# China and Tibet as Referred to in the Old Turkish Inscriptions

*Wolfgang-Ekkehard Scharlipp*

The Old Turkish inscriptions that were written roughly between the beginning of the eighth and the middle of the ninth century A.D. and represent the first testimonies of a Turkish language, include important information about contacts of the ruling Türks[1] and later the Uighurs, who were also Turkish-speaking, with other peoples inside and outside of their *el*, i.e., their steppe empire. This information is partly explicit, when, for example, we read about a delegation being sent to the other side, and partly implicit, by which we mean outside influences that we can trace in the texts in different ways.

It is not always easy to decide whether these contacts were the result of trade on the Silk Road, since the Turks as well as most of their neighbors were nomads with a dynamic life-style involving all kinds of contacts. Furthermore the Silk Road not only promoted contacts along the more or less known major or minor direct routes, but also along the many ever-changing side-routes. In addition, we must consider the fact that these contacts, while often friendly, were also characterized by hostility. Time and again, good trading relationships would suddenly become hostile.

Both trade and war have left their traces in the written stone documents of the Turkish dynasties of the Türks with their center in what is now Mongolia and the realm of the Kırghızes along the Upper Yenissey. Having Mongols and Uralic peoples as neighbors to their north, Iranians in their midst and to their east, Tibetans to the south and Chinese to the south and southeast, the natural ethnic surroundings resulted in an uninterrupted flow of information making the Turkish aristocracy a much better informed group than most of us have assumed. Moreover, the Turks controlled during

their reign, from ca 552 A.D. until the collapse of the Uighur empire in 840 A.D., very large parts of the Silk Road, which conveyed not only goods but also ideas. Undoubtedly, it was the Chinese who had the biggest influence on the thinking and decision-making of the Türks' court in Mongolia. It was the endless struggle between them and the Chinese, that led to the contacts between different Turkish groups and non-Turkish peoples, the Tibetans among them.

The Old Turkish Stone inscriptions from the Orkhon in Mongolia are relatively long memorial texts for deceased members of their aristocracy.[2] These texts include biographies of the dead which contain a range of information concerning their relations with other people. And even though the inscriptions from the Yenissey, which are thought to have been written by the Kırghızes, are much briefer than the Orkhon ones, we do find in them expressions that hint at contacts with China and Tibet, even if they are very few in number.[3]

As to the voluminous Chinese sources, we are well informed about numerous contacts and the influence they had. This is why I will concentrate here on the information which is available from the Turkish inscriptions by analysing the memorials, their architecture, explicit remarks within the texts and the vocabulary, i.e., Chinese and Tibetan words, some of which can be considered loan words.

While the inscriptions from the Yenissey, with the exception of the two from the Altın Köl, are rudimentary and do not show any outside influences, the stones from Mongolia were part of a complex memorial site that includes brick walls, statues, wall paintings and Chinese dragon masks. On certain columns, Chinese inscriptions are found on one side, which, according to the Chinese sources, were written by the Chinese emperor himself. The columns stood on a huge sculpture of a tortoise which in Chinese symbolism represents a long life, strong will, and stability. We know that at least part of the artistic work was carried out by Chinese artists who had come to the memorial for this purpose.[4]

To mention just one other result of these contacts, there is the calendar which appears in the Orkhon inscriptions but is also the Chinese calendar of the animal cycle.

Explicit remarks concerning the Chinese are abundant in the inscriptions from Mongolia. They range from a warning about the danger that the Chinese pose, to several references concerning

fights with the Chinese or delegations to or from China. The warning against the Chinese, on one hand, and the acceptance of Chinese customs, on the other,[5] may seem contradictory; but in actual fact the Chinese, though considered an enemy, were also the mighty neighbor who was admired and respected. The name *tavġaç* that Turkish sources use for the Chinese is a clear pointer to the situation that actually existed in the region before and during the time of the T'ang dynasty (618-907 A.D.). It is the name of an originally Turkish or at least Altaic dynasty (Chinese: T'o-pa, 398-534 A.D.) that later became completely sinicized. This name migrated along the Silk Road, later appearing as "Tavgast" in Byzantine and as "Tawġac" in Arab sources denoting China.

This is probably also what happened to the Turkish name for Tibet. References concerning Tibet are much rarer than those relating to China. This is not suprising in view of the more limited contacts with that country and its people. In both the inscriptions from Mongolia and Yenissey, little is said about Tibet, except for a mention of the name. For example, the inscription of Köl Tegin reports that the Turkish emperor almost reached Tibet during his campaigns or that during the mourning period after the death of Köl Tegin, there were delegations from China and Tibet among those from a variety of states. In the Yenissey inscription from Altın Köl II the deceased tells us: "Är ärdäm üçün töpüt kanka yalabaç bardım. Kälmätim (Because of my manly bravery I went as an ambassador to the Khan of Tibet, but I didn't come back)."[6]

None of the inscriptions have any detailed statements referring to Tibet, as opposed to China since, as has already been mentioned, the Tibetans were not as important as the Chinese. Furthermore, the Tibetans, who confronted the Turks, may have been military or also tribal organizations acting rather independently from the center which was quite remote from the respective centers of the Turkish federations.

Nevertheless, as will be seen later, there were contacts between the various courts, and also in this respect the knowledge about each other must have been greater than is usually assumed. In both sets of inscriptions, i.e., in both empires, people or at least the aristocracy were familiar with the Tibetan court, as we can see from the fact that the Kagan of Tibet is mentioned several times in the texts.

Another remarkable fact is that in Mongolia as well as in the Upper Yenissey the authors of the inscriptions refer to a country called *töpüt*, in other words, to a political unit of this name. It was this Turkish form of the name that again made its way along the Silk Road and is found in Arabic and in later European sources.

The name of Tibet must be of Tibetan origin, though nowadays, and in written Tibetan sources, this country is referred to with a seemingly different name: *bod*. Despite numerous sources of Indian and Chinese origin, i.e., from countries with the most important contacts to Tibet, no clues are given regarding the etymology of the word Tibet/*töpüt*. It is this Turkish version that forms the basis of a plausible analysis. It is spelled t²ÖpÖt in the inscriptions from Mongolia as it is in those from the Yenissey, although the orthography in both groups is usually not identical. What is more important is the second labial vowel representing an assimilation in accordance with vowel harmony which is written in contradiction to the orthographic rules.

My explanation is that *töpüt* is *not* a genuine Turkish word, as it has often been interpreted. It is not derived from the well known word *töpü* for "mountain peak" plus the so-called Old Turkish plural suffix -t; this etymology may be intriguing as it fits quite well for the mountainous country of Tibet. Nevertheless, this is not the reason for the plural suffix -t nor for this kind of spelling. The solution to this problem can be found in an old Tibetan designation for their own country, which probably was *stod bod*,[7] meaning the "high *bod*", the upper parts of Tibet. The development of Tibetan phonetics allows for this interpretation, as we know from the numerous Tibetan words found in Uighur texts.[8] Furthermore this etymology, which consists of two distinctive words, may be responsible for the spelling of the second labial vowel of the Turkish word. Finally as to the semantics: the word *stod pa* denotes something being high, for example mountains, as well as people living in mountainous areas. This expression is still being used for making a distinction between the Tibetans living in the lower areas, like in *dbus* (where there is now the capital of Lhasa), on the one hand, and the Tibetans in the upper regions in the west, on the other, where incidentally the Tibetan kings used to have their seats.

This leads us to the above-mentioned Chinese and Tibetan words to be found in "Runic" texts.

Chinese words abound in both sets of inscriptions. As the inscriptions from Mongolia include, inter alia, quite detailed reports on delegations and military action, they also contain a far greater number of Chinese words than the epitaphs of the Yenissey which are, with few exceptions, very brief exclamations of grief and mourning over the death of a particular person.

Most of the Chinese words in these sources represent names of Chinese people. In most cases they appear together with their military rank. To give just one example, there is the Lisün Tay Säŋün who led the Chinese delegation to the funeral of Bilgä Kagan. The term which means literally Great General, appears only three times in the inscriptions, while *säŋün* is very common in both sets of inscriptions. But while in the Orkhon inscriptions of the Türk empire this title is exlusively used for Chinese military officers, in the inscriptions of the subsequent Uighur empire (742-840 A.D.) it has been adopted by the Turkish military. Also in the inscriptions from the Yenissey, this title is very common in combination with Turkish names or titles. As for the Uighur inscriptions – belonging to the Mongolian set – we are very well informed about relations between the Uighur and the Chinese which were much friendlier than those with the Türks and the Chinese. But as far as the Kırghız Yenissey inscriptions are concerned which originated a long way from China, it is not so easy to find an explanation.

However, there is an even more suprising and important example of Chinese words in the Kırghız inscriptions. As it has been stated by other Turkologists, the word *kunçuy*, appearing once in the Orkhon inscriptions in Mongolia meaning "princess", is of Chinese origin and stems from the word *kung chu*. While in the Köl Tegin (732 A.D.) and Bilgä Kagan (735 A.D.) inscriptions it is used to designate a real princess, i.e., the daughter of the Kagan who was given to another Kagan as a wife, in the Yenissey inscriptions this word clearly denotes a wife more generally and may even have had the meaning of "my beloved wife", thus being used very similarly to the expression "my princess" in many languages. (An astonishing additional conclusion is that men who used this expression first made themselves kings.) What allows us to con-

clude that *kunçuy* in the Yenissey inscriptions means "beloved wife" is the fact that, in most cases, it appears in connection with the word *kuy*, which also came from China and means "private rooms", similar to "harem." Several times we therefore find the expression *kuyda kunçuyum*, and in one place *kuydakı kunçuyum* ("my princess or princesses in the harem") is being used. Furthermore there are parallel expressions. For example, after *kuyda* (instead of *kunçuyum*) we find *kadaş* meaning a "companion" in general, but being specified here as female companion. There is also the even more distinct *kuyda kisi*, with the second word meaning "woman", so probably "women in the private rooms."

Even more surprising about the Chinese word denoting "my beloved wife" is that it appears in a grammatically Turkish construction with the locative suffix *kuyda kunçuyum*. We may conclude from this that these expressions were quite frequently used, even before these documents were written. It was probably due to the tradition of exchanging women for marriage between the royal courts as a peace-keeping measure between neighbors.[9] As far as Tibetan words are concerned, besides the actual name Tibet, I can only find one which certainly is of Tibetan origin.[10] On the northern side of the Köl Tegin inscription we are informed about delegations that came to the funeral of the Prince Köl. In addition to the delegations sent by the Chinese emperor, by the Oghuz, the Kırghızes and others, there was a delegation from the Tibetan *kaġan* being led by a man whose name is spelled $b^2$ $Öl^2$ $n^2$. Because of this orthography this word was first taken as a name, pronounced "bölän" or something similar. This word was later recognised as the rendering of the old pronunciation of the Tibetan word *blon* meaning "minister" or "high official."

The Turks must have been familiar with this title as they apparently adapted it to Turkish phonetics by untying the Tibetan consonant cluster *bl* with the help of a vowel in regressive assimilation. According to orthographic rules, the second vowel which had actually been the root vowel, was not indicated. This is another example which allows us to conclude that these peoples had a lot more knowledge about each other than we thought. A short glimpse at history provides us with further explanations from the Chinese sources which, as we have seen, give us a good insight into how intensive these contacts were.

Information concerning Türks and Tibetans includes, for example, the fact that in 726 A.D. the Tibetans were seeking help from the Türk dynasty in their fight against the Chinese T'ang dynasty, but were denied assistance. These were attempts at coming to terms with other states in order to be a match for a third party. They were partly pursued by correspondence, partly through delegations and thus offer considerable information about the hierarchies and terminologies related to them.

## Notes

1. In order to avoid confusion, here is a brief comment on the following names: According to a recent convention the word "Türk" is used as the designation for the first two empires which the Turkish dynasties had governed in Central Asia from 552-740. The term "Turks" is usually used for the Turks of Turkey and other Turkish peoples who lived outside and later than the Türk empire.
2. Among the voluminous literature about these texts we recommend T. Tekin, *Grammar of Orkhon Turkic*, Bloomington, 1968.
3. D.D. Vasilyev, *Korpus Tyurkskih runičeskih pamyatnikov baseyna Yeniseya*, Leningrad, 1983.
4. See the inscription of Köl Tegin, Northern side, line 13: "In order to establish the memorial, to make sculptures and paintings and to prepare the inscription stele, General Chang, the nephew of the Chinese emperor came [to the funeral of Köl Tegin]." See also the discussion about this topic in Jisl, L., "Vorbericht über die archäologische Erforschung des Kül-Tegin-Denkmals durch die tschechoslowakisch-mongolische Expedition des Jahres 1958," in *UAJb* 32 (1960), pp. 65-77.
5. See, e.g., the inscription of Köl Tegin, South side, lines 5-6, we read: "They [the Chinese] give gold, silver and silk in big amounts [to other peoples]. The speech of the Chinese people has always been sweet and the goods [presents?] of the Chinese people have always been soft. In this way, by deceiving with their sweet words and soft goods they make, the remote people come closer. After these people have settled close to them, they [the Chinese] play their bad games with them [?]." On the other hand, we know from Chinese sources – among many other documents – that at least some of the Türks tried to copy even the Chinese way of clothing, which, by the way, the Chinese emperor denied them.
6. See L Bazin, "Eine Inschrift vom oberen Jenissei: als Quelle zur Geschichte Zentralasiens" in *Materialia Turcica* II, (1976), pp. 1-11.
7. There is a long discussion about the origin of the mordern word "Tibet." See for example L. Bazin, "L'origine du nom Tibet," in *Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde*, 26 (1991), pp. 9-28. In my opinion the facts concerning the Tibetan language have not been sufficiently considered, and I do not regard the discussion as closed.

8. Already in the Tibetan loan words in the classical Uighur Buddhist texts (13./14. centuries) the initial /s/ of Tibetan words does not appear in Uighur script. The exact pronunciation of Tibetan words by the early Turks in Central Asia has still to be studied. The modern pronunciation /tö pö/ is not to be found in *töpüt*.
9. The Chinese sources are rich in information about this practice between the Chinese and other courts. In the Köl Tegin Inscription (Eastern side, line 20) we also learn about this practice among different Turkish tribal federations, like in this case the Türks and the Kirghizes.
10. It is not before the time of the Uighur kingdoms in what is now Kansu and Xinjiang (ca 850 – ca 1370) that we can speak of a real Turkish-Tibetan cultural contact. The lamaist texts that have been translated from Tibetan into Turkish are rather limited in number but very elaborate in style and terminology.

# The Silk Road and Hybridized Languages in North-Western China

*S.A. Wurm*

The present-day languages and language situation of the Silk Road regions of Central Asia reflect the consequences of the former use of many different languages and the multilingual trading along these routes, as demonstrated by the existence today of a number of hybridized languages whose emergence may in part be attributable to the trading activities on the Silk Road. These languages have, until very recently, received little attention, if any, by linguistic scholars. It has been mainly through the large Language Atlases project mentioned in note 1 below that interest has become focused on them.

While there has been some marginal interest in such languages by scholars outside China (Li 1983; Field 1994), most Chinese scholars, aware of their existence, have paid little attention to them, largely because they regarded them as debased and corrupted forms of Chinese and therefore not deserving of closer attention (a view also shared by the few non-Chinese linguists who have studied them). There are a few exceptions to this rule among a number of Chinese scholars cited below, though they still share the largely erroneous opinions about the origin and nature of these languages. It has been mainly through the work of Mei Lee-Smith and the present writer relating to these languages in connection with the Atlas of Languages Intercultural Communication in the Pacific Area project that the real nature of such languages has become established.[1]

The languages found in the Central Asian Silk Road region today are the Turkic languages Uighur in Xinjiang with its very close relatives Salar and Western (Yellow) Yugur in Gansu, as well as Kazakh, Kirghiz, Uzbek, Tatar and Tuva in Xinjiang; the Mon-