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The Buddhist Culture of the Old Uigur Peoples

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I. WHO ARE THE UIGURS?

UIGUR (ALTERNATIVELY, UIGHUR, Uygur, Uyghur, etc.) is the name of an ethnic Turkic tribe. When we hear the name Turk, or Turkey, many of us think of the modern Republic of Turkey located in the Anatolia Peninsula whose capital city is Ankara. Certainly, the majority of the people living in this country are ethnic Turks. However, it was only about five hundred years ago, in about the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries CE, that Turks began living in this area.

Or some of you may remember Turkistan, which is another name for Central Asia. The word Turkistan is a pre-modern Persian word meaning "dwelling place (*stan*) of the Turks." Certainly in the area designated by this word, namely Tajikistan, Kirghizstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan in the former Soviet Union, and the Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region in China, most people are ethnic Turks. However, it was about one thousand years ago, or since the tenth century, that they began occupying these areas.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Turks originally inhabited Mongolia. Chinese historical records from the sixth century CE describe them as nomadic tribes. Ethnically, Turks are classified as Mongoloid and they speak an Altaic language. Here I would like to provide a brief introduction to the historical background of the old Uigur people who are closely connected to the spread of Buddhism.

Turkish people first appear in the Chinese historical records under the name Tujue, which is clearly a phonetic transliteration of Turk (türk). They were skilled smiths, producing armor and weapons by smelting iron ore from the Altaic Mountains. As their military power grew, they became independent. They increased their strength through the profits accumulated from the control of the east-west trade through the northern Steppe Route, and their empire extended from the Mongolian Plateau to the Caspian Sea (552–744).

The empire was split into two countries by internal disputes in 583; the East Tujue were based in the Mongolian Plateau, and the West Tujue in Central Asia. During this period the Tujue, or Turks, created a Tujue script (a rune type script) based on Aramaic. They erected inscriptions praising the deeds of their emperors (*khan*) on the banks of the Orkhon River. This script is the earliest writing system used by inner Asian nomads, and the inscriptions are a valuable academic resource both historically and linguistically. In the same period, a sixth century Chinese record states that the Northern Qi sent a Tujue translation of the *Niepan jing* (*Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*) to the Tujue upon their request. This is the first known instance that the Turks encountered Buddhism. Although there is strong academic interest in the Tujue translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the text has not been discovered. Some scholars doubt the account in the Chinese historical record and suggest it might have been a Sogdian translation rather than a Tujue translation. West Tujue was destroyed by the Tang army in 652. Remaining forces, however, later spread west of Pamir and greatly influenced the emergence of West Turkistan.

There was also under the control of the East Tujue a tribe called Tiele. The name of this tribe is also a phonetic transliteration of Turk (türk). Under the Tiele, there was a smaller Turkic tribe called the Uigur. In the eighth century, the Uigur gradually accumulated power and destroyed the East Tujue in 744. In Chinese historical records, the name of the tribe is recorded as Huigu, a phonetic transliteration of Uigur. From this time the Uigur played a central role in the region. The Uigurs made the city of Qara Balghsasun (Ordu Balïq) in the Mongolian Plateau their capital and subjugated other Turkic tribes. They established the Empire of East Uigur Khagan and controlled the Mongolian steppes for the next one hundred years.

At about this time, the revolt of Anshi (755–763) occurred in Tang China. The Tang emperor Xuanzong (712–756) was unable to quell the revolt of his own forces and requested the Uigurs to provide military assistance. While fighting in various places in China, the Uigur people were introduced to advanced Chinese culture, especially in the large cities like Changan. They also interacted with Sogdian merchants from Iran and gathered various international information.

As a result, the Uigur people experienced a settled lifestyle and learned to transcribe their own language in the Sogdian script. They adopted the Iranian religion of Manichaeism as their state religion. In a very short period they were able to create an advanced culture, which might otherwise have taken a very long time if they had maintained their nomadic lifestyle. When the revolt ended, the Uigur forces returned to the Mongolian steppes, bringing Sogdians back with them as staff officers. They built the fortified city Ordu Balïq in the Mongolian steppes.

The Uigur Empire, however, came to an end around 840 when it was attacked by another Turkish tribe, the Kirghiz. The Uigurs dissolved into various tribal groups, who dispersed in all directions. One of the groups that escaped to the west invaded Shazhou, the Turfan Basin, and Kucha. This group settled in the conquered areas and eventually established two kingdoms.

One was the Kingdom of Tianshan Uigur based in Beiting (Biš Balïq in Uigur) and Qočo. The kingdom flourished for three hundred years until the fall of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in the fourteenth century. This kingdom made a great contribution to the transmission of Central Asian Buddhism. The other was the Kingdom of Hexi Uigur. This kingdom lasted for about one hundred thirty years until it was destroyed by Xixia.

The Uigurs' presence had a great impact on the history and culture of the Silk Route. They occupied the major trading posts along the route and intensively absorbed the various cultures of the resident peoples, who were mainly Buddhist. They also began ethnic amalgamation with Indians, Iranians, and Tokharians (a Caucasian tribe) who were ethnically Indo-European.

As a Turkish tribe, Uigurs are Altaic Mongoloids. However, their identity as Turkish was based on a purely patrilineal social system. In the most extreme case, if one had a Turkish father, spoke Turkish, and maintained Turkish social custom, the person was recognized as a Turk. With this kind of identity consciousness, the Turkish tribes—mainly the Uigur—occupied the oasis cities on the Silk Route, which were essentially multi-ethnic and multi-lingual societies, and further advanced the ethnic amalgamation in the area. By the end of the tenth century, the region was completely "Turkicized"—people identified themselves as Turks regardless of their physical appearance (skin, eye, or hair color). "Turkicizing" also occurred in the western part of Central Asia through the settlement of other Turkish tribes. Thus in the contemporary situation Central Asia is also called Turkistan, namely the "land (*stan*) of the Turks."

Another noteworthy role played by the Uigurs in world history was their activities under the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty. In the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Mongolian leader Chinghiz Khan (r. 1205–27) began his campaign for world domination. At that time, the Uigur people voluntarily became Mongolian subjects and offered their support for the Mongol's plan. This was a great boon to the Mongols, because the Uigurs, with three hundred years of experience along the Silk Route, were culturally advanced and had accumulated a high level of knowledge about the ethnic groups, geography, languages, and religious traditions both in the east and the west. Behind the establishment of the Mongolian Empire was the great contribution of knowledge and information by the Uigur people. Due to those contributions, the homelands of the Uigurs were protected by the Mongols—very exceptional treatment for a minority ethnic group

under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1260–1367). Uigur people were granted the status of second rank in the empire's ethnic hierarchy and played significant roles in politics, economics, culture, and religion as the leaders of "people of colored eyes."

For example, the Mongols, who did not have a writing system, first borrowed Uigur scripts to develop Mongolian scripts. Most Uigur civilian officers working in the Mongolian capital city Dadu (modern Beijing) as officers of the "people of colored eyes" were Buddhists. They used blockprinting, the most advanced printing technology of the time, to publish great numbers of Buddhist texts and sent them to the people living in their homeland in the Turfan area. Many printed texts discovered in East Turkistan were texts published during the Yuan Dynasty, and most of the printed materials are Buddhist texts. They are printed not only in Uigur but include texts in Sanskrit and Xixia language. It is known that the people who printed and bound these texts were Chinese because the folio numbers are in Chinese characters. Uigur Buddhism was the last of the Buddhist cultures that flourished in East Turkistan and came to the end in the mid-fourteenth century together with the destruction of the Yuan Empire.

III. RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

The religious life of the Uigur people during the time that they were a nomadic tribe on the Mongolian steppes might fall into the category of shamanism or animism. As mentioned above, when they learned about Manichaeism from the Sogdians while fighting for China during the Anshi revolt, aristocratic Uigurs adopted Manichaeism and made it their state religion.

After they migrated into the oasis cities on the Silk Route in the latter half of the ninth century, some remained Manichaeans. Some aristocratic Uigurs converted to Christianity when they encountered Nestorian missionaries. However, the majority of Uigurs, including common people, became Buddhists while living in this strongly Buddhist environment. This is known from the following facts: (1) many religious texts discovered in the area are Buddhist texts; (2) the names of donors on religious documents have Buddhist names; (3) they frequently used words borrowed from Sanskrit; and (4) business transactions, such as borrowing grain or selling bondsmen, customarily required a witness, and in many cases monks from Buddhist monasteries performed this function.

Uigurs express the name of the Buddha as *bur-xan*, combining the word "buîet," the middle archaic pronunciation of the Chinese character *fo*, with the Altaic-language honorific ending *-xan* (*-qan* [*-khan* in Mongolian]). It seems that they thought that this was not enough, because they added the word *tängri* (heaven) before *burxan* and calleed the Buddha

tängri burxan (heavenly Buddha), or even more politely, *tängri tängrisi burxan* (the Buddha, the most heavenly among the heavily beings). The concept of *tängri* (heaven) represented the "deity who brings blessings" among Turks and Mongols, as well as among the ancient Koreans and Japanese. For the general populace, it was perhaps easier to accept Buddhism by adding explanatory titles appealing to their ethnic tradition instead of simply the title Buddha.

In an interesting and related phenomenon, Uigurs who became followers of Manichaeism called the founder Mani (216?–276?) by the name *mani burxan* (Mani Buddha). This may reflect a syncretic aspect within Manichaeism. But it also tells us how deeply Buddhism had penetrated into the lives of the Uigur people.

IV. TRANSLATION OF BUDDHIST TEXTS

In the mid-ninth century, Uigur people moved into the major cities in Central Asia along the Silk Route and established their nation in the area of Turfan and Kucha. There, they encountered the various Buddhist cultures of the Indians, Iranians, Tokharians, and Chinese who had been there since the second century CE. At the time, being "civilized" in this area meant to accept Buddhism. The Uigur people, horse-riding nomads from the steppes, were skilled in the military techniques of horsemanship and the use of bows and arrows. The cultural aspects of the Uigurs, however, lagged far behind the people they conquered. In order to establish and maintain their country in a respectable way in this area, they needed to adopt Buddhism at the state level. Perhaps they believed that by choosing Buddhism they could maintain friendly relations with China, the great Buddhist empire to the east. We can see some parallels with the Japanese, who introduced Buddhism as a state religion between the sixth and seventh centuries at the dawn of their nation-building so that the government could receive international recognition as a civilized state within East Asia.

However, in Japan Buddhist texts were not translated into Japanese. Chinese translations were used for about twelve hundred years, until about one hundred fifty years ago. This point shows a great difference from the Uigur people. The Uigur people began by making a great effort to translate Buddhist texts written in various languages into their own language.

Scholars have yet to come to an agreement on issues like whose Buddhism first influenced the Uigur people when they moved to the Silk Route, or from what language the Uigur people translated Buddhist texts. Some maintain that the first influence must have come from the Tokharian Buddhism of Turfan and Kucha, because some Sanskrit terms in Uigur

texts are introduced through Tokharian loan words. Other scholars suggest that it was Sogdian Buddhism because some Sanskrit terms in the Uigur texts are borrowed from Sogdian loan words, and because the Sogdians maintained colonies in Turfan and had close contacts with Uigurs. Yet others think it was Chinese Buddhism, because, as we saw with the word *burxan* (Buddha), the fundamental Buddhist terminology in Uigur texts is based on Chinese. My own view is that these terms entered the Uigur Buddhist texts from equidistant points. Since at that time people lived in multi-lingual and multi-ethnic communities around Turfan and Kucha, I think that it is not necessary to identify a single source of initial Buddhist influence upon the Uigur people.

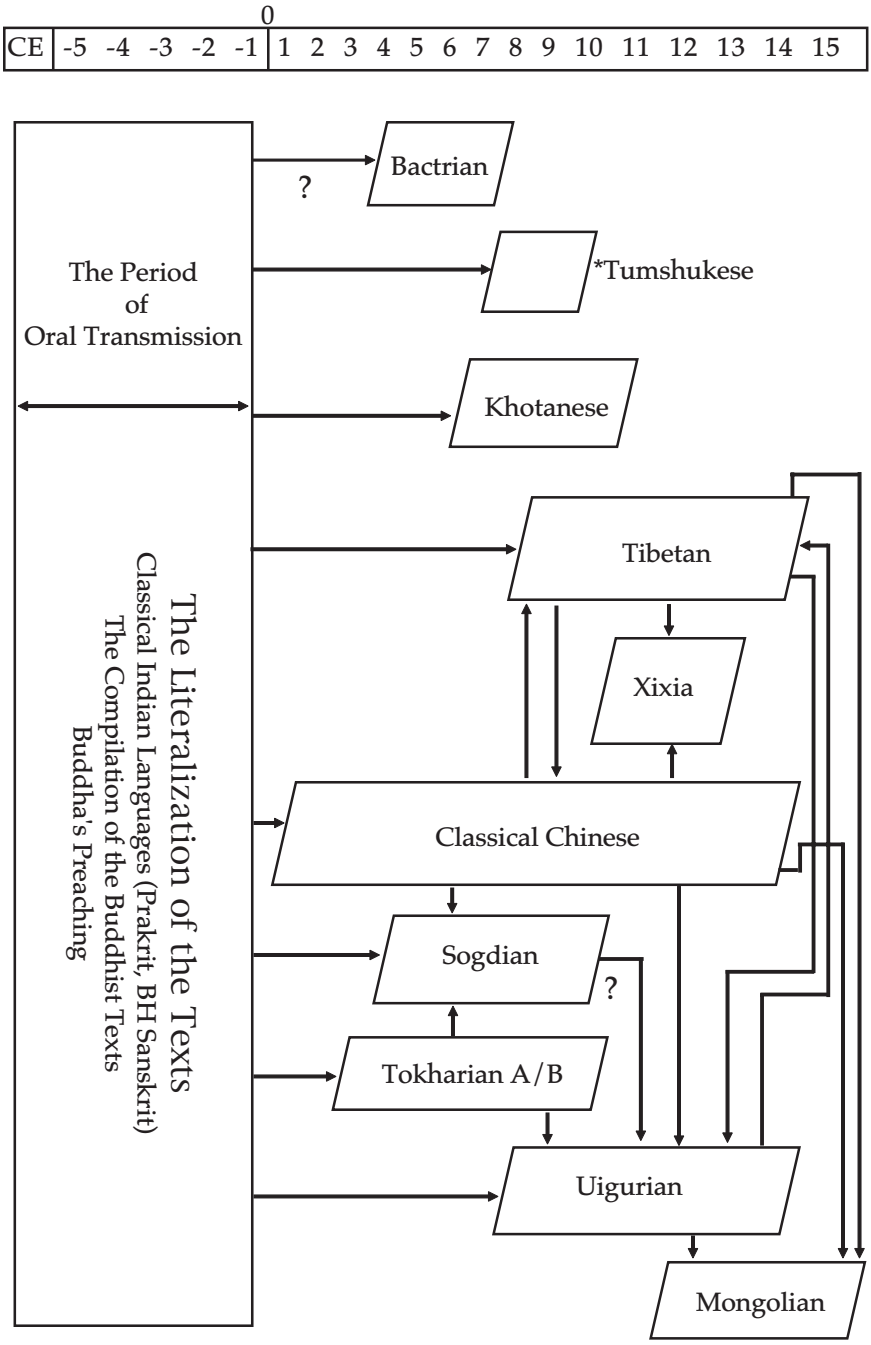
The Uigur people, living in multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Central Asia, produced Uigur translations of the Buddhist texts available to them. For many years we have been deciphering the text fragments collected by expeditions to the area. Here I provide you a chart titled "Outlook of the Translation Relationship of the Buddhist Texts in Central Asia" (cf. Plate A), which I created so that you can see the inter-relationships between the translated Buddhist texts at a glance. The arrows (→) signify the direction toward which the translation was made. The accuracy of the directions of the arrows are certain because they are based on descriptions in the colophon attached at the end of each Buddhist text. Question marks (?) mean that, although these texts do not have descriptions in their colophons, historical circumstances and characteristics in the translations suggest this direction. An asterisk (*) indicates that the name of the languages is not necessarily accepted by all scholars. The original chart was made in 1994 for students in my seminar. It was updated in 2000 by adding the Bactrian entry.

I will give a general overview of the Uigur translations of Buddhist texts. Among the early translations, the Buddhist texts translated from Tokharian and Sogdian, generally speaking, include many *avadāna* and *jātaka* tales, which derive from the Sarvāstivāda school of Nikāya Buddhism. These translations are only found in the early period of Uigur Buddhism. Among the Buddhist texts translated from Tokharian, there is a script for a play about Maitreya-worship. It is very interesting to imagine that religious dramas may have been performed in the gardens of Buddhist temples.

Translations from Chinese texts had a strong influence on Uigur Buddhism from its early period until its end. A wide variety of Chinese Buddhist texts were translated, including major Buddhist sutras of both the Mahāyāna and Nikāya, as well as commentaries, and some apocryphal texts.

Translations from Sanskrit texts are, in many cases, bilingual texts written both in Sanskrit and Uigur. The texts cite the Sanskrit word by word or phrase by phrase, followed by Uigur translations. Most of the texts use the Indian Brāhmī script to transcribe both the Sanskrit and Uigur. Run-

Plate A: Outlook of the Translation Relationship of the Buddhist Texts in Central Asia



ning contrary to the expectations of many scholars, many of these texts belong to the later period. Some were translated even during the Mongol Yuan Dynasty. Many are *Āgama* texts or *abhidharma* texts of the Sarvāstivāda school.

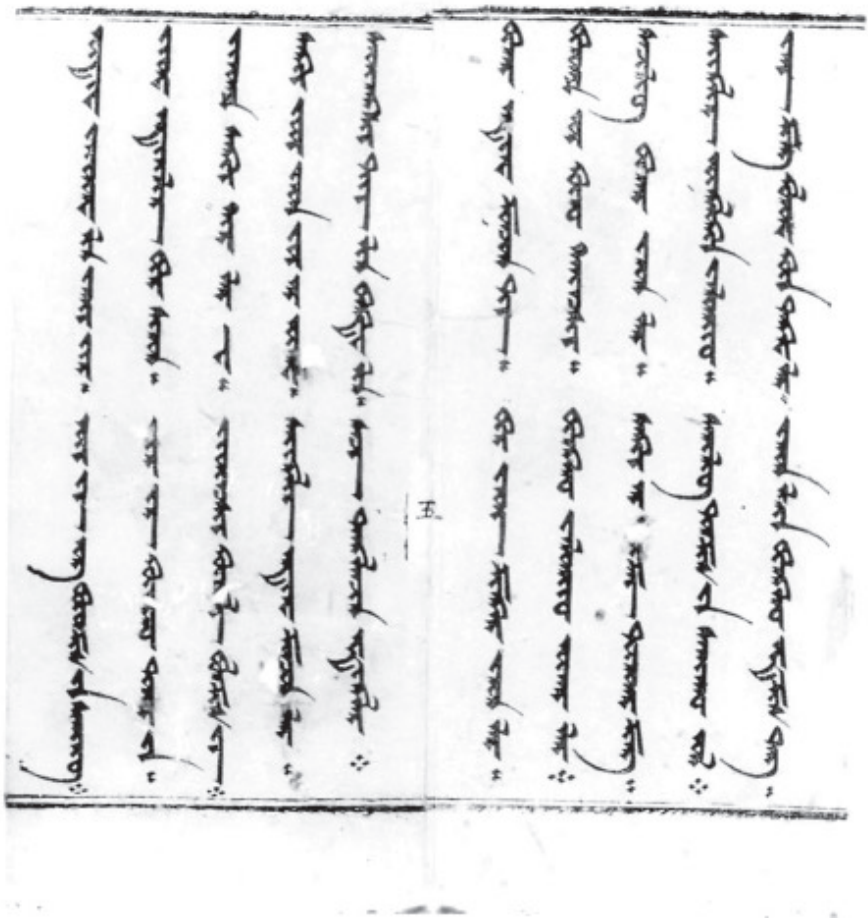
Translations from Tibetan were mainly done in Central China during the Mongol Yuan Dynasty. Most are Tantric Buddhist texts. Among them, there is a brief historical text titled *History on How a Sandalwood Image [of the Buddha] Came to Be Situated in China*. This Chinese text was first translated into Uigur, then it was translated into Tibetan. This is an extremely rare Buddhist text marked clearly with the date of translation, the thirteenth day of the second month in 1263, as well as the names and backgrounds of the people who participated in its translation.

What kind of scripts did Uigur people use to transcribe their Buddhist texts? First, they borrowed scripts from the Sogdians, with whom they had strong ties. Since Uigur is linguistically different from Sogdian, the Uigur script was made by incorporating some changes at points where the Sogdian was unable to express the Uigur language adequately. Large numbers of Buddhist texts were transcribed using this script. Within the Uigur script, there are several writing styles, from square, or block style, to cursive. The square style was used for making fine copies of Buddhist texts. The Brāhmī script was used mainly for making bilingual editions incorporating the original Indian text. Sogdian and Tibetan scripts were occasionally used, but not very frequently. For non-Buddhist texts, Uigurs used the Manichaean script for Manichaean texts.

5. ALLITERATIVE BUDDHIST VERSES

The poetic tradition of the Turks and Mongols is represented by alliterative verses composed four lines (cf. Plate B). The Uigur people translated Buddhist texts written in a variety of languages into their own language. Undoubtedly they spent a great deal of effort in translating texts and deciding on the proper terms for translation. Sometimes, we find two different words are used to translate the same philosophical term. This may suggest that these translations were produced in different time periods. The earlier translations tend to be sluggish, descriptive, wordy, and lacking in literary appeal. In the later period from the latter half of the thirteenth century (especially during the Mongol Yuan Dynasty), the terms for translation are established, wordiness is avoided, and the translations are smooth and fluent. But sometimes such fluent translations feel distant and seem less interesting. Perhaps the Uigur people shared my feeling. While producing these perfectly fluent translations of the famous Mahāyāna sutras, they also created alliterative four-line poetry based on significant

Plate B: Uigur Alliterative Version of the *Guan wuliangshou jing*



passages from the sutras. This alliterative poetry might have appealed to their literary passions and aroused great spiritual inspiration.

Major Mahāyāna sutras like the *Guan wuliangshou jing* and *Hyanyan jing* (*Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra*) were translated both in prose versions and in the poetic style. Let me introduce a few examples of poetic translation. The first example is a famous verse found at the end of a Chinese translation of the *Hyanyan jing*. The original Sanskrit text of this part is also written in verse.

願我臨欲命終時	I wish, when my life is about to end,
盡除一切諸障礙	That all my hindrances will perish;
面見彼仏阿弥陀	Coming face to face with the Buddha Amida,
即得往生安楽刹	I will instantly obtain birth in the Land of Bliss.

One Uigur poet translated the Chinese into the following alliterative four-line verse.

apam bizing bo yaš-ïmz alqïnγu öd bolsar,	[a-: 13]
alqu törlüg tïdïγ-ïmz alqïnzun otγuraq,	[a-: 13]
amita aba burxan yüüzin yügärü biz körüp,	[a-: 15]
arïγ sukavaḍi uluš-ta tugalïm tärk tavraq ::	[a-: 15]

If this is our lives' ending time,
Let all varieties of (our) hindrances perish certainly!
We, after looking at the face of Amita-ābha Buddha in front,
Will be born in the pure Sukhāvatī Realm quickly.

Another Uigur poet translated the same Chinese verse as follows.

aγtuq bolup isig öṣüm üzülgü tuš-ta :	[a-: 13]
alqu qïlïnč-lïγ tïdïγ-larïm yumqï tarïqïp :	[a-: 14]
amita ayusi burxan manga yügärü közü[n]üp :	[a-: 16]
artuq mängilig yirtinčü-tä barïp tuγayïn :	[a-: 14]

Becoming weak at the moment of my warm body's ending,
My hindrances possessing all karma should disappear;
Amita-āyus Buddha, for me, in front of me appears.
I will go and be born in the World of Extreme Joyfulness.

These two Uigur verses were created using the same source text. Both of them use "a-" for making alliterative verses, but we can see a difference in the artistic sense of the two poets through their word selections. In yet another version of this same verse, the poet selected "sa-" sounds for the alliteration, even though there are very few words in Uigur begin with the

"sa-" sound. Although it was difficult to create an alliterative verse based on the sound "sa-," the poet was able to do it by incorporating many loan words from Sanskrit Buddhist terminology. It seems that the poet was showing off his literary sophistication! From an academic point of view, it is very surprising to see that in the two verses cited above the poets were already aware of the two different Sanskrit names for Amida Buddha: Amita-ābha, "Immeasurable Light," and Amita-āyus "Immeasurable Life."

In addition to the verses based on Buddhist scriptures, the Uigurs wrote poetry on other popular Buddhist themes, such as dedications to buddhas and bodhisattvas, confessions of faith, and expressions of repentance. There are also verses of prayers to the Buddha asking for such things as the peace and prosperity of the Uigur imperial family; the protection and safe return of a husband who went war; and gratitude to the Buddha for the long-awaited birth of son. These verses express the real feelings of people faced with the challenges of life and are very interesting from a sociological point of view.

Also sociologically interesting are some verses directed against the spread of Islam. These were probably written in about the thirteenth century. Some attack Islam in a very straightforward manner. Others lament the decline of Buddhist society. These people who disliked Islam appear to have moved further toward the eastern regions. This is perhaps evidenced by the surprising fact that a Uigur manuscript of the *Jinguangming jing* (*Suvarṇa-prabhāsasottama-sūtra*) found in Gansu was copied in 1687. Although Buddhism disappeared from Turfan in the fourteenth century, the religion seems to have been maintained by exiled Uigur people in regions further east.

Plate C: The Buddha on a Boat nd Caravan Leaders
Chotcho, Tafel 28



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