the Chinese

²⁷ Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 19.

border. These Uyghur refugees sought safe haven with their Chinese neighbors to the south. These letters revealed several aspects of the Uyghur transformation during the period of the qaghanate.

The second exception dealt with the final splinter group to be discussed. The Turfan Uyghurs were visited by a Chinese traveler named Wang Yande who left a brief account of his visit to Turfan. Both Svat Soucek and Geng Shimin, a historian more focused on the Uyghurs specifically, provide slightly different translations of Wang Yande's relevant writing. Yande's account revealed elements of transformation that these Uyghurs began to experience upon their arrival to the eastern Tarim basin. These Uyghurs faced the most profound transformation of all splinter groups. Aside from this, translated Chinese documents were minimal and the imperial records were at their weakest in this period.

Another normally valuable perspective was also weak in the period as Arabs and Persian geographers, travelers, and scholars seemed disinterested in the non-Muslim regions of inner Asia. The first important source was *The Regions of the World (Hudud al-Alam)*, an anonymous Persian geography compiled in 982 CE. This is a source that must be carefully navigated particularly as regions far from the Persian homeland are described. It was highly unlikely the geographer had traveled there and may have relied on secondhand accounts and hearsay. The references relevant to this work then, the more distant lands, often were imprecise or inaccurately dated. Nevertheless, it was an important primary source in setting the context of the region up following the Uyghur diaspora. Another useful source was the *Compendium of Turkic Dialects* something between a dictionary and an encyclopedia compiled in 1070 by Mahmud al-Kashgari, a

western neighbor of the Turfan Uyghurs in the Qarakhanid kingdom (ca 998-1211).²⁸

There was a brief description of the Turfan Uyghurs that aids our understanding of that kingdom in the eleventh century.

Another reason for the dearth of sources on the region was that as Islam spread east in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, some records were destroyed by the zeal of the newly converted and sometimes repositories of documents were abandoned and not maintained.²⁹ However, the caves in the oasis of Dunhuang, where one group of Uyghurs moved in this period, have largely been left intact. Inside these caves an incredible wealth of art and manuscripts survived over 1600 years of chaos in the region from the time of its origin in 366 CE.³⁰ Again, much of it remains untranslated and, in any event, is more detailed religious scripture that is irrelevant to a study of this focus. However, some manuscripts from the caves provided an important element in the secondary scholarship that was consulted for this work.

Most of the secondary sources have already been described but this period is of particular interest to Japanese and some Chinese scholars. Much of it, also, is not available in English. What was available seems focused on issues that were not particularly critical to this work. Still, tangential to their studies were details that revealed elements of the Uyghur transformation in this period of diaspora.

While I mentioned Samuel Lieu's *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China* in the previous chapter's historiography, much of his work was particularly important in this later chapter where he describes in more detail the character of the Uyghur Manichaean elect in the Turfan region. It is possible that this character of practice could also be

²⁸ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, 316.

²⁹ Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 156-7.

assumed for the period of their qaghanate. However, it is most responsible to discuss these details in the period that Lieu considers them to be taking place, even if he does not seem particularly precise in setting the historical context.

CHAPTER 1: UYGHUR ORIGINS IN THE NOMADIC TURKIC TRADITION

The Uyghurs underwent radical changes over the course of the roughly five hundred years that are being examined. In order to understand those changes, it is first important to establish the nomadic Turkic tradition out of which the Uyghurs were born. The nomadic Turkic tradition is comprised of four elements: the nomadic lifestyle, nomadic strategy, tribal structure, and shamanism. The Turks' documented relations with foreign groups reveal elements of the tradition. The influence of foreign religions, Sogdian merchants, and the Chinese all came to affect the nomadic Turkic qaghanates at various times. However, the majority of these influences were transient, and the nomadic Turkic traditions continued relatively unchanged. The reactions to these influences revealed a great deal of the nomadic Turkic tradition.

Understanding the nomadic Turkic tradition is critical to this work as it was a defining feature of the Uyghurs' identity as a tribe within the Turkic qaghanates. This continued to be the Uyghur tradition at the start of their own qaghanate upon the destruction of the second Turkic qaghanate in 730. This tradition can then be contrasted with the Uyghurs' gradual transformation as they eventually became the cultured administrators within the Mongol empire. It was only with the later Uyghur qaghanate, that these foreign influences became a permanent element of their culture.

History

The ethnogenesis of the Turks is incredibly complicated and still is based largely on conjecture. The Turks are not traceable with any certainty before the sixth century.¹ There are some earlier references made to the Turks,² but the Chinese were considered the first to reference clearly the Turks in relation to the formation of their first qaghanate in 552.³ Perhaps this is because they had closer relations to the qaghanate, or perhaps simply because they were such respected historians. Denis Sinor characterizes their origins as “nebulous and confusing” and reminds the reader that there is no absolute certainty until the period of the Turkic qaghanates.⁴ The consensus is that the term “Turk” is a “composite grouping formed from diverse elements.”⁵ However, it generally refers to the inner Asians who share some basic features: the Turkic language family, largely nomadic features, similar religious beliefs, as well as the runic script. It is also generally agreed upon that the Turks have their origins in the Altai mountain region, though there are some sources that instead indicate they may have originated in the eastern Gansu region.⁶ While the Turks as a whole were never solely pastoral nomads,

¹ Denis Sinor, “The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire,” in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 285.

² Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 116.

³ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia, Vol. 1: Inner Eurasia from Prehistory to the Mongol Empire* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 248.

⁴ Denis Sinor, “The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire,” in *CHEIA*, 285-8. While the ethnic question falls outside the scope of this work, an interesting essay exploring some of these issues of ethnogenesis is Denis Sinor’s “Some Components of the Civilization of the Türks (6th to 8th century A.D.)” in *Studies in Medieval Inner Asia*. (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1997). On III, 145 he states that “It is always hazardous to speak of the “origin” of a people...any study of ethnogenesis must either start at a point in time fairly arbitrarily chosen or – without seeking too precise a chronological basis – must content itself with examining the time and the circumstance of the transformation of one, or several ethnic unities into a new one.”

⁵ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 120.

⁶ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to AD 1757* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 131-2.

this was the tradition that led to the Turks being so influential throughout the medieval period and is a defining feature that separates them from their surrounding neighbors.

The Turks built their first qaghanate upon the ruins of the preceding Juan-juan polity that had slowly fallen apart, apparently due to internal strife.⁷ This first qaghanate lasted from 552 until 630 CE.⁸ However, in 580, after a short period of consolidation and expansion, their inability to effectively address the problem of succession caused it to split into western and eastern qaghanates.⁹ The eastern qaghanate, the more direct predecessor of the Uyghur state, had already experienced a level of sinicization within its administration due to its proximity to the Chinese in the east and the exacting of tribute from the Chinese.¹⁰ This sinicization even led to some favor being given to Buddhism by the qaghan T'o-po. Under his reign, Buddhist temples were constructed, Buddhist sutras were translated, and missionary activity among his people was actively supported.¹¹

The influence of several foreign elements would remain in the east, centered in the communities in the Tarim basin. Fifty years later, when the famed Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang traveled through the Tarim basin he noted a strong Buddhist presence in both the northern and southern towns of the region. In the kingdoms of Agni, Kucha, and Aksu along the northern route Xuanzang noted the presence of the Sarvastivadin Buddhist faith and clergy ranging from approximately 1000 in Aksu to 5000 in Kucha.¹² Emperor Ashoka, a north Indian ruler in the third century BCE, reputedly called together a Buddhist council to reject the teachings of the Sarvastivadins. This would explain its

⁷ Denis Sinor, "The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire," in *CHEIA*, 294.

⁸ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia, Vol. 1*, 248.

⁹ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 133. This is a challenge that plagues many great powers over the course of history, and nomadic inner Asian powers are no different.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 132-3.

¹¹ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia, Vol. 1*, 251.

¹² Hiuen Tsiang, *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, trans. Samuel Beal (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1968), 17-29, 306-320.

movement farther north into inner Asia¹³ and account for the Indian influence in the Tarim basin throughout the medieval era. Along the southern routes of the Tarim basin, Mahayana Buddhism, the predominant Buddhist tradition, was noted by Xuanzang to be flourishing. This region probably was the strongest inner Asian bastion of Buddhism in the era.¹⁴

It is natural that foreign influence would remain a force in this region for three reasons. First, these areas had an ethnic Chinese contingent in the population. Not only was Turfan's ruler of Chinese descent, but there had been, for some time, a Chinese military colony in the region that accepted the suzerainty of the Turks "during the troubled times of the Sui and early Tang dynasties."¹⁵ This led to some level of sinicization as well as a base population of practicing Chinese Buddhists. Second, the Turkic portions of the population were largely sedentarized communities that had lost some of their earlier nomadic traits. Interestingly, Xuanzang and his biographer Huili were sure to note the quality of the horses in the northeastern Tarim kingdom.¹⁶ They were still exhibiting some traces of the nomadic culture that many of them had as their heritage. Additionally, the sinicization and Buddhicization processes were incomplete which is evidenced in Huili's biography of Xuanzang where he noted that the kingdom of Turfan was not fully Buddhist but the king promised Xuanzang that he would cause them all "to take the sacred book in hand."¹⁷ Still, the influence of Chinese and Buddhist culture was strong in this region and only strengthened when China annexed this area ten

¹³ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 38-41.

¹⁴ Hiuen Tsiang, *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, 306-320.

¹⁵ Sally Hovey Wriggins, *The Silk Road Journey With Xuanzang*, 21.

¹⁶ Hiuen Tsiang, *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, 20. See also Hwui Li, *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, trans. Samuel Beal (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, Inc., 1973), 24.

¹⁷ Hwui Li, *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, 27.

years after Xuanzang's visit.¹⁸ Finally, there is some evidence that even before the Turkic tribes took control of the region, the Hephthalites, an Iranian people, had subdued some of the city-states in the Tarim basin between 493 and 508. From this period, there was evidence of Buddhism, as well as Nestorian Christianity and Zoroastrianism.¹⁹ Between the Chinese and Hephthalite cultural and religious influence, and the trend towards sedentarization, the Turks in this area had begun to undergo some transformation. To the north though, the nomadic Turkic tradition remained largely unaffected despite these brief interludes of a leader's flirtation with foreign cultures.

Just as T'o-po, the qaghan who was supportive of Buddhism died, the Chinese Sui Dynasty had unified north China and formally began its reign over China in 581. Sui Wen Ti, the dynastic founder, decided to send the Turks living in the court of Changan²⁰ back to the steppe as well as to suspend its large payments of silk that were placating the eastern Turkic qaghanate.²¹ The Sui dynasty and a unified China was not intimidated by the Turks and this marked a reverse in power on the steppe. The Turks were forced to respond and one of the leaders vying for power in a succession crisis, She-t'u, decided to raid China a year later. It was his hope that the invasion would both raise the morale of the tribes with loot as well as pressure the Sui to "adopt a more accommodating policy towards the steppe."²² This was probably not a complete success as She-t'u continued to

¹⁸ Sally Hovey Wriggins, *The Silk Road Journey With Xuanzang*, 21.

¹⁹ Denis Sinor, "The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire," in *CHEIA*, 299-300.

²⁰ The Chinese capital for the periods of history discussed in this paper.

²¹ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 136.

²² *Ibid.*, 136. Barfield observes this strategy as routine for nomadic groups throughout his book and calls it the 'outer frontier strategy'. He outlines it earlier in his book when describing the Xiongnu's strategy against the Han Dynasty. This strategy utilized the nomadic advantage to strike quickly and retreat before the Chinese could retaliate. There were three elements to this strategy: "violent raiding to terrify the Han court, the alternation of war and peace to increase the amount of subsidies and trade privileges granted by the Chinese, and the deliberate refusal to occupy Chinese land even after great victories." Pages 49-51 explore this nomadic strategy in greater detail.

have problems against his rivals competing for rule over the eastern qaghanate. In 584, he was forced to flee to China and sought the protection and aid of China in exchange for his submission.²³ This however did not stabilize the eastern qaghanate. The western qaghanate even began to crumble when their qaghan Tardu attempted to intervene to the east stretching his power and resources too thin.²⁴ Following the collapse of Tardu, both qaghanates gradually fell apart due to this frequent internal conflict.²⁵

A second Turkic qaghanate briefly came to the forefront of the inner Asian political landscape from 683 to 734 CE.²⁶ This period is most important for the Orkhon inscriptions of this qaghanate reveal, for the first time, the perspective of the Turkic people from within. As discussed above, these inscriptions were carved in a runic script in the 730s and chronicle the qaghanate as well as offer advice to future rulers. Aside from the Orkhon inscriptions, the second qaghanate generally follows similar patterns as the first. It eventually fell apart for the same reasons as the first: internal conflicts and powerful external forces.²⁷ These internal conflicts allowed some tribes to pursue independence. Following ten years of chaos in the eastern steppe, the Uyghurs, one of the more powerful eastern tribes in the qaghanate, were able to assert their power and form a new tribal confederation with them as the ruling tribe.²⁸

²³ Ibid., 137. This is Barfield's 'inner frontier strategy' that is, again, a consistent occurrence in nomadic Turk relations with China. Barfield describes this strategy as follows: "One party (usually the weaker) in a tribal civil war obtaining China's aid to destroy his steppe enemy." He distinguishes this from "outright surrender", instead characterizing it as a means of maintaining autonomy and staying free from Chinese control but utilizing their help to consolidate control in the steppe. The Chinese happily participated and saw it as "using barbarians to fight barbarians." See page 63 for a full exploration of this strategy.

²⁴ Ibid., 138.

²⁵ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 133-136.

²⁶ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia, Vol. 1*, 261.

²⁷ Ibid., 263.

²⁸ Ibid., 264.

Nomadic Turkic Tradition

The nomadic Turkic tradition is a critical foundation in the identity of the Uyghurs. Contrasting this tradition with later descriptions of the Uyghurs reveals a tremendous transformation. However, before discussing the Uyghurs' transformation, the nomadic Turkic tradition must be explored. It was the starting point for understanding the radical transformation they would later undergo. This tradition consisted of the Turkic nomadic lifestyle, nomadic strategy, tribal structure, as well as their shamanic religious origins.

The Turks occupied a vast steppe, largely uninhabited, with a harsh terrain and climate.²⁹ This harsh landscape was primarily suitable for a pastoral nomadic lifestyle, which was a defining characteristic of the Turkic qaghanates. Eickelman defines pastoralism as “the herding and management of animals” consisting in inner Asia of the five animals: sheep, goats, horses, cattle, and camels. Nomadism describes groups of people “that move from place to place in a purposeful, but not always predictable, manner.”³⁰ Khazanov extensively discusses the complexity of defining pastoral nomadism, but reduces it down to five core features:

1. pastoralism is the predominant form of economic activity
2. its extensive character connected with the maintenance of herds all year round on a system of free-range grazing without stables
3. periodic mobility in accordance with the demands of pastoral economy within the boundaries of specific grazing territories, or between these territories
4. the participation in pastoral mobility of all or the majority of the population (as opposed, for example, to the management of herds on distant pastures by specialist herdsmen, into which only a minority is involved in pastoral migrations)

²⁹ Yehoshua Frenkel, “The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes in Medieval Arabic Writing,” in *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 211.

³⁰ Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach, 3rd Ed.* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998), 72.

5. the orientation of production towards the requirements of subsistence (as opposed to the capitalist ranch or dairy farming of today)³¹

In general, a great deal of pastoral nomads' lives were centered around their livestock and the products that they provided.

Nomads maintained an unstable but symbiotic relationship with their sedentary neighbors out of necessity. Pastoral nomads were not as self-sufficient as an agricultural society which can more easily support larger populations. Nomadism was significantly more specialized and more subject to the unwelcome whims of both man and nature. Weather, disease, and other nomads were all disruptive and damaging to the nomadic Turks, but also pastoral overproduction can be a problem.³² They had a need for products coming from their sedentary neighbors: grains, tools, cotton and silk textiles, and luxury items like silver and gold valuable and silk.³³ The nomadic Turks could gain access to goods produced by their sedentary neighbors in several ways. Sometimes nomads would gain political superiority and tax the sedentary populations.³⁴ There could also be a formal symbiosis, but this required significant concessions on the part of the nomads and more often they preferred to trade from a position of military superiority. This was routinely the case in inner Asia. Finally, the nomadic Turks could always resort to raiding, which also happened periodically in the period.³⁵

³¹ Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, 2nd ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 16.

³² Peter Golden, "Nomads and Their Sedentary Neighbors in Pre-Cinggisid Eurasia." *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 7 (1991): 68-9.

³³ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 153.

³⁴ Peter Golden, "Nomads and Their Sedentary Neighbors in Pre-Cinggisid Eurasia," 70. Golden suggests this taxation was rare, but I would submit that it was probably routine for the sedentary populations with the Turkic qaghanates ruled over based on the evidence provided in other sources.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

The nomadic lifestyle is described frequently in the writings of their sedentary neighbors. The *Wisdom of Royal Glory (Kutadgu Bilig)*, written by the Islamicized Qarakhanid Turk Yusuf Khass Hajib reveals a great deal about the nomadic lifestyle. While this document, written in 1010, was meant to be a guide for Islamic Turkic princes of the Qarakhanid kingdom, it can safely describe earlier nomads.³⁶ Little had truly changed in this long-standing relationship between sedentary and nomadic peoples.

Describing the Qarakhanids' nomadic neighbors, Hajib writes:

After this come the cattlebreeders, the masters of all livestock. They are simple and honest men, without folds and corners, and they put no burden on other people. They provide us with food and clothing; horses for the army and pack-animals for transport; koumiss and milk, wool and butter, yoghurt and cheese; also carpets and felts – take a little of each for your home. They are a useful class of men and you should treat them well, my calf!³⁷

The nomads' lives and livelihood were centered around livestock. The nomadic Turks who controlled the qaghanate "lived in felt tents, ate meat, and drank qimiz (fermented mare's milk)."³⁸ Travelers' accounts described the Turks as "pastoral nomads roaming through the grassland of Eurasia on horseback, tending their animals on the grassy plains and mountainsides."³⁹ The Turks' nomadic lifestyle created a very militaristic horse centered society. Golden suggests that their economic and social organizations meant that nomads were "well-schooled soldiers."⁴⁰ This nomadic lifestyle was a critical element of the Turks' identity, and it also was an important factor in the development of their own nomadic Turkic strategy and how they related to their sedentary neighbors.

³⁶ Yusuf Khass Hajib, *Wisdom of Royal Glory (Kutadgu Bilig): A Turko-Islamic Mirror for Princes*, trans. Robert Dankoff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 1-2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 184-5.

³⁸ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 152.

³⁹ Yehoshua Frenkel, "The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes in Medieval Arabic Writing" in *Mongols, Turks, and Others*, 211.

⁴⁰ Peter Golden, "Nomads and Their Sedentary Neighbors in Pre-Cinggisid Eurasia," 75.

The chief adviser in the second qaghanate was Tonyukuk, a Chinese educated Turk. He contested the leadership of the second qaghanate when they had proposed building a city with Buddhist and Taoist temples. He offered that:

The number of the Türk is small, only a hundredth of the population of the T'ang. That we can, nevertheless, resist the T'ang is thanks to the fact that we travel in search of grass and water, have no fixed settlements, and live from hunting. All our men are practiced in war. When we are strong, we let our soldiers march off in search of plunder; when we are weak, we flee to the hills and forests and hide.⁴¹

This passage reveals a great deal about the Turkic identity. It confirms an understanding that the nomadic lifestyle was what brought them their success. By not having a fixed settlement and acquiring most of their food via hunting, they strengthened an already strong militaristic base. Tonyukuk recognized that this was their strength in the face of vast numbers. Sinor suggests that Tonyukuk was emblematic of the Turk polity in three ways. He was a “staunch but reasonable opponent of the Chinese, and fierce guardian of Türk national values, even to rejecting Buddhism and Taoism as unsuited to a people of warriors.” Tonyukuk understood that the nomadic Turkic lifestyle was a critical facet of their identity and a strategic advantage over their sedentary neighbors.⁴² The history bears this out with their regular raiding of sedentary populations, including the Chinese at the frontier. This was motivated both for political reasons (outer frontier strategy) as well as the basic need for resources that could only come from a sedentary agricultural population. Of course, when they had to, nomadic states could trade with their sedentary neighbors or portions of the population that were sedentary in a peaceful manner.

⁴¹ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia, Vol. 1*, 262. Christian drew this quote from a Chinese scholar writing in a German book. I cannot find it in the Orkhon inscriptions so I am not sure where its origins lie.

⁴² Denis Sinor, “The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire,” in *CHEIA*, 312.

Another element of the Turkic nomadic identity was an understanding not only of the tactical advantages of a nomadic lifestyle (and by extension, warfare) but also the threat that a sedentary lifestyle had on the strength of the Turkic nomadic identity. The Orkhon inscriptions contain two important passages that pertain to this threat, specifically the threat of the sedentary Chinese. The first is recorded as follows:

They give us gold, silver, and silk in abundance. The words of the Chinese people have always been sweet and the materials of the Chinese people have always been soft. Deceiving by means of their sweet words and soft materials, the Chinese are said to cause the remote people to come close in this manner. After such a people have settled close to them, the Chinese are said to plan their ill will there...Having been taken in by their sweet words and soft materials, you Turkic people, were killed in great numbers.⁴³

This passage reveals that the Turks were aware of their historical heritage. There were mistakes made that led to the fall of the first qaghanate. The leaders of the second qaghanate were aware and savvy enough to know that to a large degree it was a result of the softening influence of their sedentary neighbors. This passage from the Orkhon inscriptions notes the dangers of the Chinese specifically. The sedentary population only offered softness. This softness was perceived as a critical factor leading to the downfall of the first qaghanate.

As a warning to future generations, a second passage recounts the influence that the Chinese had in breaking up the unity of the Turkic qaghanate:

Then the younger brothers succeeded to the throne and the sons succeeded to the throne. But apparently, the younger brothers did not resemble their fathers. Consequently unwise qaghans succeeded to the throne, bad qaghans succeeded to the throne. ...Since the lords and peoples were not in accord, and the Chinese people were wily and deceitful, since they were tricky and created a rift between younger and elder brothers, and caused the lords and peoples to slander one another, the Turkish people cause their state which they had established to go to ruin...Their sons worthy of becoming lords became slaves, and their daughters

⁴³ Talat Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 261-2.

became servants to the Chinese people...Those lords who were in China held the Chinese titles and obeyed the Chinese emperor.⁴⁴

The Turks understood that the Chinese influence was poisonous to their nomadic culture. It broke down the nomadic Turkic polity as the Chinese asserted their will on the younger generations. This gap between generations broke down the unity of the Turkic qaghanate, which led to the decline of the first qaghanate as they became more concerned with rank and title in the Chinese territory.

In the abstract, the Turk qaghanate followed the same pattern as many pastoral nomadic states. It was organized as an imperial tribal confederacy that, according to Thomas Barfield was “autocratic and statelike in foreign affairs, but consultative and federally structured internally.”⁴⁵ The tribal structure of the Turks “consisted of the ruling clan and its allies” at the core.⁴⁶ Outside this core, tribes that joined the confederacy on their own were appended. These tribes were allowed to maintain their own native rulers. Beyond this layer were the tribes that were “compelled” to join.⁴⁷ Those tribes not under direct rule were closely supervised by officials appointed by the qaghan. Their rulers may have even been sometimes replaced by these officials. These officials were in charge of both extracting tribute and maintaining loyalty. They were also placed in the riskiest positions during military campaigns. Finally, the tribal confederation also received tribute from sedentary populations within the range of their influence.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 264.

⁴⁵ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 8.

⁴⁶ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 146.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 146.

The qaghan was the highest leadership position for the Turkic polity of the time, whose rule was mandated by heaven. Further, he had the role of supreme law-giver.⁴⁹ The question of succession was an important challenge that the nomadic Turkic qaghanates regularly faced. Generally, the succession was supposed to be lateral, going from older brother to younger and then to their respective sons.⁵⁰ However, this was not always the case, and as shown, became a consistent source of conflict within the Turkic imperial histories.

Beyond the qaghan, there were many titles that pointed to various functions within the qaghanate. The wealth of titles reveals that the Turks had a “fully developed nomadic state.”⁵¹ Given that there was also a term for the commoners, there does appear to be some degree of social stratification developing in this period of the nomadic Turkic qaghanates.⁵² Peter Golden asserted that with the decline of the Turkic qaghanates, statehood within inner Asia also began to fade, particularly in the west. To the east, some elements of the statehood survived with the Uyghurs’ eventual qaghanate.⁵³

Another aspect of the nomadic Turkic tradition was their shamanic religion, and their appreciation for the possible negative impact that foreign religions could have on their nomadic tradition. Specifically, these foreign religions often undermined the unity of the shamanic tradition. The shamanic religion of inner Asia was a part of the nomadic Turkic tradition that continued well into the thirteenth century, long after the Uyghurs had largely converted to more textual religions. Shamanism is free from texts and generally centered on the shaman as a religious leader who had the power both to

⁴⁹ Ibid., 146-7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁵¹ Ibid., 149.

⁵² Ibid., 148.

⁵³ Ibid., 149.

commune with spirits as well as to affect the natural world. J.A. Boyle, a noted scholar of inner Asian history, defines a shaman as:

An individual without official authority but often of great influence. His supposed power comes to him from the spirits as a gift or grant...his communion with the spirits enables the shaman to foretell the future, change the weather, blast the crops or multiply game, avert catastrophes or precipitate them on foes; above all, to inflict of cure disease.⁵⁴

The medieval observers in inner Asia confirm these traits in the inner Asian shaman. The anonymous author of the *Hudud al-Alam*, a Persian geography written in 982 CE, possibly makes mention of these shamans when discussing the western region of Transoxania following the fall of the second Turkic qaghanate. They “greatly esteem the physicians and, whenever they see them, venerate them, and these doctors have command over their lives and property.”⁵⁵ Later, William of Rubruck, a European who traveled in the region during the Mongol empire, devoted a chapter to the “soothsayers” and confirms the influence they had in the court with their ability to foretell events, affect the weather, and having a medical function. William also makes mention of the importance of fire in ritual and for purification purposes⁵⁶ most notably when he says that:

Everything that is sent to the court they pass between fires, and they get their due share out of this. They also purify all the bedding of the dead by taking it between fires; for when anyone dies everything belonging to him is set on one side and is not mixed with the other things in the orda until they have all been purified by fire.⁵⁷

Though Boyle’s article is not focused specifically on the shamanism of the Turkic qaghanates, it is probable that the traits of shamanism were consistent throughout the region and throughout the course of the early medieval and medieval eras.

⁵⁴ J.A. Boyle, “Turkish and Mongol Shamanism in the Middle Ages,” *Folklore* 83 (1972): 178.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, *Hudud al-Alam: The Regions of the World*, 100.

⁵⁶ Christopher Dawson, *Mission to Asia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 197-200.

Descriptions abound in this chapter dedicated to soothsayers.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

Focusing more specifically on the shamanic religion of the Turkic qaghanates it seems that in this tradition the people worshipped the elements of fire, air, and water, as well as several gods that represented some fundamental natural elements. Tengri was the celestial heavenly god, which had its origins in the more ancient inner Asian peoples. Further, there are references to an earth-water cult, a female deity of protection and fertility and the worship of holy mountains was not unknown. One ritual within their religion was the sacrifice of horses, cows, and sheep. The shamans played a critical role in the worship and ritual within the Turkic religion. They served as both the link between the people and spirits as well as a power capable of influencing the natural world.

However, as the Turkic qaghanates became more involved in interregional affairs, more foreign religions began to work their way into the culture as described above. On the fringes, in the Tarim basin, some permanent change to the Turks began with the presence of these foreign religions. Meanwhile, in the heartland there were only brief flirtations with foreign religions. T'o-po, as discussed above, briefly supported Buddhism in the first qaghanate. To the west in the first qaghanate, according to the Byzantine historian Theophylactus Simocattes, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorian Christianity were all "known to and practiced by at least some Türks" in the late sixth century.⁵⁸ During the second qaghanate, Bilge Qaghan briefly considered building walled cities as well as Buddhist and Taoist temples. It was Tonyukuk who argued for the qaghanate to maintain its traditional values and ways of life.⁵⁹ The Orkhon inscriptions revealed that most leaders probably understood the risky nature of the influence of the foreign religions. The risk was in its threat to the rugged militaristic and

⁵⁸ Denis Sinor, "The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire," in *CHEIA*, 306.

⁵⁹ Peter Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 138, 150.

nomadic culture of the nomads as well as its poisonous effect on the unity of the Turkic polity. Because of this, foreign religions generally had a transient influence in the heartland of the Turkic qaghanates.

Conclusion

This chapter has established the foundational starting point for the Uyghur identity at the start of their own qaghanate. There are four critical facets of the nomadic Turkic tradition: a nomadic lifestyle, nomadic strategy, tribal structure, as well as a shamanic religion. These are critical for an understanding of all Turkic origins and the Uyghurs are no different as former members of the Turkic tribal confederation. In some places this tradition was to remain critical to the Turkic identity into the fifteenth century. However, it was the Uyghurs who were the first inner Asian power to be so powerfully affected by the foreign influence that their predecessors managed to largely combat. According to the Old Tang dynastic history, the *Jiu Tang Shi*, before their qaghanate's founding in 744, the Uyghurs "had no fixed dwellings, they roamed about in search of waters and pastures...and they were excellent horseriders and archers."⁶⁰ As will be revealed in subsequent chapters, they underwent a profound amount of change in the following five hundred years. The next chapter will explore specifically the change that they underwent during their peak of power as the successor to the eastern Turkic qaghanate and how that change led to their downfall.

⁶⁰ Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories*, 13.

CHAPTER 2: THE UYGHUR QAGHANATE (744-840 CE)

From the ruins of the Turkic qaghanates, the Uyghurs asserted their power and consolidated the steppe. In 744 CE, they founded their own qaghanate in the region of modern Mongolia.¹ While the Uyghurs traced their origins to the nomadic Turkic tradition of the steppes of inner Asia, it was in this period that they began their transformation. During the Uyghur qaghanate, there were three primary foreign influences that shaped their development: Sogdian culture to the southwest, the Manichaeism they brought, and the Chinese influence to the southeast.

One of the most important events in the period of the Uyghur qaghanate was the arrival of the Manichaeism in approximately 762 CE.² It came from the west, in Persia, where five hundred years earlier, it had reached its apex.³ On the surface, it seems unusual that Manichaeism moved gradually east and became the official, “state sponsored” religion of the Uyghurs,⁴ so far from its origin both temporally and geographically. However, as will be shown, there were important historical factors that pushed it into the region and appealed to the Uyghurs.

Despite its status as the official religion of the Uyghur qaghanate, there were some important complications that prevented their conversion to Manichaeism from

¹ Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories*, 1.

² *Ibid.*, 9. Any citation from this work from the translated dynastic histories will be either JTS or XTS for old and new histories respectively.

³ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

being absolute. These complications could be seen in the court debates that preceded its proclamation as the official religion, the persistence of shamanism, the gradual and inconsistent sponsorship it received, and finally the issues that surround any conversion process. These issues include the difference between the practice and belief of the people and the decree of a ruler as well as how much the religion really suited the Uyghurs' lifestyle. Still, there were some clear reasons why the Uyghur qaghans had an interest in converting and those reasons went beyond genuine belief.

While genuine belief cannot be discounted, it is clear that there was also some interest in asserting a separate identity from the Chinese. The Chinese favored Buddhism in the early Tang era, and when the Uyghurs entered the eastern Chinese capital of Loyang and encountered Manichaean Sogdian merchants this non-Chinese religion had the appeal of being distinct from Chinese religions. Manichaeism was not well received in China and by adopting Manichaeism, the Uyghurs wanted to leave little doubt they were nothing like their neighbors to the south. Additionally, these Sogdian merchants were inner Asian commercial powers and by favoring Manichaeism, the Uyghurs hoped to strengthen ties with them. It is also important to recognize that while the Uyghurs were trying to assert a separate identity from the Chinese, some sinicization within the Uyghur qaghanate was inevitable.

It was often difficult to separate the transformative elements of the Manichaean faith from the Sogdian and Chinese influences that were also shaping the Uyghurs. For this reason, at times, the picture may become muddled between multiple influences. However, despite the challenge in assigning precise quantitative proportions to each separate influence, it is clear that Manichaeism, the Sogdians, and the Chinese all had a

major transformative influence on the Uyghurs in a movement away from the nomadic Turkic tradition. With these influences came a level of intellectualization, sedentarization, general softening of the rugged nomadic culture, and finally some divisiveness within the Uyghur qaghanate. Some of these factors played a part in their eventual destruction at the hands of the Qirghiz to the north. The Qirghiz maintained the nomadic culture that the Uyghurs shared at the time of their rise; the time before they had transformed and weakened.

Manichaeism

Manichaeism arose in the third century CE within the Persian Sassanian empire.⁵ However, throughout Persia, the Sassanian empire held Zoroastrianism as the official religion.⁶ Manichaeism was founded by a Persian, named Mani (216-276 CE), who was raised in an ascetic environment where Christian, Jewish, and Gnostic dualistic elements were present.⁷ A significant portion of his life was spent traveling, and he went as far as India. These travels informed his notions of the religion that he would soon begin to proselytize.⁸ He envisioned a universal faith that drew elements from the established religions of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism, as well as more esoteric Gnostic traditions.⁹ From Zoroastrianism, he borrowed the dualistic elements of light versus darkness, good versus evil, and the body and material world standing in opposition to the soul and the immaterial.¹⁰ Mani also valued the rules of conduct that Buddha taught¹¹

⁵ A.V. Williams Jackson, *Researches in Manichaeism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 3.

⁶ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 73-5.

⁸ Iain Gardner and Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaean Texts From the Roman Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5-6.

⁹ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 75.

¹⁰ A.V. Williams Jackson, *Researches in Manichaeism*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

and perhaps borrowed the concept of reincarnation from Buddhism as well.¹² In Christianity, Mani saw Jesus as a highly respected living example and as something of a figurehead in the Manichaean mythology.¹³

The Manichaean cosmology was also a strange fusion of earlier religions. The dualistic elements of two opposing principles became a crucial foundation of Manichaean belief. There was the good life of light that the human soul participated in, balanced by the material body that was a part of evil and darkness.¹⁴ In order to live the proper life, one was encouraged to minimize involvement with the material world, which naturally led to ascetic tendencies.¹⁵ Asceticism became even more important as it related to Mani's conception of time. The current phase, where the two principles were in conflict, could only come to an end with humanity's ascetic practices. This would then separate the imprisoned light from the dark matter and the third age would begin.¹⁶ This age would be known as the age of light, when darkness was again subjugated.¹⁷

Asceticism took on different forms in the lives of the clergy and laity. The elect were the clergy who lived ascetic lives and were celibate. They fasted, and refrained from indulging in meat and fermented liquid.¹⁸ This lifestyle forced them to be quite reliant on the laypeople of the Manichaean religion, known as hearers.¹⁹ They were expected not to be indulgent and also to be generous. However, they certainly did not

¹² Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 74.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁴ A.V. Williams Jackson, *Researches in Manichaeism*, 7.

¹⁵ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 76-7.

¹⁶ A.V. Williams Jackson, *Researches in Manichaeism*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ Colin Mackerras, "The Uighurs," in *CHEIA*, 329.

¹⁹ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 77. Foltz referred to them as hearers, Mackerras as auditors. I defer to Foltz as the scholar more focused on religion. It is possible there are Manichaean Uyghur records that specify the term auditors though. Regardless of terminology, the descriptions of their roles remain similar in both sources.

have as rigid of expectations as the elect, as they were allowed to marry and eat normally.²⁰ If hearers led a good life, they would be reincarnated as elect after their death.²¹ Those who lived proper Manichaean lives would eventually live in the region of light in the third age after it was freed from imprisonment. Asceticism as a fundamental element of Manichaeism was incompatible in many ways with the nomadic Turkic tradition, and will be discussed in depth later. However, as Manichaeism came to be adopted by some Uyghurs, it would appear to have a profound effect on those who closely observed its practices. This issue becomes complex when the question of how closely the Uyghurs followed the tenets of Manichaeism is raised.

An important element of Manichaeism was its missionary character. Even before the religion had gained a widespread following, Mani had been traveling and sharing his ideas. He must have engaged in considerable exchange, as Manichaeism was clearly informed by his travels. Due to Zoroastrianism being favored by the Sassanians in Persia, it was not readily accepted in its birthplace of Persia. Proselytization became critical to its survival.²²

The missionary work was generally pursued by the elect.²³ Partially because of its missionary character and universal ideals, Manichaeism took on a level of malleability. To the west, in the Mediterranean region, it tended to emphasize more Christian elements and was construed as a heretical Christian sect.²⁴ Legends abound as to how far Mani traveled east in his lifetime, but given its eventual arrival in China, Manichaeism must have moved into inner Asia between the late third century or as late as

²⁰ Colin Mackerras, "The Uighurs," in *CHEIA*, 329.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 329.

²² A.V. Williams Jackson, *Researches in Manichaeism*, 6.

²³ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 77.

²⁴ A.V. Williams Jackson, *Researches in Manichaeism*, 7.

the early sixth century, when it came to be practiced by the Indo-European Sogdians of Transoxania.²⁵ As it moved east, primarily with the Sogdians, Manichaeism took on more Buddhist traits including religious texts being called sutras.²⁶ Manichaeism actually became close enough to Buddhism that the Chinese condemned it as a distorted religion “falsely calling itself Buddhism.”²⁷ The Tang perceived it as a threat to Buddhism, which experienced its peak during the early part of the Tang dynasty (618-907). The Tang era had also, at least until 751, marked a pinnacle in power that had never been attained before in Chinese history. Interestingly, the Chinese did not outlaw it completely, provided that Manichaeans “practice it among themselves.”²⁸ They wanted to prevent its influence from spreading to the Chinese people, but knew they could not alienate the Sogdians, particularly in the Tarim basin. There, in the far western arm of Tang control, their power was the weakest and the Sogdians had a strong commercial presence.

Sogdians

The Sogdians, of Indo-European Iranian stock, were responsible for the link between east and west and played a critical economic and cultural role in inner Asia both before and during the Uyghur qaghanate.²⁹ Geographically, Sogdiana was situated west of the Pamir Mountains, north of Bactria, and between the Syr Darya and Amu Darya Rivers. Effectively the Sogdians occupied the land between Khurasan and the Tarim Basin to the east known as Transoxania and occupied the important commercial cities of Samarqand and Bukhara. Well before the Common Era, Sogdiana was a known region.

²⁵ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 78.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁷ Colin Mackerras, “The Uighurs,” in *CHEIA*, 329.

²⁸ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 79.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

It is believed that, along with monks of the Indo-Iranian borderlands, the Sogdians were the primary force behind the spread of Buddhism into China in the second and third centuries CE.³⁰ By the fourth century CE there were records of large Sogdian merchant colonies in China.³¹ This was clear evidence that the Sogdians were active quite far from Sogdiana, and their colonies also dotted the northern and southern routes around the Tarim basin of inner Asia.³² In the fifth and sixth centuries the Sogdians reached a new level of strength and stability internally with significant agricultural expansion and urbanization.³³ Following this, the seventh and eighth centuries saw Sogdian merchants becoming a powerful influence throughout Asia due to expansion of colonies and trade networks.³⁴ They were active “in a region from Outer Mongolia to Northwest India, and from the Chinese capitals to the Aral Sea.”³⁵ When the Sogdians began to convert to Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity, they translated religious texts from Middle Persian, Syriac, and Parthian into Sogdian and then later into Turkic and Chinese.³⁶ After spreading Buddhism, they began to introduce the western religions of Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity to inner Asia and China.³⁷ Naturally, Sogdians did not all convert to Manichaeism. However, their relationship with Manichaeism and the Uyghur relations with the Sogdians would prove to be a critical factor in the Uyghurs’ conversion to the foreign religion.

³⁰ Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History*, trans. James Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 2.

³¹ B.I. Marshak and N.N. Negmatov, “Sogdiana,” in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia Vol. III*, ed. B.A. Litvinsky (Paris: UNESCO, 1996), 238.

³² Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 122-7.

³³ *Ibid.*, 104-5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 112-44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

The Sogdians' skill in various languages, both spoken and written, allowed them to serve as translators and interpreters. Their scribes were responsible for a great deal of translated religious literature.³⁸ Because of their expansive presence and remarkable adaptability they were important cultural intermediaries along the Silk Road.

The Uyghurs' Rise to Power

The Uyghurs' rise began in the first half of the eighth century with the dissolution of a Turkic qaghanate. By 744, the Basmil tribes, another Turkic group vying for power were scattered and possibly partially absorbed by a Uyghur and Qarluq alliance. The Qarluqs were another Turkic tribe seeking control of the steppe. Shortly after defeating the Basmil, the Qarluqs were forced to submit to the Uyghurs, who had finally come to dominate the steppe along the Orkhon River.³⁹ However, their rise to power was not the only shift in the political climate of Asia at the time.

Even before the Turkic qaghanates had fallen, Tang power was beginning to recede in areas of inner Asia. The Tang would never again as firmly hold control of the region as they did in the early seventh century. In the eastern Tarim Basin, the Tibetan empire had begun to threaten the Chinese protectorates of the region and forced them to retreat to the Turfan depression in 670.⁴⁰ The Uyghur rise to steppe dominance coincided with another important event in the Tang dynasty's unstable hold on inner Asia. In 751, the Tang lost their foothold west of the Pamir Mountains to the Abbasids in a critical

³⁸ Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 13.

³⁹ Denis Sinor, "The Uighur Empire of Mongolia," in *Studies in Medieval Inner Asia* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1997), 5.

⁴⁰ Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 36. Interestingly, around two hundred years later, the Turfan Depression would become the home of the one of the splinter groups of Uyghurs fleeing from their homeland upon the destruction of the qaghanate.

battle at the Talas River.⁴¹ The Tang would suffer an even more serious blow from within, as a powerful Tang military governor, An Lushan, rebelled shortly thereafter. This weakened the Tang at a critical juncture and further rolled back their influence in inner Asia as they were forced to focus on internal stability.⁴² In tandem, these events were critical turning points for the Tang dynasty that would begin to crumble until formally ending in 907.⁴³ By the time these catastrophes surfaced, the Uyghurs had consolidated their power to the northeast of the Tarim basin and were propelled to prominence largely due to the Tang decision in 757 to send ambassadors to “cultivate good relations and to request soldiers.”⁴⁴ The increasingly weak Tang dynasty needed the Uyghurs’ help in battling the rebellion and diplomatic relations began.

The first evidence of the developing relationship was the decision to enter into diplomatic marriage alliances. The Emperor Su Zong agreed to a marriage alliance with the “barbarians.” At the request of the qaghan’s diplomats a Uyghur princess was sent to the Emperor.⁴⁵ This was a serious concession by the emperor and displayed the dire circumstances the Chinese were facing during the An Lushan rebellion. The second stage of the developing relationship between the Uyghurs and the Chinese followed when their combined forces successfully recaptured the eastern capital of Loyang. There, the Uyghurs were further legitimized by the Tang when they received titles from an imperial edict. The edict also called for a payment of 20,000 rolls of silk to be made every year to

⁴¹ Denis Twitchett, “Hsüan-tsung (reign 712-56),” in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T’ang China, 589-906, Part I*, ed. Denis Twitchett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 443.

⁴² Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 151. An Lushan is believed to have had a Turco-Sogdian heritage. This fact reveals the increasing role of Turks and Sogdians in Tang China.

⁴³ Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 6: Alien Regimes and Border States*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Herbert Franke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5.

⁴⁴ Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T’ang Dynastic Histories*, JTS 54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, XTS 55.

the Uyghurs.⁴⁶ In the following year, the emperor granted a Chinese princess to the qaghan so that the marriage alliance now went both ways.⁴⁷ This decision revealed the high status of the Uyghurs. Previous dynasties had made alliances, but the Tang were one of the few to send “true daughters of the emperor” to another nation.⁴⁸ With these developments, the Uyghurs had cemented their important role in Asia until the qaghanate disintegrated in 840.

Beginning in 756 with the Uyghur aid in combating the An Lushan rebellion the Uyghurs had developed a relationship with the Tang dynasty, and in many ways, they were the dominant half of that relationship at least until 779.⁴⁹ After their assistance in the winter of 757 in recapturing the eastern capital of Loyang, the Uyghurs pillaged the city for three days. According to the *Xin Tang Shu*, the elders of the city were forced to bribe them with “enormous quantities of silken fabric and embroidery” in order to satisfy them and prevent further pillaging.⁵⁰ However, this may be a bit of revisionist history by the later historians as the *Jiu Tang Shu* records that while the Uyghurs pillaged, they stopped of their own free will and were further rewarded by the prince of Guang Ping with “embroidered hair-cloth and precious stones.”⁵¹ The older record characterizes things differently by implying that it was not even the payment that stopped the Uyghurs from devastating the eastern capital.

Another instance that illustrated Uyghur dominance occurred in 762, when the Uyghurs were assisting the Tang again in combating uprisings. A Chinese prince who

⁴⁶ Ibid., JTS 60.

⁴⁷ Ibid., JTS 62.

⁴⁸ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 152.

⁴⁹ Tun Bagha, the new qaghan in 779 was considerably more courteous and, at times, submissive to the Chinese in comparison to other Uyghur leaders.

⁵⁰ Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories*, XTS 59.

⁵¹ Ibid., JTS 58.

had been sent to the Uyghurs refused to do a ceremonial dance and his retinue was beaten so fiercely that two died “within the evening.”⁵² The prince of Yong was spared from the beating, which showed some level of respect. Still, the Uyghurs were not intimidated by official Tang visits and did not fear repercussions for such inflammatory behavior. The Uyghurs also drained Tang finances by the annual tribute as well as the horses being traded for Tang silk. In 765, the Tang treasuries were empty and officials were forced to go without their salary “in order to supply [the Uyghurs].”⁵³ The capital of Qarabalghasun along the Orkhon river was once probably more of a semi-permanent tent city. However, as the wealth and power of the Uyghurs increased, it undoubtedly became more of a permanent capital that was critical to the qaghanate. The massive wealth they accumulated was not easily transportable and the government, out of necessity became more developed as the qaghanate grew. Manichaeism, over time, also played a role in the growing importance of the capital as some Uyghurs began to sedentarize and sometimes urbanize. The Uyghurs had a strong presence on the steppe that crept into the Tarim basin where they battled the Tibetans for control. At times, they were quite domineering in their relations with the Tang dynasty. However, the Uyghurs’ conversion to Manichaeism would begin to create some important problems within the steppe nation.

Manichaeism in the Uyghur Qaghanate

The Uyghur conversion to Manichaeism began in 762 during the second pillaging and occupation of Loyang. The Uyghur qaghan Mou-yü adopted Manichaeism after making frequent visits to some Sogdian Manichaeans in the city.⁵⁴ Shortly after Mou-yü’s arrival back in the Uyghur capital of Qarabalghasun, a bitter debate ensued as to

⁵² Ibid., JTS 74.

⁵³ Ibid., JTS 84. This account is strangely missing from the revised *Xin Tang Shu*.

⁵⁴ Colin Mackerras, “The Uighurs,” in *CHEIA*, 330.

whether the Uyghur state should adopt it as an official religion. The opposition probably echoed the earlier Turkic qaghanates' disapproval for foreign religions as a threat to the unity and strength of the polity. Despite this opposition, the Sogdian court retinue that now accompanied the qaghan convinced him to ignore his opposition. He then "issued a decree that Manichaeism should be embraced by his subjects."⁵⁵ This bitter debate displayed an important challenge to conversion. Naturally, it was not ever full scale, but even within the court, there was significant resistance immediately to the new religion. Any foreign religion would, naturally, divide the Uyghur court and probably portions of the population.

According to one Turkic record, the court debate was followed by the people gathering "in crowds of thousands and tens of thousands" where they "gave themselves over to joy until mornings."⁵⁶ This was a peculiar and questionable response that was probably a fabrication, and at least an exaggeration, given that the Uyghur population had just been told to embrace a foreign, and relatively unknown, religion. Even Mou-yü was not convinced his people would adopt the religion without encouragement and employed something similar to the nomadic decimal military organization to the conversion effort. According to Mackerras, he "divided his people into groups of ten, in each of which one person was made responsible for the religious instruction and good works of the other nine."⁵⁷

Three years after the proclamation from the qaghan, in 765, it was still questionable how fully the conversion had progressed. The Tang histories record that in a Uyghur battle against Tibetan troops some Uyghur "magicians" called up wind and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 330.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 330.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 331.

snow to turn the tide in favor of the Uyghurs.⁵⁸ As late as 821 when Tamim ibn Bahr visited, the Uyghurs had not fully converted. In his account he noted the presence of Manichaeans but also “fire-worshippers professing the Magian religion.”⁵⁹ Minorsky’s commentary suggested that this “Magian religion” was unlikely to be Zoroastrianism and possibly may refer to ibn Bahr’s confusion over Buddhism or the shamanistic religion of the Turkic tribes.⁶⁰ What was important was that this was strong evidence that, again, Manichaeism had not necessarily even taken hold to the point of being the dominant religion in the Uyghur qaghanate. Additionally, ibn Bahr made reference to some pebbles with magical properties to affect the weather, which indicates the persistence of shamanism.⁶¹ This all points to the possibility that, like the later Mongol and Qara Khitai powers, the Uyghurs ruled over a diverse population that could not effectively be unified religiously. The most realistic policy then, adopted by all three powers, was to allow this religious diversity to flourish.

The Uyghur conversion to Manichaeism was not recorded in either of the Tang dynastic records. The first mention of Manichaeism, with regard to the Uyghurs, occurred in 807 when the Uyghurs came to the court of the Tang “for the first time...accompanied by some Manichaeans.”⁶² Further, the qaghan “constantly had them participate in state affairs.”⁶³ When drawing the entire record together, it seemed probable that the Uyghurs on a wide-scale may not have converted to the new religion or did so in name only. However, the Uyghur elites may have more readily converted.

⁵⁸ Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to T'ang Dynastic Histories*, JTS 82.

⁵⁹ V. Minorsky, “Tamim ibn Bahr’s Journey to the Uyghurs,” 283.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁶² Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to T'ang Dynastic Histories*, XTS 109.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, XTS 109.

The conversion process was certainly slowed by a lack of consensus in the court. Mou-yü sponsored Manichaeism and later, according to the *Xin Tang Shi*, the Sogdians encouraged him to invade China. However, Mou-yü's chief minister, Tun Bagha opposed this plan and "became annoyed and attacked and killed him and, at the same time, massacred nearly 2,000 people from among the qaghan's family, his clique, and the Sogdians" and succeeded Mou-yü as qaghan of the Uyghurs.⁶⁴ Barfield suggested that Tun Bagha opposed an invasion of China because it would have "deprived the Uyghur elite of an important source of revenue."⁶⁵ This was a distinct possibility, but he also may have resented the increasing influence that the Manichaean Sogdians had on the qaghan, given his murder of not only the qaghan's family but the Sogdian contingent of supporters. Perhaps he also saw the threat that may have accompanied this new influence in the court. Not long after Tun Bagha died, Manichaeism was reinstated and Mackerras maintained that it even "remained strong at court throughout the second dynasty."⁶⁶ This inconsistent support for Manichaeism by the qaghan certainly slowed the conversion process of the wider population.

Less concrete complications surrounding the Uyghur conversion should not be ignored either. First, there was a very real difference between a conversion being decreed by a political leader and it being firmly undertaken by the population. Conversion to a new religion often takes generations, and this was not an overnight success as implied by the Turkic records quoted above. The conversion process is also slowed by the important distinction between accepting a new religion and truly undertaking a new religion with an understanding for the practices and beliefs. How deeply Manichaean were some of the

⁶⁴ Ibid., XTS 89.

⁶⁵ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 153.

⁶⁶ Colin Mackerras, "The Uighurs," in *CHEIA*, 333.

Uyghur Manichaeans? Upon the disintegration of the Uyghur qaghanate, their later kingdoms continued to be religiously diverse. The diaspora will be explored later, but it is reasonable to doubt the wide-scale conversion of the Uyghurs during their qaghanate.

The final challenge that cannot be ignored regarding the conversion to Manichaeism was it being, in ways, incompatible with a nomadic society. According to the Tang records, the laws of the Manichaeans dictated eating only in the evening, drinking water, eating strong vegetables, and to abstain from drinking fermented mare's milk.⁶⁷ This was in direct opposition to the traditional nomadic lifestyle. There is evidence from the later Turfan Uyghur kingdom that the Manichaeans did not strictly practice the ascetic values of Manichaeism and there is reason to assume a similarly loose practice during the earlier period of the Uyghur qaghanate.⁶⁸ Christian theorized that a conversion by the elites was "an aggressive and self-conscious rejection of pastoralist customs by Sinicized sections of the Uyghur elites."⁶⁹ This was a compelling argument that pointed out an incompatibility that surely complicated the process of wide-scale conversion.

Given all of these complications and challenges to conversion, there were still compelling reasons that led some of the Uyghur qaghanats to sponsor Manichaeism. As discussed above, genuine belief by Mou-yü and other converts cannot be discounted.

Mackerras offered that Manichaeism may have struck the qaghan as:

...an ideal mixture between sophistication and rigour, an excellent tool for raising the cultural level of his people without in any way relaxing the discipline which he, as the leader of a warlike people, demanded of his subjects. Its contempt for the body and material goods must have appealed to his militaristic nature.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories*, 109.

⁶⁸ Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 91-5.

⁶⁹ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia, Vol. 1*, 270.

⁷⁰ Colin Mackerras, "The Uighurs," in *CHEIA*, 331.

So it is possible that there were Manichaeian tenets that resonated with Mou-yü that went beyond genuine belief as he pursued strengthening the Uyghur polity.

Beyond this, there were two major factors that may have played a role in the qaghan's decision for his people to embrace Manichaeism. First, was his interest in asserting his independence from Tang China. The Chinese had condemned Manichaeism and the qaghan's likely perception of his sedentary neighbors to the southeast was that they were a weak people. It was unlikely then that Buddhism offered any appeal to the Uyghur qaghan. Conversion to a religion reviled by the Chinese indicated his lack of respect for Chinese culture and perhaps would "lessen its political and cultural impact in his empire."⁷¹ Beyond this, a conversion to Manichaeism provided the Uyghurs an opportunity to assert its, at least temporarily, dominant role in their relationship with China. Mou-yü was able to persuade the Tang, possibly by threat of force, to have Manichaeian temples built in China, first in 768 and more in 791.⁷² This displayed considerable power by the qaghan. He was able to pressure the Tang into allowing a condemned religion's presence to be strengthened within its borders. The suggestion that the Chinese were forced into this was evident given that two years after the Uyghur disintegration, in 842, the government "ordered the closing of all Manichaeian temples throughout the empire, except for those in Chang-an, Loyang, and Tai-yan."⁷³ Two years after the temple closings the Chinese "executed the Manichaeian priests still in China."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid., 331.

⁷² Ibid., 332.

⁷³ Christopher Beckwith, "The Impact of the Horse and Silk Trade on the Economies of T'ang China and the Uighur Empire: On the Importance of International Commerce in the Early Middle Ages," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 34, no. 3 (1991): 194.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 196.

The Chinese government was never supportive of Manichaeism within their borders.

The second factor in the Uyghur conversion to Manichaeism was that the Sogdians who, to some degree, practiced Manichaeism were important to the financial strength of the Uyghurs. In the Sogdians, the Uyghurs had an incredibly valuable trading ally. As the Uyghurs traded and received tribute from the Chinese, the Sogdians served as an outlet for the silk and other merchandise further to the west.⁷⁵ The Uyghurs recognized this value and, in turn, the Sogdians recognized the value of a powerful nomadic ally. Their relationship was financially beneficial to both parties. Further, the Sogdians were not a political or military threat to the Uyghurs, so Manichaeism was not seen as a threat. However, some aspects of the relationship with Sogdians and Manichaeism unknowingly led to transformations that weakened the Uyghur qaghanate.

Transformation in the Uyghur Qaghanate

Any discussion of a religion's influence proves to be difficult because it cannot be separated from other influences that also affect a culture. The present case is no exception and unfortunately, this section cannot offer any definitive conclusions. Instead, it is also an attempt to provide an impressionistic explanation of some elements of transformation in the Uyghur qaghanate. In a study of the Uyghurs, it was quite difficult to separate Manichaeism's influence from the influence of the Sogdians and Chinese.

The first aspect of transformation among the Uyghurs was their gradual intellectualization. It was in their imperial phase that their script developed out of the Sogdian script.⁷⁶ Later, this contributed to their reputation as a learned society who were

⁷⁵ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 158.

⁷⁶ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 173.

invaluable as administrators in the Mongol empire four centuries later.⁷⁷ The erection of one stele by Mou-yü after converting to Manichaeism was already inscribed both in Uyghur and Sogdian showing powerful evidence that new influences were reshaping the Uyghurs. Later steles continued to have the Sogdian script represented.⁷⁸ Manichaeism and the accompanying influence of Sogdian culture was at least partially responsible for this trend towards intellectualization in the Uyghur qaghanate.

Another aspect of transformation was a move towards partial sedentarization. This began before the religious conversion, as the capital of Qarabalghasun had already been established. There was a need for a capital to engage in diplomacy with their neighbors and house the expanding governmental infrastructure. There was also a need for a stable and guarded location to store the Uyghurs' growing wealth.⁷⁹ With a fixed capital, sedentarization was inevitable. However, while the sedentarization process undoubtedly began with the foundation of a fixed capital city, the conversion to Manichaeism sped up that process. Tamim ibn Bahr noted Qarabalghasun was a "great town, rich in agriculture" and surrounded by lands "full of cultivation and villages lying close together."⁸⁰ It was necessary for adherents to a religion that did not allow the consumption of meat for its clergy to pursue agriculture. The capital also had twelve huge iron gates according to ibn Bahr, which were surely only brought in later as the wealth of the capital increased. This sedentarization was not complete though as the

⁷⁷ David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia, Vol. 1*, 270.

⁷⁸ Ablet Kamalov, "Material Culture of the Nomadic Uighurs of the Eighth-Ninth Centuries in Central Asia," in *Religion, Customary Law, and Nomadic Technology*, ed. Michael Gerbers and Wayne Schlepp (Toronto: Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia, 2000), 32.

⁷⁹ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 157.

⁸⁰ V. Minorsky "Tamim ibn Bahr's Journey to the Uighurs," 283.

qaghan had a giant tent made of gold.⁸¹ This tent symbolized, to some degree, the Uyghurs maintaining their nomadic heritage.

A transformation that is more difficult to ascribe to one influence was the gradual softening of the Uyghurs who had formerly been a militaristic and largely nomadic people. Early on, the Uyghurs had successfully aided and raided the Chinese. They also had defeated an army of 50,000 Qirghiz in late 758 or late 759 and a Tibetan army in 765.⁸² The Uyghurs were a powerful military force in the region. This early era of strength and consistent success must have played a part in this process of softening. Their increasing power brought more wealth and trade into the region. Perhaps the Uyghurs became content and overconfident, believing their position in the steppe to be more stable than it actually was. In 790, they suffered two blows to their military dominance. First, they lost a critical battle in the south to the Tibetans.⁸³ Shortly after this, the Qarluqs seized some Uyghur territory and forced some tribes to flee south, closer to the capital.⁸⁴ While the Uyghurs recovered from these defeats, it marked a turning point in their dominance. Finally, in 840, 100,000 Qirghiz “scattered” the tribes of the Uyghurs after killing the qaghan.⁸⁵

The military defeat at the hands of the Qirghiz was certainly a heavy blow to the qaghanate. The *Xin Tang Shu* further detailed the Uyghur fall as a result of “famine and pestilence, and also heavy snowfalls” in which “many of the sheep and horses died.”⁸⁶ Perhaps, the famine would not have been quite as destructive if the Uyghurs had not

⁸¹ Ibid., 283.

⁸² Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories*, JTS 66, 82.

⁸³ Ibid., JTS 102.

⁸⁴ Ibid., JTS 104.

⁸⁵ Ibid., JTS 124.

⁸⁶ Ibid., XTS 125.

become as reliant on agriculture. However, the famine certainly affected even the nomadic portions of the population when livestock could not feed and perished in a harsh winter. This famine and pestilence had a dramatic effect on the entire Uyghur population. Still, it is possible that had the Uyghurs maintained a more flexible and nomadic lifestyle, they could have moved and found better grazing land. Those Uyghurs who had sedentarized certainly perished in larger numbers than those who had retained the nomadic tradition.

Barfield argues that a softening process was not responsible for their decline. Instead, he offered that a nomadic group with a permanent capital “spelled danger.”⁸⁷ On the surface, this was a compelling argument. However, both the increasing wealth and the increasing dependence on Qarabalghasun as a fixed capital were partially a result of the conversion to Manichaeism. Barfield does not seem to take this deeper impact of Manichaeism and Sogdian relations into account in his theory. An Arab writer, al-Jahiz, who lived in the time when the Uyghurs fell wrote that they “used to excel the Qarluq, even if the latter were twice as numerous” and blamed their decline on the conversion to Manichaeism.⁸⁸

Finally, the disagreements and inconsistent support of Manichaeism by the Uyghur elites surely created a tense and divisive atmosphere. This has been explored above in the description of the challenges to conversion. The Manichaean influence, difficult to separate from the Sogdian and Chinese influence, had not only intellectualized, sedentarized, and softened the Uyghurs, but it also damaged the unity of

⁸⁷ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 159.

⁸⁸ V. Minorsky, “Tamim ibn Bahr’s Journey to the Uyghurs,” 297.

the qaghanate. The last decade of the qaghanate was filled with “power struggles and rebellions in Qarabalaghasun itself.”⁸⁹

Conclusion

The Uyghur qaghanate’s founder died in 747, and according to Mackerras, Mo-yen-ch’o “carried forward his father’s achievements by strengthening the monarchy and extending his people’s domination over the Qarluq and Basmil.”⁹⁰ Beyond this, he established relations with the Tang dynasty, which proved to be a boon to the developing Uyghur qaghanate. Mo-yen-ch’o’s successor was Mou-yü who was responsible for the partial conversion of the Uyghurs to Manichaeism. Under his reign, they reached the apex of the qaghanate period. The new religion however would continue to “exercise a profound influence” well after his death.⁹¹ Much of the stability and strength of the Uyghur qaghanate early on was due to the ambition and the charisma of these qaghans, who had a unifying presence over their people. Manichaeism would, in time, wear away this Uyghur strength and unity just as their predecessors’ Orkhon inscriptions had warned. It created an important series of challenges and complications for the Uyghurs that both prevented the conversion from being absolute, and also transformed their culture.

The transformation cannot solely be attributed to Manichaeism, as the developing relations with the Sogdians and Chinese certainly played a role. Nevertheless, there were some very clear reasons why the Uyghur qaghans had an interest in Manichaeism. Beyond genuine belief and a resonance with some of the tenets of the foreign religion, it also allowed them to formulate a unique identity and assert their independence from

⁸⁹ Colin Mackerras, “The Uighurs,” in *CHEIA*, 341.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 318.

China. It also strengthened commercial ties with the Sogdians. The Uyghurs had a vested interest in building a relationship with these powerful merchants who were influential throughout inner Asia. Still, the qaghans' decision to prop up Manichaeism transformed the Uyghur qaghanate in ways that played a part in their eventual decline. In 840, the Uyghur qaghanate was destroyed by the Qirghiz who had long been hostile to the Uyghurs, inheritors of the Turkic qaghanates that the Qirghiz battled in the past.⁹² The population was scattered in three primary groups who had varying degrees of success in their survival post-qaghanate.⁹³

⁹² Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 163. The Orkhon inscriptions make many references to hostile relations with the Qirghiz and mention of them is only outnumbered probably by the Chinese.

⁹³ There are various interpretations of where the Uyghurs moved and how many different splinter groups there were, but I believe much of the interpretation from the different historians is based on their own personal focus with their work. I have determined there to be three primary groups based on the sources that explore this shadowy period I have chosen to call the Uyghur diaspora.

CHAPTER 3: THE UYGHUR DIASPORA (840-1209 CE)

Following the dissolution of the Uyghur qaghanate in the steppe of modern Mongolia they fractured into three primary groups and were dispersed.¹ This period of inner Asian history is particularly complex. The region had a more chaotic character, and there was an ebb and flow between political powers and cultural influences. In many ways it was a three hundred and fifty year period of chaos leading into the Mongol's imperial period. As described in chapter two, the Tang were already on the decline during the period of the Uyghur qaghanate. Shortly after the Uyghur diaspora the Tang dynasty officially ended in 907.² Tibet, in around 866 CE, also saw its influence in the region wane.³ With the Tang, Uyghurs', and Tibetans' influence all receding, there was a power vacuum in the latter half of the ninth century in inner Asia. The Indo-European Tokharians and Sogdians temporarily seemed to be the inheritors of the Tarim basin. Quickly the vacuum was filled by two groups of Turks. The Uyghurs entered the eastern region upon the destruction of the qaghanate and a series of Islamicized Turkic groups took control of western inner Asia as well as the western portion of the Tarim basin.

The Uyghurs experienced this increased regional complexity and it shaped their identity in new ways. During the period of the Uyghur qaghanate they were shaped by

¹ Geng Shimin, "Uighur Kingdom of Kocho," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia, Vol. IV, Pt. 1*, ed. M.S. Asimov and C.E. Bosworth (Paris: UNESCO, 1998), 200.

² Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, "Introduction," in *CHC, Vol. 6*, 5.

³ Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*, 171-2.

three factors: Manichaeism, and Sogdian and Chinese culture. In the period of their diaspora, some Uyghurs not only continued to experience those influences, but were also shaped by Buddhism, Nestorianism, and the Indo-European culture in the Tarim basin. The transformation of the Uyghurs from their nomadic Turkic tradition only increased in this period. Each group experienced varied degrees of success in their survival. They also experienced different types and degrees of transformation. Despite these groups transforming in different ways and not all surviving, they all left the steppe identified as Uyghurs and all who survived experienced remarkable transformation. Yet, despite this change, they continued to be identified as Uyghurs. Much like the previous chapter, this one must be necessarily impressionistic as attributing transformation to one or another specific influence is difficult. Still, the transformation is evident and can be attributed to these collective external influences.

Organizationally, this chapter will discuss each splinter group's history and type of transformation in order of their success. First, attention will be directed to the group that survived for the shortest period of time: the Uyghurs who sought refuge in China and were killed only three years after the destruction of the qaghanate.⁴ The next two groups each lasted for approximately two hundred years in the Gansu corridor, and slightly to the west in Dunhuang, before being absorbed by the Tibeto-Burmese Tanguts in the mid to late 1020s⁵ and the late 1060s or early 1070s respectively.⁶ The Tanguts were to the southwest of the Gansu corridor who began to assert their dominance in the region in the

⁴ Michael R. Drompp, *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire: A Documentary History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 113-9.

⁵ Geng Shimin "Uighur Kingdom of Kocho," in *HCCA, Vol. IV, Pt. 1*, 200. Some scholars cite slightly different dates, I will default to Geng Shimin who is more of a specialist than the others on Uyghur history.

⁶ Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze, "The Liao," in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 6*, ed. Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120-1.

eleventh century.⁷ These two Uyghur groups are grouped together for several reasons. First, they are geographically very close to one another and survived for roughly the same length of time. They also experienced similar transformations and there were minimal available sources for both groups.

Finally, the longest lasting Uyghur splinter group moved to the Turfan depression and founded the Turfan kingdom, which did not fall until 1284, over seventy years after submitting to the Mongol empire.⁸ The Turfan Uyghurs are who the modern Uyghurs, some still living in the Turfan depression, look to as a part of their heritage. Also, because they were the longest lasting group, most studies of the Uyghurs leading up to the Mongol empire focus on the Turfan splinter group. Because of this, they will receive most of the attention here as well.

Uyghur Refugees in China

The shortest-lived group that fled the steppe in 840 were the refugees moving into the northern frontier of China. By 843, the weakened Tang were finally able to cobble together an army large enough to topple the Uyghur threat at the border. Those Uyghurs who resisted the Chinese were divided and absorbed into various districts of China or were destroyed by the military.⁹ Because these Uyghurs were so short lived they serve to confirm the earlier transformation that occurred during the Uyghur qaghanate and not so much to reveal further transformation. With this splinter group there was the evidence of sinicization, sedentarization, and the influence of Manichaeism.

The simple fact that a portion of the Uyghur tribes headed to China reveals a great deal about their level of sinicization. There must have been some level of comfort and

⁷ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, 104.

⁸ Geng Shimin "Uighur Kingdom of Kocho," in *HCCA Vol. IV, Pt. 1*, 200.

⁹ Michael R. Drompp, *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire*, 118-9.

understanding that developed within the Uyghurs toward their Chinese neighbors. They must have believed that their neighbors would aid them in their time of need.

Throughout the period of the qaghanate the Uyghurs and Chinese maintained close relations as explored in chapter two. Sinicization even became a goal for the Chinese during the period of the qaghanate in the marriage rituals. A Chinese princess married to the Uyghurs is recorded as being humiliated upon her rescue from the Uyghurs for failing to be a “civilizing influence” and failing to keep the peace between the two powers.¹⁰ By “civilizing,” the Chinese naturally meant that the Uyghurs should become more like “the Middle Kingdom” of China. While she may have partially failed in keeping the peace and perhaps had not fully “civilized” the Uyghurs, there was some change within them.

The Uyghurs were comfortable enough with the Chinese to arrive in a “relatively peaceful” manner aside from a few minor skirmishes from smaller groups arriving earlier.¹¹ Interestingly, a chief named Ormïzt led the first group of refugees, a name of Sogdian origin and Drompp was sure to note that this reflects the “great influence of the Sogdians and Manichaeism among the Uighurs.”¹² The peaceful arrival of such a large group could be interpreted in two ways. First, the Uyghurs could have been so weakened that they did not see any advantage in raiding along the Chinese border. This interpretation is weakened by the fact that smaller groups of Uyghurs *had* raided around the same time.¹³ It is likely that this weakened state was just one factor in the decision of the Uyghurs to arrive peacefully. The movement away from the nomadic Turkic tradition

¹⁰ Michael R. Drompp, “A T’ang Adventurer in Inner Asia.” *T’ang Studies* 6 (1988): 19.

¹¹ Michael R. Drompp, *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire*, 40.

¹² *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

however, was another factor in this decision. Certainly, it was no longer the sole template of policy that the Uyghur leadership operated under.

That the nomadic strategy was no longer the sole approach of Uyghur leadership is evidenced not only by the peaceful arrival of the Uyghurs but also in two requests made of the Chinese by a group of Uyghurs who arrived shortly after the first wave of refugees. These requests were so bold by a group of refugees that they must surely have felt closer to their neighbors than the Chinese felt about them. They also reflect the further sedentarization of the Uyghurs as well as the powerful influence of Manichaeism.

The first revealing request made by Ögä Qaghan, leader of the second group of tribes that fled to the border, to the Chinese was to “borrow” a city.¹⁴ The Chinese rejected this request citing the lack of historical precedent for such a radical allowance.¹⁵ There is not much to be said about this request other than that it shows a marked movement away from a largely nomadic lifestyle. Drompp suggests that Ögä Qaghan’s boldness was due to their having a Chinese princess that had been married to the Uyghurs within the refugee camp. While a hostage princess may have been a factor in this bold request, they must have also felt somewhat close to the Chinese. Otherwise they never would have fled to the border for refuge in the first place. This event on the border raises a strange aspect of the Uyghur transformation. While part of the motivation for adopting Manichaeism *originally* may have been to assert independence from the Chinese, its influence towards intellectualization and sedentarization actually brought the Uyghurs closer to their neighbors in many ways.

¹⁴ Ibid., 57.

¹⁵ Ibid., 229-31.

The second request made of the Chinese was that they provide safety for Manichaeans in China, presumably a significant portion of these being of Uyghur or Sogdian stock.¹⁶ The Chinese seemed more receptive to this possibility, but did not explicitly make any promises.¹⁷ This point simply reinforces the strides that Manichaeism had made within the Uyghur ranks, at least amongst the nobility. Still, there are doubts as to whether conversion to Manichaeism was widespread during the Uyghur qaghanate.

The period of Uyghur refugees at the Chinese border was short lived, but thanks to the survival of Li Deyu's correspondence, some important aspects of transformation can be understood. Notably, looking back to confirm sinicization, sedentarization, and the influence of Manichaeism during the qaghanate period. However, because the refugee group survived for such a short time, no further transformation occurred during the diaspora.

The Gansu and Dunhuang Uyghurs¹⁸

The next two important Uyghur splinter groups moved into the Gansu corridor and its far western town of Dunhuang. The process of their arrival and presence in the region is cloudy, though it seems likely there was not a significant struggle as the region was a microcosm for the events as inner Asia as a whole. There was probably a vacuum as the Chinese and Tibetans were both on the decline and the Uyghurs simply filled that hole.¹⁹ Lilla Russell-Smith, an art historian with an admirable grasp of the foreign

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷ Ibid., 230.

¹⁸ Gansu and Dunhuang correspond more with the modern regional terminology as opposed to the specifically Chinese lexicon of Kan-chou or Sha-Chou which was often employed. Those terms however, do not conjure the same imagery.

¹⁹ There is no agreement amongst the sources consulted as to how the Uyghurs entered the region or how they ruled. Details were scarce on this splinter group.

secondary studies contends that the Tibetans were still in control initially at the arrival of the Gansu Uyghurs. Only towards the end of the ninth century were these Uyghurs able to assert their control over the Gansu region.²⁰ They even potentially battled the Dunhuang Uyghurs to the northwest.²¹ The Dunhuang Uyghurs had probably more quickly integrated into that oasis as the Tibetans had lost control to the Chinese by 851.²² If, initially, the Gansu Uyghurs were under some degree of Tibetan control there was surely some influence on their culture. Russell-Smith believed this early period of the Gansu Uyghurs was a “period of experimentation in Uyghur culture, during which the incorporation of a varying degree of local and foreign influence took place.”²³ Similar Uyghur cultural experimentation probably occurred in Dunhuang to the northwest.

Generally, the Gansu region was a peninsula of Chinese control into inner Asia.²⁴ To the north of this corridor was the Gobi Desert and the nomads who continued to be seen as a threat to stability, to the south were the Nanshan Mountains, an eastern arm of the Kunlun Mountains. This corridor was critical to the economy of both inner Asia and China as the majority of the commerce through east inner Asia went through the Gansu region. Given the Uyghurs’ control by the end of the ninth century in such a commercially critical region, it is likely that they became increasingly cosmopolitan and wealthy. The influence of Sogdian merchants passing through the region as well as the Chinese natives continued to be felt, and the Tibetans in the region may also have played a part in their transformation. Beyond mentioning these varied influences moving

²⁰ Lilla Russell-Smith, *Uyghur Patronage in Dunhuang: Regional Art Centres on the Northern Silk Road in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 57-8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 57-65.

²² Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*, 170-1.

²³ Lilla Russell-Smith, *Uyghur Patronage in Dunhuang*, 58.

²⁴ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 18.

through the region, it is quite difficult to clearly delineate the influences that were shaping their transformation.

It is also difficult to characterize the Uyghurs' presence in these regions during this period. Nominally, it seems both the Gansu and Dunhuang regions were under Liao Chinese control, but it was probably in practice, controlled by the Uyghurs.²⁵ The Liao were a semi-nomadic Manchurian people to the northeast of China who took control of the northern portion of China in 907 that also marked the end of the Tang dynasty.²⁶ Very little effort was made to distinguish between the various Uyghur groups, but they were noted as having a significant influence on the Liao. Wittfogel and Feng go as far as to make comparisons between the Uyghurs' influences on the Liao with the Norman influence on England. In fact, Uyghur merchants were the only non-Liao peoples who had special quarters in the capital.²⁷ They also taught the Liao "to grow melons," probably encouraged the use of the camel, and "inspired" the creation of the smaller Liao script.²⁸ This naturally reflects the continued transformation of the Uyghurs who had now come so far as to influence more nomadic groups towards agriculture and intellectualization. Over time the Liao dynasty became increasingly sinicized as well, and naturally, they would characterize the Uyghurs as subordinate kingdoms. Despite some Liao influence, the Chinese majority continued to shape the Gansu and Dunhuang

²⁵ Karl A. Wittfogel and Feng Chia-Sheng, *History of Chinese Society: Liao (907-1125)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1949), 103.

²⁶ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 167-77. Barfield provides a concise introduction to the rise of the Liao (also known as the Khitan).

²⁷ Karl A. Wittfogel and Feng Chia-Sheng, *History of Chinese Society: Liao (907-1125)*, 23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23. The melon growing may have been taught by the Uyghurs of Turfan, an area known for their melons.

Uyghurs in a more marked way. One of the only concrete pieces evidence of this appeared to be a fusion between Uyghur and Chinese titles in Dunhuang.²⁹

The *Hudud al-Alam* presents possible nuggets of information on the Dunhuang and Gansu Uyghurs. However, there are inaccuracies in information and it can be a poor source for determining chronology. The descriptions of the distant lands of “Chinistan” (China) are marred with problems. This makes sense as the author probably relied on similarly unreliable sources from travelers or secondhand accounts of the region. The description of Dunhuang recounts that the area “belongs to China” and that “the inhabitants are harmless and profess the faith of Mani.”³⁰ The native population was decidedly Buddhist and Chinese, so it is likely that the anonymous author is confusing details. It is unusual for the author to characterize the Chinese as harmless given that China was a known and respected power even as far distant as Persia. It is possible then that he is instead speaking of the Uyghurs who had entered the region as a harmless entity. These Uyghurs may have been less known to the Persian author as an element of the population. They may have even appeared the same as Chinese people to the more western perspective. Further, the author simply says the area “belongs to China” which is vague at best. This may have simply acknowledged nominal control by the Liao as noted above. Nothing concrete can be said, but it is unusual that he would characterize the region as Manichaeian.

In the description of the Gansu region, the author makes note of the “perpetual” conflict between the Chinese and Tibetans over the region.³¹ Again, this information appears dated as historians now know that the Uyghurs took control of the region by the

²⁹ Yang Fu-Hsüeh, “On the Sha-Chou Uighur Kingdom.” *Central Asiatic Journal* 38: 1 (1994), 104.

³⁰ Anonymous, *Hudud al-Alam: The Regions of the World*, 85.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

late ninth century. The author of the work may have been utilizing older material in compiling some of the more distant lands. The only other detail of the Gansu region is the author's note that they are "idolaters," which Minorsky interprets as meaning Buddhist.³² Scholars now know well enough that this region and its native Chinese population was largely composed of Buddhists and this would prove to have an enormous impact on the Gansu and Dunhuang Uyghurs.

Perhaps the most important new element of transformation during the diaspora that cannot be attributed to a single ethnicity's influence began in the tenth century: Buddhization. Russell-Smith believed that by 980 there were Uyghur Buddhist monks from the Gansu region coming to the Dunhuang Uyghurs, a "definite sign that at least some of the Ganzhou Uyghur population was Buddhist at this time."³³ The process of Buddhization affected all the Uyghurs other than the refugees who were destroyed along the Chinese border. In Dunhuang, the Mogao caves were an incredible repository of religious art and text that had a profound influence on the Buddhist native population as well as the Uyghurs who were gradually beginning to convert. Yang Fu-Hsüeh dedicated an entire article to the Uyghurs of Dunhuang and perceives the period as that of a Uyghur Manichaean court ruling over a largely Buddhist population. This is based on the majority of the manuscripts in Dunhuang being Buddhist and only a few being Manichaean. However, those that were Manichaean contained names of the qaghan and other members of court. The Uyghur court had an open religious policy and allowed many religions to exist and encouraged and supported religious expansion.³⁴ The first Buddhist sutras were translated into the Uyghur language in this period, which further

³² Ibid., 85.

³³ Lilla Russell-Smith, *Uyghur Patronage in Dunhuang*, 65.

³⁴ Yang Fu-Hsüeh, "On the Sha-Chou Uighur Kingdom," 93-4.

supports the suggestion that the Uyghurs were beginning to convert.³⁵ Unfortunately, the conversion process was cut short as the Tanguts first conquered the Gansu Uyghurs in the late 1020s and then the Dunhuang Uyghurs in the late 1060s. The process not only of Buddhization but also, a larger transformation, would continue with the Uyghurs who moved to the Turfan depression. These would survive well into the Mongol period and the Turfan region is now considered the homeland of the modern Uyghur people.

The Turfan Uyghurs³⁶

As described in chapter one, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim of the seventh century Xuanzang described a rich sedentary Buddhist population thriving in the Tarim basin dating back centuries before the Uyghurs arrived in the region. This sedentary population was multi-ethnic. It was composed of the Indo-European Sogdians who had a presence in nearly every town along the trading routes. There were also Chinese populations who settled the area as the Tang dynasty's power extended throughout the region at various times. Finally, the bulk of the population was probably Indo-European Buddhist Tokharians who comprised the urban population of Qocho and surrounding towns.³⁷

The Turfan depression, south of the Tian Shan mountains was a "prosperous oasis with a developed agriculture, producing wheat, barley, rice, maize and beans as well as cotton, grapes, melon, sesame, and so on."³⁸ North of the Tian Shan, were vast stretches of steppe, ideal as pastureland for the still semi-nomadic Uyghurs. However, the region may not have been entirely unknown to the Uyghurs. They may have "already had some

³⁵ Ibid., 94.

³⁶ As opposed to the Chinese mode Gaochang Uyghurs, the 'Kingdom of Qocho' (too narrow) or the West Uyghurs (too broad and not descriptive enough), I have chosen to employ the Turfan Uyghurs as this region was broader than just Qocho and was the region where the most documented transformation occurred.

³⁷ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, 77-9. Buddhist practice was predominant but Nestorian Christianity and Manichaeism were also in practice.

³⁸ Geng Shimin, "The Uighur Kingdom of Kocho," in *HCCA Vol. IV, Part One*, 201.

control over these western reaches” from their capital in Qarabalghasun during the qaghanate period.³⁹ The Uyghurs arrived and established their kingdom in the dual capitals of Qocho, the winter capital and Beshbalig, the northern summer steppe capital.⁴⁰ The Uyghurs proceeded to move even further west along the northern Tarim trade routes into Karashahr and Kucha.⁴¹ It was in the eastern Tarim basin that the Uyghurs underwent the most profound levels of transformation and “gradually gave up their nomadic life and turned to a settled, urban or agricultural existence and created in Kocho a brilliant civilization.”⁴² Peter Golden, citing the *Hudud al-Alam*, suggested that the Qocho emerged as the “supreme capital” by the early tenth century.⁴³ This is too literal and trusting of a reading given the *Hudud al-Alam*’s questionable accuracy. The text does indicate that Qocho was “the seat of government” while noting Beshbalig as simply the residence of the idiqut in the summer.⁴⁴ However, this is not enough to ignore the more likely possibility that a dual capital system did not persist longer. At the time the Uyghur idiqut Barchuq submitted to Chinggiz Qhan, he still resided in Beshbalig according to a historian of the Mongols, the thirteenth-century Persian Ata-Malik Juvaini.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is probable that for many Uyghurs, gradually Qocho became the preferred area to settle as they continued to urbanize and sedentarize. This suggestion is strengthened by evidence that towards the end of the fifteenth century, Beshbalig was

³⁹ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, 78.

⁴⁰ Geng Shimin, “The Uighur Kingdom of Kocho,” in *HCCA Vol. IV, Part One*, 200.

⁴¹ Takao Moriyasu, “The Sha-chou Uighurs and the West Uighur Kingdom.” *Acta Asiatica: Bulletin of the Institute of Eastern Culture* 78 (2000): 36.

⁴² Geng Shimin, “The Uighur Kingdom of Kocho,” in *HCCA Vol. IV, Part One*, 202.

⁴³ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 163.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, *Hudud al-Alam: The Regions of the World*, 94.

⁴⁵ ‘Ala-ad-Din ‘Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror*, trans. J.A. Boyle (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 47. Boyle provides a detailed introduction to both Juvaini and this work from pages xxvii-xxlvii.

gradually abandoned.⁴⁶ Qocho must have become the more populous town south of the Tian Shan, simply not as quickly as Golden suggested.

An unusual element of the Uyghurs in this region must first be addressed before moving deeper into the Turfan Uyghurs' transformation. The leader of the Uyghur kingdom of Turfan adopted the title of *idiqu*, employed by Basmil Turks.⁴⁷ The Basmil, as recorded in chapter two, were defeated as the Uyghurs consolidated the steppe into their own qaghanate. It is strange that they now adopted a Basmil title. The Uyghurs may have been seeking to gain legitimacy by affiliating themselves with a known political body in the region as the Basmil lived in the Beshbalig area well before the Uyghur diaspora.⁴⁸ It also creates further confusion regarding the question of ethnicity as discussed in the introduction to this work. Were these actually Uyghurs moving into the region? Much of the literature suggests that this was the case, but it certainly seems an unacknowledged possibility that some of these refugees fleeing the Uyghur steppe were other tribal members of the confederation over which the Uyghurs ruled. The Muslim source, the *Hudud al-Alam*, far from the most reliable source does not call the people of this region Uyghurs, but instead uses the term *Toqhuz Oghuz*.⁴⁹ This does seem to strengthen the suggestion that it was not specifically Uyghur tribes but rather another part of the Turkic confederation occupying this region. Possibly, they were even Basmil tribes that had been absorbed into the Uyghur tribes. As discussed in the introduction, all that can be done is to set this question aside and operate under the assumption that the

⁴⁶ Liu Yingsheng, "Urban Development and Architecture Part Three: Eastern Central Asia," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia Vol. IV, Part Two*, ed. M.S. Asimov and C.E. Bosworth (Paris: UNESCO, 1998), 578.

⁴⁷ Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic*, 165.

⁴⁸ Geng Shimin, "The Uighur Kingdom of Kocho," in *HCCA Vol. IV, Part One*, 202. This theory is my own to my knowledge, I am simply citing where I found that the Basmil were living in the region.

⁴⁹ Anonymous, *Hudud al-Alam: The Regions of the World*, 94.

majority of the sources were accurate in describing these people as Uyghurs, even though it may be a somewhat anachronistic term. It still serves a purpose to identify a political group in order to frame a discussion, even if it may be somewhat of a simplification.

The very geography of the Turfan depression shaped the Uyghurs in this period as the landscape in the Tarim basin was not conducive to nomadic activity. As the Uyghurs moved into the region this new landscape shaped their further movement away from the nomadic lifestyle. This was not an overnight process and some contrast can be drawn between the native Indo-Europeans and Chinese by looking at how they dealt with the heat as opposed to the newly arriving Uyghurs. While the natives remained in town and sought refuge in underground areas of their homes, the Uyghurs moved to the cooler slopes of the northern Tian Shan Mountains and the northern capital, which offered relief from the summer heat of the Turfan depression.⁵⁰

Further distinctions between the natives and the Uyghurs can be made based on an account by Wang Yande, an envoy of the Song empire, the Chinese dynasty in the southern half of formerly unified China. He visited in 982 and revealed just how gradual the change must have been as this was over one hundred years after the Uyghurs had arrived:

In this country it neither rains nor snows, and the heat is extreme. Every year, when summer is at its hottest, the inhabitants move underground... Houses are covered with white clay... There is a river which flows from a mountain defile called Ching-ling: it has been regulated in such a way that its waters pass around the capital, irrigate its fields and gardens, and move its mills. The country produces the five principal types of cereals... The nobility eat horse-flesh, while the rest of the population eat mutton, ducks, and geese... The men enjoy horseback riding and archery...⁵¹

⁵⁰ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, 78.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 78-9.

This first portion of his account draws out several important points. It is further confirmation of both the climate and rich sedentary civilization that occupied the Turfan region. It had an established and diverse agrarian economy and was technologically adept enough to irrigate the fields and turn the mills. Not only this but they “produce sable, cotton, and brocaded cloth” so they clearly had some skill in the textile industry.⁵² Wang Yande was sure to note a distinction between the diets of the nobility, mostly Uyghurs, and the rest of the population. It does not seem likely that this distinction was based on ethnicity, but instead on class. It is probable that the nobility were the slowest to change as they had more capability to resist the forces of change as opposed to the common Uyghurs. Wang Yande also made note of the fundamental characteristics of a nomadic culture in the male hobbies of horseback riding and archery. These can be tied with the nomadic Turkic tradition of chapter one.

The Uyghurs could not remain untouched by the cultural plurality of the region though. In another portion of Wang Yande’s account he noted that they use the Chinese calendar system and there was an “imperial library which holds imperial letters and orders from Tang Taizong (627-49) and Tang Xuanzong (712-56), which is very carefully locked.”⁵³ Clearly there was a Chinese presence in Turfan. This was accompanied by a respect for their culture and tradition not only by the Uyghurs, but the Indo-European natives who had been under rule by the Chinese during stretches of the Tang dynasty. Wang Yande also noted the love for music and the preferred instrumentation of the Turfan peoples. The Persian historian Gardizi,⁵⁴ writing in the

⁵² Geng Shimin, “The Uighur Kingdom of Kocho,” in *HCCA Vol. IV, Part One*, 203.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁴ W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1992), 20-1. Barthold provides a brief commentary on Gardizi.

eleventh century made note of the Uyghur leaders wearing “Chinese silk garments” and the style of dress being “very long and loose and cover the whole body...The sleeves are wide and the lower hems are long.”⁵⁵ This is hardly appropriate dress for nomads with a militaristic culture centered around horses. Change was definitely happening.

This cultural plurality is evident at an even deeper level when examining the religious landscape of the Tarim basin. Gardizi noted that the Uyghur idiqut was Manichaeism, but that there were Christians and Buddhists in the area.⁵⁶ Gradually, the Uyghurs began to convert to Buddhism. However, while Buddhism became predominant, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity remained. The conversion to Buddhism was a subtle process that can probably be likened to the conversion to Manichaeism during the qaghanate. As noted in chapter two, it is unclear just how many inroads were made by Manichaeism within the population. There was the possibility that this was primarily a phenomenon among the nobility. It also may have been a conversion that was a bit loose in practice and doctrinal interpretation. Further weight is given to the possibility of Manichaeism being primarily practiced by nobility when Wang Yande wrote that “there is a Manichaean temple...the priests are from Persia, they strictly observe their own rites.”⁵⁷ It is unusual that Wang Yande noted that the priests were from Persia and strictly observed the rites of the religion. This passage reveals that there was a Persian (probably Sogdian) culture that was still present in the region. It also reveals that Wang Yande may not have observed Uyghurs in the priesthood. Samuel Lieu’s own recent work on Manichaeism in inner Asia does not note the ethnic

⁵⁵ Shimin Geng, “On the Fusion of the Nationalities in the Tarim Basin and the Formation of the Modern Uighur Nationality.” *Central Asian Survey* 3, no. 4 (1984), 7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁷ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, 79.

breakdown of the priesthood in Turfan, but *does* note that the priests were not particularly strict in practicing the ascetic values of Manichaeism as described in chapter two. The Manichaeans here were *not* reliant on alms but instead “derived regular supplies of foodstuff from their lands.”⁵⁸ They also did not practice fasting generally. Further, while Manichaean elect were technically not allowed to pursue agriculture or livestock rearing, those elect in this region owned land and played an important role in the agrarian economy as well as being landowners. An important part of agriculture in the region was wine making, and Manichaean elect were technically not allowed alcohol.⁵⁹ Lieu goes so far as to characterize the clergy as “profit making landowners.”⁶⁰ Clearly, all this evidence displays the great divide between doctrine and practice. This is nothing shocking, unusual perhaps if the majority of the clergy in the region were still Sogdian, but revealing as to the depth of conversion if some of this clergy were Uyghur.

It is possible that Manichaeism may not have had a significant impact on the Uyghurs during the qaghanate period. This would possibly make the Uyghurs more receptive to Buddhism, but conversion was inevitable as the Uyghurs experienced it over a longer period of time in a more saturated region. Manichaeism in the qaghanate only had around seventy-five years, from 762 to 840, to make inroads before the diaspora began. The Uyghurs in the Tarim basin were exposed to Buddhism from the late ninth century until well into the thirteenth century and beyond the scope of this study. This was a significantly longer period of time and undoubtedly, over that time, had a more profound effect on the Uyghur community.

⁵⁸ Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*, 91.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

Further, as opposed to Manichaeian Sogdian merchants who were trying to make inroads primarily to the nobility of the Uyghur qaghanate, the Uyghurs were now simply one portion of a population that was predominantly Buddhist. All people, including Uyghur commoners would have had greater exposure. The presence of Buddhism as the majority played a part in the conversion process. Translations of Wang Yande's account vary, but one notes simply one Manichaeian temple as opposed to fifty Buddhist temples.⁶¹ Whether Manichaeism was falling out of favor by the time Wang Yande visited in 982 is unclear, and too much weight should not be put behind one translation, as others note Manichaeian temples in the plural existing, it is still worth noting as a possibility that the Manichaeism presence was waning or never particularly strong in the region. Again, Buddhism was the faith of the majority.

Analysis of the Buddhist texts that survive suggests that the character of Buddhism upon the Uyghurs' arrival was originally a fusion between Tokharian, Sogdian, and Chinese influences. Later, by the middle of the eleventh century and on, it became predominantly of a Chinese style. It is well known that Buddhism reached its peak in China under the Tang.⁶² As Tang power gradually weakened, officials began to turn inward and began to limit the spread of Buddhism in China by destroying temples, monasteries, and returning monks and nuns to lay life.⁶³ The somewhat romantic interpretation was that as it fell out of favor in China, it returned from where it spread to China originally, through inner Asia, the conduit between China and India.⁶⁴ The Uyghurs eventually converted, evidenced by the translation of a large portion of the

⁶¹ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, 79.

⁶² Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 52.

⁶³ Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*, 130-1.

⁶⁴ Geng Shimin, "The Uighur Kingdom of Kocho," in *HCCA Vol. IV, Part One*, 205.

Buddhist corpus into the Uyghur language.⁶⁵ With this conversion and the faith being bolstered by Chinese Buddhists fleeing the heartland of China, Buddhism reached its efflorescence from the tenth to thirteenth centuries from the eastern Tarim basin to the western edges of the Gansu corridor in the Mogao caves of Dunhuang.

The presence of Buddhism as the strongest faith in the region created some pressure on the Uyghurs to convert and again, genuine belief cannot be ignored. Still, there were other factors that played a role in the gradual conversion. The first was the possibility that the new, harsher climate of the Tarim basin may have made the Uyghurs more receptive to Buddhism. The second factor is that eventually, despite the Uyghurs' open religious policy, a conversion to the faith of the majority may have added strength and legitimacy to their reign in the region. Finally, much like the receptiveness to Manichaeism in the qaghanate period, some of the nobility's interest in Buddhism may have been as a response to their neighbors.

William McNeill, a respected global historian made an interesting point about Buddhism in his work *Plagues and Peoples* saying that, "like Christianity, Buddhism explained suffering."⁶⁶ He proceeded to imply that Buddhism offered comfort in the face of the disease that faced the hotter climates of both the region of its origin, India, as well as areas of China where it spread. Buddhism taught that death was an escape from the suffering and pain from life.⁶⁷ This is a passing point in his work, but one worth consideration as the theory works well in the harsh climate of the Tarim basin. This point is clouded by the fact that Manichaeism offered a similar worldview in its own doctrine. However, that Manichaeism had this similarity with Buddhism may lend weight to the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 205.

⁶⁶ William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976), 136.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 136-7.

interpretation that the appeal of Manichaeism was more political than doctrinal as the climate of the steppe was not as deadly or as conducive to disease as the Tarim basin. This aspect of Manichaeism would not have resonated as strongly with the Uyghurs of the qaghanate period. However, as the Uyghurs moved into the Tarim basin, Buddhism may have had some appeal for the commoners and others who had not earlier embraced Manichaeism as they faced the new Tarim basin climate.

No firm studies of population breakdowns have been undertaken and it is unlikely this is a possibility. Geng Shimin suggested that the Uyghurs and other Turkic groups were the numerical majority in the region. This is a controversial suggestion only bolstered by the fact that the region was gradually Turkicized linguistically.⁶⁸ Still, this point is unconvincing given the long history of Indo-European populations as well as Chinese and Tibetan involvement more recently in the region along with the Turks. The more precise way to characterize the region is remarkably multicultural and multiethnic. This diversity could have been an important motivating factor for the Uyghur leaders to convert to the religion of the masses. It would add strength and legitimacy to their control of the region. This hope for increased unity also may have played a role in the Uyghurs' relations with their neighbors to the west.

According to the *Diwan Lughat at-Turk* or *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects*, something of a collection of the Turkic lexicon known to the Qarakhanid author Mahmud al-Kasghari in the 1070s,⁶⁹ the Uyghurs were “the strongest of the infidels.”⁷⁰ The Qarakhanids were Turks who had already converted to Islam to the west of the Uyghur

⁶⁸ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, 79.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 87-90. A good introduction to this work is provided by Soucek here.

⁷⁰ Mahmud al-Kasghari, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (Diwan Lughat at-Turk) Part I*, trans. Robert Dankoff (Duxbury, MA: Harvard University Printing Office, 1982), 140.

lands of the eastern Tarim. Their control stretched from the western Tarim as far west as Transoxania across the Pamir Mountains and held power from the late tenth century to the middle of the twelfth century.⁷¹ The Tarim basin then was the site for tensions between Islam and Buddhism throughout this period until eventually the region was fully Islamized by the seventeenth century.⁷² The Muslim Qarakhanids might have further motivated the Uyghur nobility to convert to Buddhism for unity and to strengthen the Turfan kingdom against a common enemy.

A brief shift in perspective is important in order to understand the Uyghurs' increased role as cultural transmitters and middlemen in the exchanges between east and west. First, as they took control of the eastern Tarim basin, it was squarely in the middle of the trade routes of the famed Silk Road as opposed to the northern steppe of the qaghanate period. This certainly was important in this aspect of transformation. However, the Sogdians still dominated in this role up until around the time of the arrival of the Uyghurs. Again, though, it is difficult to draw too fine a point and one must make generalities and simplifications. However, the new presence of Islam gradually destroyed the heartland of Sogdiana and the Sogdian culture "entered into crisis in the ninth century."⁷³ Sogdian influence in the west was disappearing and in the eastern Tarim basin the "Sogdian network gave way to a regional Uighur network, from China to the eastern Tianshan."⁷⁴ The rise of Islam to the west then not only affected the process

⁷¹ Some basic introductions to the Qarakhanids can be found in Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia*, 83-92 and René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*, 144-8.

⁷² James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 78.

⁷³ Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 289.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.

of conversion to Buddhism for the Uyghurs, but also may have played a role in their rise as important middlemen in cultural exchange between east and west.

Conclusion

During the period of the Uyghur diaspora there was further movement away from the nomadic Turkic tradition that was the original foundation of the Uyghurs' identity. This can be seen in further sedentarization, urbanization, religious transformation, and the evolution towards a learned society. Some Uyghurs became important custodians of religious learning as well as middlemen in trade and cultural exchange throughout the conduit that was the Tarim basin. This was a result of continued exposure to the Chinese and Sogdian cultures, as well as Manichaeism. However, there were also the new influences of Buddhist culture and the Indo-European Tokharian natives of the region. Also, perhaps to a smaller degree Nestorian Christianity and the Tibetan remnants of their powerful polity in the eighth and ninth centuries had some influence. There was a sustained period of Uyghur stability, particularly in the Turfan kingdom that allowed this myriad of influences to gradually fuse together to create a new culture in the region.

EPILOGUE: THE UYGHUR TRANSITION TO MONGOL RULE

The transition of the Uyghurs to Mongol suzerainty in some ways begins with the arrival of the Qara Khitai who took control of the region leading up to the Mongol period. The Uyghurs came to be favored by the Mongols within their empire because they were the first to willingly submit to Mongol rule. The narrative of this discussion then, must begin with an exploration of their submission, which played a role in the favor they received from the Mongols. From there, evidence in the form of travelogues and histories during the early Mongol empire reveal just how far the Uyghurs had transformed. Finally, there will be a brief examination of the Uyghurs in the Mongol empire in what was often characterized as a cultured administrative role. In some ways, this is oversimplifying the character of the Uyghur population as a whole, for the administrative roles were clearly only handled by exceptional Uyghurs. However, these exceptional Uyghurs *did* serve to instill and transmit some important elements of Uyghur culture in the Mongol empire. In some ways, it was now the Uyghurs turn to shape the Mongols who embodied the nomadic tradition.

The Uyghur Submission to the Mongols

The stability of the eastern Tarim basin began to crumble after the Liao were defeated by the Jurchen Jin dynasty. Some of these Liao fled west forming a new powerful presence in inner Asia in the Tarim basin, north of the Tian Shan as well as

west of the Pamir Mountains. They came to be called the Qara Khitai and ruled from roughly 1141 until their destruction in 1218 at the hands of the Mongols.¹ Qara Khitai rule over a primarily Muslim territory was never centralized, unlike the Chinese, despite their otherwise largely sinicized administrative style.² Because of this lack of centralized control and the distance from the Qara Khitai capital near Lake Issyk Kul, the Uyghurs, at the eastern edge of the Qara Khitai rule, were, for the most part autonomous. As long as they paid their taxes and tributes to the gürkhans³ they were even able to maintain their own armies.⁴ The primary reminder of Qara Khitai rule were the financial officials placed in the cities. Armies were only dispatched to quell uprisings.⁵ Nevertheless, after approximately seventy years, the Uyghur idiqut Barchuq, decided to shift loyalties, casting off Qara Khitai rule in favor of the growing Mongol power to the east.⁶ After slowly declining in prestige and power over the last third of their existence, in 1218, like most powers in the region of inner Asia, the Qara Khitai were eliminated by the Mongols.⁷

The Uyghurs' shift in loyalties in favor of Mongol rule occurred for a number of reasons. Most importantly, as the Qara Khitai declined in power, they came to exact heavy taxes and tribute from their Uyghur vassals to the east. The shift in loyalties may also have been, in part, due to the declining power of the Qara Khitai. To the west of the Qara Khitai, the Muslim Khwarazm Shahs were a growing threat, which may have led to

¹ Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 93-131.

³ The title of the Qara Khitai leader, meaning "universal khan", see Biran, 1; or "great khan", see Emil Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources, Vol. 1* (n.p.: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005), 225.

⁴ James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror*, 45.

⁷ Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 60-86.

Uyghur fears of being subjugated by Muslim overlords. The heavy taxes and declining power of the Qara Khitai as well as the threat of Muslim rule were all part of the Uyghur decision to submit to the Mongols. To the east, the Mongols were gaining prestige and perhaps the Uyghurs wanted to link themselves to a growing non-Muslim power. The Mongols could potentially offer protection from both the Qara Khitai and the Muslim Khawarazm Shahs.

Fear of the Mongols can certainly not be ignored either, and there was some evidence that Mongol envoys had already arrived in the Uyghur northern capital of Beshbalig before the submission. If these envoys had arrived, it was likely they brought promises of either great rewards and prosperity or destruction at the hands of Chinggis Khan, contingent on the Uyghurs' response. The policy of favoring those who submit and destroying those who resist by the Mongols was retained throughout the Mongol conquests and was most clearly recorded by Rashid al-Din in an exchange between a later Mongol khan, Möngke, grandson of Chinggis Khan, and the Middle East in the 1250s:

If you come of your own accord and support our army with men and supplies, your countries, armies and households will remain with you and your efforts on our [behalf] will be looked upon with favor. But if you are negligent and cultivate remissness in carrying out the order, then as soon as we, with God's power, finish with them [the Assassins], we, without fail, will head in your direction and deal with your households and countries in the same manner we dealt with them.⁸

All of these factors played a part in the Uyghurs' decision to cast off Qara Khitai sovereignty in favor of the Mongols.

By 1211, with the formal submission along the Kerulen River, the Uyghurs had sealed their vassalage to this quickly rising power in Eurasia. They had already made

⁸ Thomas T. Allsen, "The Yüan Dynasty and the Uighurs of Turfan in the 13th Century," in *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 244.

notice of their desire to submit to the Mongols by spring of 1209. Barchuq offered his services and said that he would “be like a fifth son to him [Chinggis Khan] and give him all my strength.”⁹ *The Secret History* suggested that at this point Chinggis offered one of his daughters in marriage and said “let him become my fifth son.”¹⁰ However, other sources suggested that this betrothal did not occur until Barchuq was in Chinggis’ presence in 1211.¹¹ Regardless, the Uyghurs’ submission was the first in a long line of kingdoms to be put in a subservient position to the Mongols. The fact that they were the first though, played some part in their important role in the Mongol empire. The importance of being the first to submit can be seen going as far forward as a statement Qubilai made to the Koryo ruler in 1270 that was recorded in the *Yuan Shi*:

You [the Korean monarch] submitted later, therefore [you] are ranked low among the princes (wang). During the reign of our T’ai-tsu [Chinggis Khan], the Iduq qut was the first to submit, accordingly it was ordered that [he] be ranked first among the princes. Arslan [A-ssu-lan] next submitted, therefore [he] was ranked below him [the Iduq qut]. You ought to know this.¹²

The fact that this statement was made nearly sixty years after the submission of the Uyghurs revealed how the Mongols valued their first willingly loyal subjects outside of their original territory.

How Far the Uyghurs Have Come

Chang Chun was a Chinese traveler who accompanied Chinggis Khan in his travels to the western regions in the early 1220s.¹³ The story of his travels aided the creation of a picture of how far the Uyghur people had come. The Uyghurs could have

⁹ Anonymous, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, adapt. Paul Kahn (Boston: Cheng and Tsui Company, 1998), 135.

¹⁰ Ibid., 135.

¹¹ Thomas T. Allsen, “The Yüan Dynasty and the Uighurs of Turfan in the 13th Century,” in *China Among Equals*, 247. Emil Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources, Vol. 1*, 249.

¹² Thomas T. Allsen, “The Yüan Dynasty and the Uighurs of Turfan in the 13th Century,” in *China Among Equals*, 247.

¹³ David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1990), 15-6.

potentially wreaked havoc in the eastern Tarim basin, but instead, as demonstrated in chapter three, a gradual fusion occurred between the urban Indo-European Buddhist communities and the slowly transforming Uyghurs. The Uyghurs, who were still exhibiting some signs of their nomadic Turkic traditions, had from the foundation of their qaghanate, gradually moved away from these traditions.

As the Mongol retinue accompanying Chinggis Khan arrived in the eastern Tarim basin, at the foothills of the Tian Shan, Uyghurs came out to meet them and the Uyghur ruler “brought [them] grape-wine, choice fruits, large cakes, huge onions, and strips of Persian linen.”¹⁴ This small town at the edge of the Uyghur territory did not serve them important staples of a nomadic diet, namely meat and milk, the products of a livestock centered economy.¹⁵ However, these offerings do imply a strong economic basis in agriculture. Also, the Persian linen suggests a continued cross-cultural exchange in the region and the importance of trade throughout the period for the Turfan Uyghurs.

After leaving this small town, the Mongol group proceeded towards Beshbalig. On the way, Chang Chun noted that the fields of corn were irrigated and waters were brought via aqueducts.¹⁶ Irrigation was not damaged or destroyed during the Uyghur rule over the region and aqueducts were at least maintained if not built or expanded during this period. This suggests that there was a well-developed infrastructure in the Turfan Uyghur government. After arriving in Beshbalig, not only were there similar diets as the above mentioned and vineyards, but a large number of “Buddhist and Taoist [probably Manichaeic based on a later description of their dress] priests” came to meet them

¹⁴ Ch’ang-Ch’un, *Travels of an Alchemist*, trans. Arthur Waley (London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd., 1931), 79.

¹⁵ Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, 2nd ed., 39.

¹⁶ Ch’ang-Ch’un, *Travels of an Alchemist*, 80.

outside of the city.¹⁷ Again the multicultural character continued with the presence of various religions. Further, though sources are rather scant, the European Christian ambassador William of Rubruck makes note that Nestorian Christianity was still alive in the region as well when he traveled in inner Asia in the middle of the thirteenth century.¹⁸ So some evidence is available that strengthens the suggestion that the Uyghur transformation intensified over the period of their Turfan kingdom of the eastern Tarim basin.

Uyghurs in the Mongol Empire

Perhaps partially due to the Uyghurs' being the first to submit to the rapidly rising Mongol power, they were a favored people. An illustration of this favor is revealed when the Mongols later in the empire allowed most Uyghurs, who had been scattered throughout the inner and east Asian Mongol political system, to return to the Uyghur homeland. This was a rare allowance for the Mongols.¹⁹ This favor could also be seen in the role that the Uyghur language and script played to the, until then, illiterate Mongols. The Uyghurs also had important roles as auxiliary troops in the early advances of the empire, as well as being administrators, civil officials, translators and interpreters in the empire. Again, there is no need to belabor these points. This brief section is simply to reveal how far the Uyghurs had come. To the point where they would have a critical role in the Mongol empire and exert a strong influence both culturally and administratively upon the developing empire.

The Uyghurs had, even before the Mongol empire was established, been serving administrative roles for other Mongol tribes. When Chinggis Khan conquered the

¹⁷ Ibid., 80-1.

¹⁸ Christopher Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, 137-8.

¹⁹ Thomas T. Allsen, "The Yüan Dynasty and the Uighurs of Turfan," in *China Among Equals*, 248.

Mongol Naiman tribe in 1204 he brought along their Uyghur scribes and administrators. The most notable of these was Tatar Tonga, a Uyghur in charge of the Naiman tax collection system.²⁰ An exchange between Chinggis Khan and Tatar Tonga revealed that the Mongols had not developed any system of writing. According to the *Yuan Shi*, Tatar Tonga was “ordered to teach Chinggis’ sons and all the Mongol princes the Uighur written and spoken language.”²¹ Because administering over a vast and still expanding empire requires communication in the form of writing, this was a critical step for the Mongols. To adopt the Uyghur script reveals both the transformation the Uyghurs had undergone as well as the influence they would have on their new Mongol rulers. As the “lingua franca on the eastern steppe was Turkic, not Persian,” Uyghurs were cemented not only as administrators, but translators and interpreters throughout inner Asia.²²

The Uyghurs would also contribute troops and intelligence to the Mongol war effort against Küchlüg, the de facto ruler towards the end of the Qara Khitai. Rashid al-Din recorded that Barchuq led five hundred troops in battle against Küchlüg,²³ Juvaini recorded that he led three hundred troops.²⁴ Admittedly this was a small fraction of the Mongol army estimated to be between twenty and thirty thousand troops²⁵ but it cannot be ignored as aid in the war effort to destroy the Qara Khitai. Certainly, the Uyghurs also provided intelligence to the Mongols, although this cannot be confirmed. Thomas Allsen

²⁰ Michael C. Brose, “Uighurs and Technologies of Literacy,” in *Religion, Customary Law, and Nomadic Technology*, ed. Michael Gervers and Wayne Schlepp (Toronto: Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies, 2000), 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 20. The *Yuan Shi* was the chronicle of the Mongol ruled Yuan dynasty.

²² Elizabeth Endicott-West, “The Yüan Government and Society,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 6: Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1358*, ed. Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 611.

²³ Emil Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources, Vol. 1*, 261.

²⁴ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: History of the World Conqueror*, 46.

²⁵ Emil Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources, Vol. 1*, 233. Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History*, 83.

further developed a picture of the Uyghur military's role in the Mongol empire. He first submitted that, based on a thirteenth-century Muslim author, "they were reputed to be poor fighters."²⁶ This reveals further movement away from Kashgari's eleventh-century characterization of the Uyghurs as "the best shooters."²⁷ Nevertheless, when the Mongols pressed past the Qara Khitai and attacked Khawarazm, Barchuq is said to have accompanied them with 10,000 Uyghur troops. These troops were reported to be primarily infantrymen.²⁸ An army of foot soldiers is hardly emblematic of the rugged horse culture of the Uyghurs' nomadic origins. Still, this was only the beginning of a long tradition of serving alongside or being drafted into mixed units within the Mongol empire.

As administrators and civil officials in the Mongol empire, Uyghurs reached new heights as well. Two of the three basic taxes employed by the Mongols possibly had their origins in Uyghur tax systems. The khubchiri was a tax levied on the sedentary population and the khalan was an agricultural tax.²⁹ If this was the case, it reveals some remnants of the nomadic tradition within the ruling Uyghurs of the Turfan kingdom. Again, the transformation was gradual and there are still signs in this time of some traits in line with this nomadic Turkic tradition. There was another aspect of the Mongols' strategy for maintaining their imperial strength that may have been influenced by the Uyghurs: the postal relay system and its import as a method of rapid communication.³⁰

One final important point revealed some level of continued sinicization within Uyghur culture. Some believe that the Uyghurs were important in "bridging the gap

²⁶ Thomas T. Allsen, "The Yüan Dynasty and the Uighurs of Turfan," in *China Among Equals*, 265, 279.

²⁷ Mahmud al-Kashgari, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (Diwan Lughat at-Turk) Part 1*, 140.

²⁸ Thomas T. Allsen, "The Yüan Dynasty and the Uighurs of Turfan," in *China Among Equals*, 265.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 263-4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 264-5.

between Chinese and Mongolian culture.”³¹ Of the 277 darughas³² mentioned in the *Yuan Shi* only the Mongols (104) and northern Chinese (46) outnumbered the Uyghurs (34).³³ This reflects the respect that the Mongols had for the Uyghurs. According to a somewhat sarcastic Juvaini, the Mongols “consider the Uighur language and script to be the height of knowledge and learning.”³⁴ However, part of the Uyghur culture had been shaped by relations with the Chinese and “the majority of Western and Central Asians who held chin-shih degrees were Uighurs.”³⁵ This allowed those Uyghurs who had sinicized to bridge Chinese and Mongolian culture. The Uyghur presence among the Mongols had a tremendous influence in shaping the rapidly expanding and developing empire.

³¹ Elizabeth Endicott-West, “The Yüan Government and Society,” in *CHC*, Vol. 6, 611.

³² David Morgan, *The Mongols*, 109. “The most important all-purpose Mongol official in conquered territory.”

³³ Thomas T. Allsen, “The Yüan Dynasty and the Uighurs of Turfan,” in *China Among Equals*, 267.

³⁴ Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: History of the World Conqueror*, 7.

³⁵ Elizabeth Endicott-West, “The Yüan Government and Society,” in *CHC*, Vol. 6, 611. A chin-shih degree was awarded following successfully passing civil service examinations in China (see p. 271-2 in this same volume).

CONCLUSION

Most studies of the Uyghurs focus on one group or period of the Uyghurs in isolation. The field of history is about understanding change over time and these specific and isolated studies have not developed a context and understanding of the Uyghurs as a people. Hopefully, this historical work sheds some new light on the incredible transformation that the Uyghurs underwent from their roots in the nomadic Turkic tradition to the cultured administrators of the Mongol empire. Even today, the Uyghurs maintain a sense of their own identity despite being very different from the Uyghurs that were a part of the nomadic Turkic traditions.

The first step in understanding the Uyghur transformation is to explore their origin: the nomadic Turkic tradition that began when they were a tribe in the Turkic qaghanates of the sixth to eighth centuries. The Uyghurs' nomadic identity can be understood partially via the history of the Turkic qaghanates. This is comprised of the tribal structure, the nomadic lifestyle, the nomadic strategy, and finally the shamanic religious tradition. The relations with, and accounts from, their sedentary neighbors are also critical to understanding this nomadic tradition due to the scarcity of sources from the Turkic qaghanates. By exploring this period, the baseline for the study was set that could then be contrasted with all the transformations later that eventually led to their role as cultured administrators in the Mongol empire.

From the ruins of the Turkic qaghanates along the northern steppe, in 744 CE the Uyghurs founded their own qaghanate in the steppe of modern Mongolia. While the Uyghurs traced their origins to the nomadic Turkic tradition of the steppes of inner Asia, it was in this period that they began their transformation. While the Turkic qaghanates encountered foreign religions, Sogdian culture, and Chinese culture, they were largely transient. However, in the Uyghur qaghanate, there were three primary foreign influences that they gradually absorbed: the Chinese influence to the south and east, Sogdian culture to the southwest and west, and the Manichaean religion brought by the Sogdians.

The Uyghurs were slowly being sinicized despite making an effort to assert a distinct identity separate from the Chinese. Via the Sogdians, Manichaeism gradually moved east, where it came to be sponsored by some of the Uyghur leadership. Despite its status as the Uyghurs' official religion, there were some important complications that prevented the conversion from being absolute. First, there was a mixed reaction to Manichaeism in the court. This mixed reaction meant inconsistent and incomplete support by the Uyghur nobility. Second, the conversion process also takes generations typically, and the Uyghur qaghanate only lasted seventy-eight years after the religion arrived. There simply was not enough time for wide-scale conversion. Finally, the Manichaean religion was largely incompatible with the nomadic Turkic tradition. However, Manichaeism had the benefit of being a distinct and separate religion from the Chinese. It also strengthened a relationship with the powerful Sogdian merchants who introduced the religion to the Uyghurs.

It was difficult to separate the transformative elements of the Manichaean faith from the Sogdian and Chinese influences that were also shaping the Uyghurs. Yet, it remains clear that they all played a part in the process of transformation within the Uyghur qaghanate. These influences brought a level of intellectualization, sedentarization, general softening of the rugged nomadic culture, and finally some divisiveness within the Uyghur qaghanate. Some of these factors played a part in their eventual destruction at the hands of the Qirghiz who maintained the rugged nomadic Turkic tradition that the Uyghurs had begun to abandon.

Upon the fall of the Uyghur qaghanate they splintered into three primary groups and were dispersed. Each group experienced varied degrees of success in their survival, as well as different levels and types of transformation. Despite these groups transforming in different ways and not all surviving, they were all identified as Uyghurs and faced increased intercultural contact, ethnic mixing, sedentarization, and the influence from foreign religion.

The era of the Uyghur diaspora was complex as the Tibetan, Chinese, and Sogdian presence in inner Asia began to gradually recede leaving a complex and diverse cultural imprint. The Uyghurs experienced this cultural diversity and it shaped their identity in new ways. In the period of their diaspora, some Uyghurs continued to experience the influences they faced in the period of the qaghanate: Manichaeism, as well as Sogdian and Chinese culture. However, some of the Uyghur groups began to be shaped by Buddhism, Nestorianism, and the Indo-European culture in the Tarim basin. The transformation of the Uyghurs from their nomadic Turkic tradition only grew more deep and permanent in this period.

The Uyghur refugees who headed to China survived for the shortest period of time. After three years, Tang Chinese armies destroyed them. Because their existence was so brief the refugees are most helpful in confirming the transformation that the Uyghurs underwent in the period of the qaghanate, namely increased sedentarization and sinicization. The next two groups lasted for approximately two hundred years in the Gansu corridor and its far western town of Dunhuang before being absorbed by the Tanguts in the eleventh century. They experienced continued sinicization as well as the increasing influence of Buddhism. Finally, the longest lasting Uyghur splinter group moved to the Turfan depression where Uyghurs continue to live today and founded the Turfan kingdom. These Uyghurs are the descendants of most modern Uyghurs and their transformation was the most radical. Here they came to be considered a learned people; they were the custodians of religion and culture in the region as they mixed with the Indo-European Tokharian and Chinese natives. They also eventually became the most sedentarized and urban Uyghur group.

The Turfan Uyghurs submitted quickly to the Mongols and came to be a favored group within the empire. Within the Mongol empire, the Uyghurs proved invaluable and the picture of their role in this era serves as an ideal endpoint for the study as they became what many consider the cultured administrators of the Mongol empire who would influence the Mongols towards a more highly evolved style of rule and administration. Contrasting their role within the Mongol empire with their origins in a nomadic Turkic tradition provides what can only be viewed as a stunning and profound transformation.

While modern Uyghurs no longer exhibit many traits of their nomadic Turkic traditions, they do seek to assert their independence from communist China by looking to the past. They can trace their origins back as early as the influential qaghanate that was a powerful threat to their Tang Chinese neighbors all the way down the line to their roles as cultured administrators of the Mongol empire. This rich heritage legitimizes the Uyghurs as a presence once equal to the Chinese. It also provides them with a source of pride as they struggle to maintain their identity amidst modern challenges.

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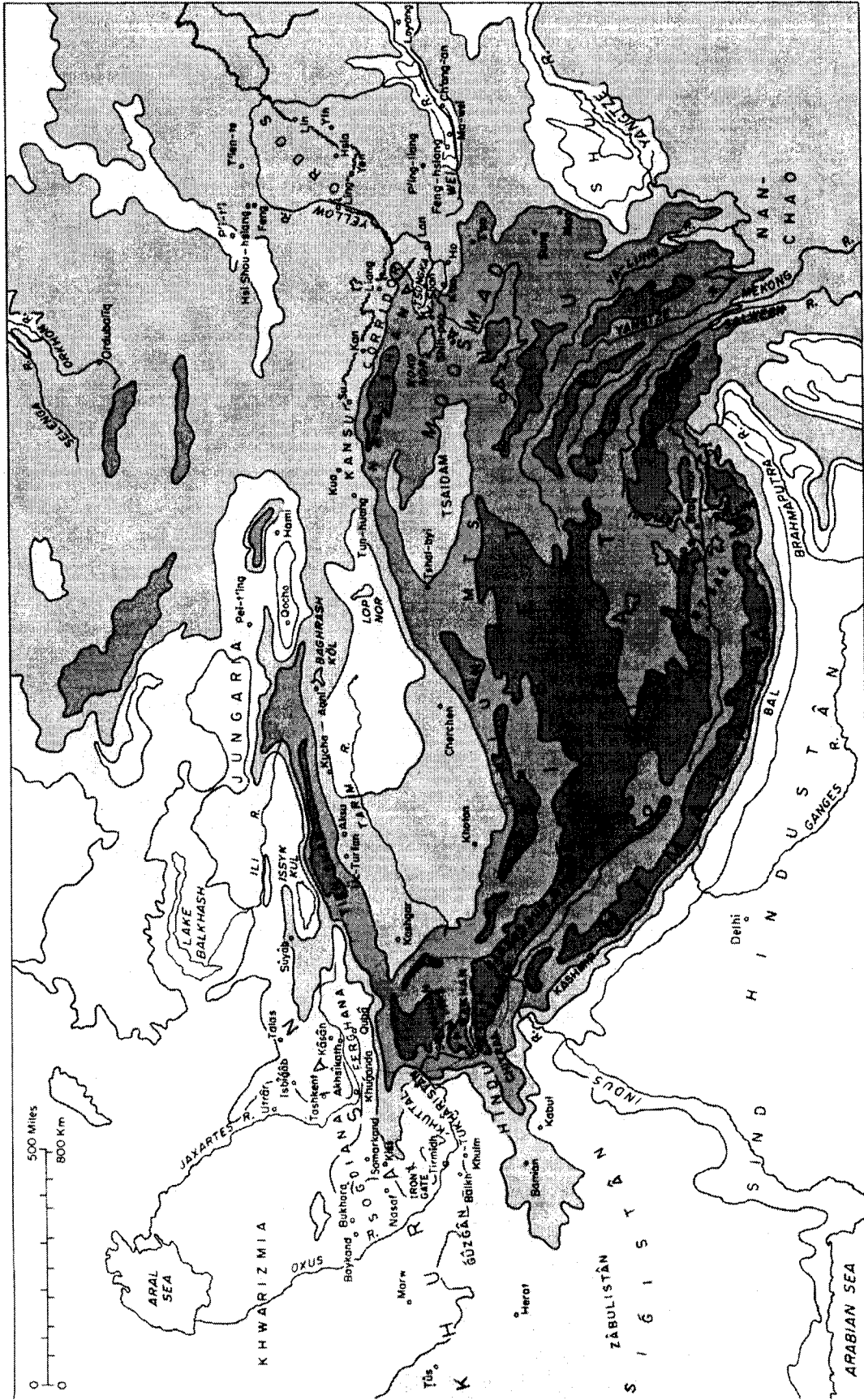
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ABBREVIATIONS

Cambridge History of China = *CHC*

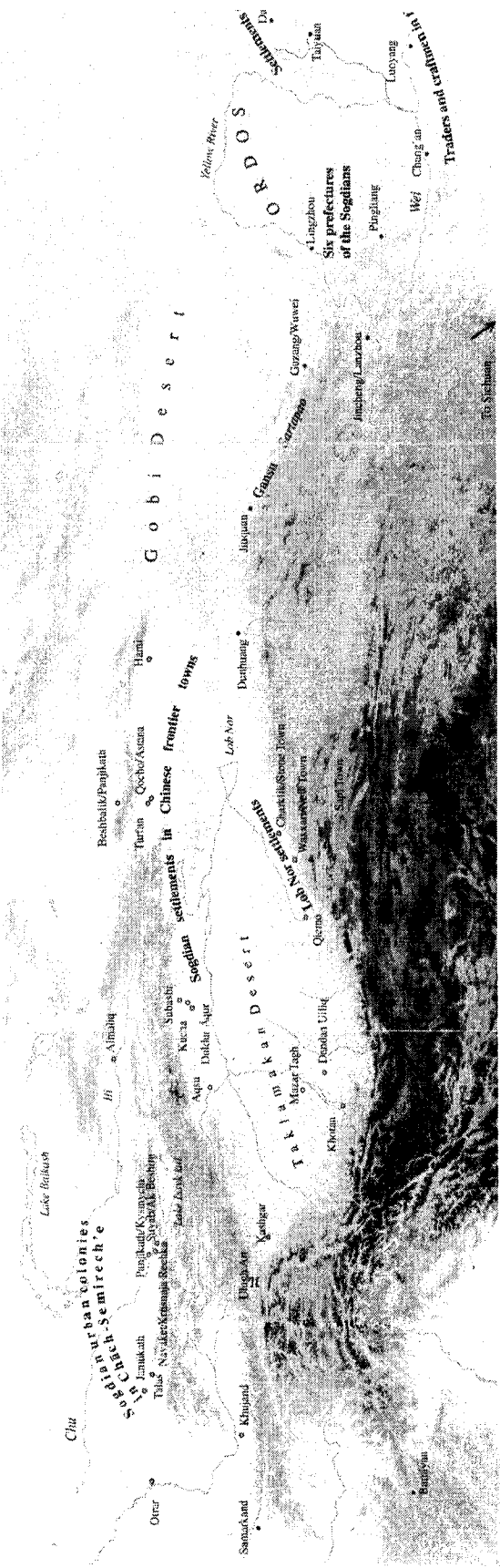
Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia = *CHEIA*

History of Civilizations of Central Asia = *HCCA*



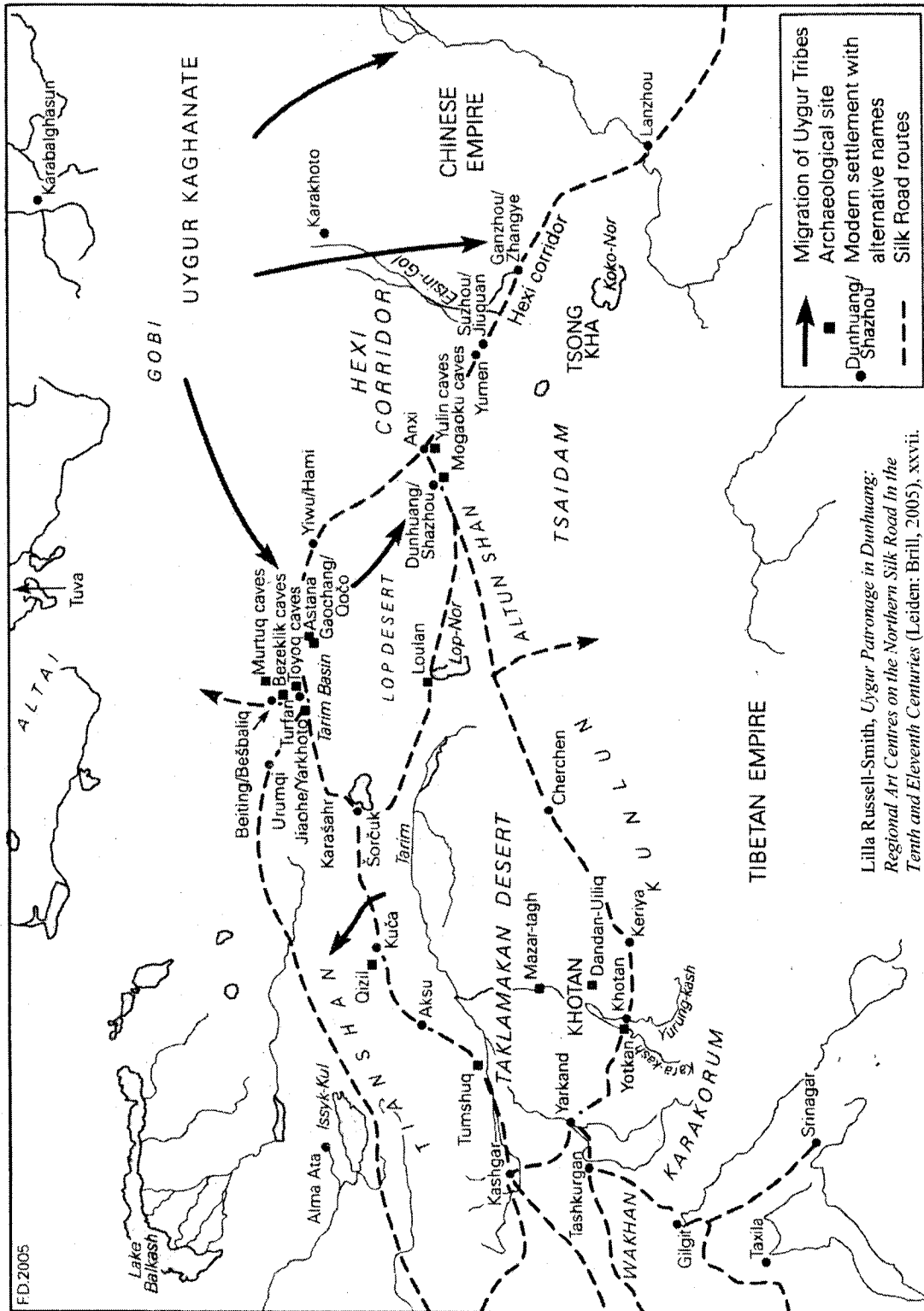
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I. EARLY MEDIEVAL CENTRAL ASIA



Map 7. Sogdian commercial expansion to the east.

Étienne de la Vaisière, *Sogdian Traders: A History*, trans. James Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2005), center panels.



Map of the Silk Road in the ninth-tenth centuries

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: Connor Joseph Bell

ADDRESS: 807 Rubel Ave., Apt. 4
Louisville, KY 40204

DOB: Oshkosh, Wisconsin – August 15, 1979

**EDUCATION
& TRAINING:** B.A., History: Humanities Concentration
Humanities: Disciplinary Studies Concentration
Philosophy Minor
Religious Studies Minor
University of Louisville
1998, 2000-04

Summer Workshop in Slavic, East European, and
Central Asian Languages: Intensive Uyghur I
Indiana University, Bloomington
Summer 2007

M.A., History
University of Louisville
2007-08

EMPLOYMENT: Graduate Student Department Assistant
Fall 2006-Spring 2007

Graduate Student Teaching Assistant
Fall 2007-Spring 2008