

A Field Research of Chinese Uyghur People's Writing Reforms and Influences in the 20th Century

Abuduwupuer Reheman

School of Chinese Language and Literature
Shaanxi Normal University
Xi'an, China 710119

Yingjie Guo

School of International Studies
Shaanxi Normal University
Xi'an, China 710062

Abstract—Uyghur language is a unique language spoken by Uyghur people in China. Historically, several reforms focusing on the writing system of Uyghur language took place in the 20th century due to the influences of the particular ideology, political changes, periodical guidance, or underestimated practices within the writing system of the language. There were two comprehensive reforms on a large scale. After the reforms, Uyghur people reaffirmed the Arabic Uyghur scripts (Old Uyghur scripts) as their written language. This article will mainly talk about the reforms and also relate to their impacts on the developments of the Uyghur people in China.

Keywords—Chinese Uyghur people; writing reforms; influences; 20th century

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is considered the most important tool of thinking and communication for human beings. And written language is the particular physical form of language itself. As one of the minority nationalities in China, the Uyghur people have the largest population as well as relatively developed language, culture, and economy. It also has rich historical and cultural heritage in its development. Uyghur language is the universal language of its people throughout China and spreading now all over the world. After a long period of turmoil and unrest, the old Uyghur language has been used in China since 1984. In the countries of Central Asia, the Uyghur language based on the 1937 Slavic letters has been used up to now. Therefore, the Uyghur's writing career has ushered in a short and relatively peaceful era. For now, it has been gradually improved and plays an indispensable role in the modernization process of the Uyghur nationality. However, many scholars have never given up on the idea of reforming the old Uyghur scripts which have been practiced until now. One reason lies in the fact that Latinization was a universal trend in the world, so the existing Uyghur language also needs to be Latinized and the second reason is that the old Uyghur language did not catch up with the times. Particularly, it did not meet the needs in the fields of computer science and electronic technology. If we use Latinized Uyghur Language, a lot of unnecessary troubles can be reduced, and accordingly, we can save more time and energy to study other issues existing in Uyghur language. In addition, another external factor is potentially traced in the Latinization reform of the writing system in Central Asian countries. For example, the reforms

in the neighboring countries, such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan have been completed. As to Kazakh, Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev in December 2012 for the first time explicitly proposed a specific year for the reform of the writing system, asking for the Latinization of the Kazakh language to be completed by 2025. Recently, the program of the Latinization of Kazakh has been announced and passed smoothly. And there is also the Latinization trend in Kyrgyzstan. These reforms have always been the factors to make the proposition of the Uyghur people's writing reforms a hot topic.

Uyghur community is hopeful that Chinese government and the relevant departments of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region will release the official documents about the Uyghur's writing reform. However, some scholars and researchers in the language field also express their views about the reform on WeChat and QQ, these applications are very famous in China. Although their opinions are reasonable on some level and deserve to arouse the public concern, they are not universally supported by the government and the social organizations for various reasons. The opposite is that most scholars still advocate for using the current Uyghur writing system. For a better understanding of the overall situation, we might as well review some representative books and articles published after 1984 which are related to the Uyghur people's writing reforms. There are some relevant articles as follows. On the Reasons of the Historical Evolution of Uyghur Writing System written by Niu Nuji and published in the Journal of Xinjiang University (Niu Nuji, 1990); An Introduction to the Evolution of Chinese Uyghur Language and Writing System written by Tuernisha Rouzi and published in the Journal of Xinjiang Education Institute (Issue 1, 2008); The Contrast between the Reform of Turkek Language and Writing System and the Reform of Chinese Uyghur and Kazakh Writing System written by Zhang Lei and published in the Journal of PLA Foreign Language University (Issue 5, 2002). And these are some relevant works with our article. Language and Writing System of Xinjiang written by Xiao Zhongyi; The Written Languages We Used written by Kuerban Waili (Xinjiang People's Publishing House, Aug. 2001); Historical Problems about Uyghur Written Language written by Tuerxun Ayofu (Central Nationalities Publishing House 2013); The Review of the Policy and Laws of Chinese National Languages edited by Ma Liya and Sun Hong (Nationalities Publishing

House, Nov. 2007); Uyghur Writing System and Language written by Yibulayin Mutiyi (Nationalities Publishing House 2013); The Application and Development of the Modern Uyghur Writing System written by Minawa Abudureyimu and Aili Wupuer (Social Sciences Press, May 2012); Historical Research of Uyghur Language written by Chen Zhenzong (China Social Sciences Press, Jan. 2016). Some monographs like Records of Language and Writing System of Xinjiang, 60-Year Development of Language and Writing System of Xinjiang, Studies on the Languages of China's Ethnic Minorities in the 20th Century (1998), 60 Years of the Studies on the Languages of China's Ethnic Minorities (2009), all have relevant discussion about the Uyghur language and writing system. In short words, the Chinese Uyghur's writing reforms in the 20th century and have always been the hot topic concerned by scholars at home and also some extent in abroad.

II. NOTIONS OF THE REFORMS OF UYGHUR WRITING SYSTEM

The reform of the Uyghur writing system belongs to the field of language planning. In the book entitled *An Introduction to Language Planning*, Chen Zhangtai divides the contents of the language corpus planning into five categories: first, establishing standards of the pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar of the language; second, revising the existing standards of the pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar; third, creating new forms of language for the nation without written language; fourth, reforming the writing system; fifth, normalizing and standardizing the writing system. This shows that the reform of the writing system, furthermore, belongs to the field of the language corpus planning. [1] As to the classification of the reform of the writing system, Zhang Lei divides the reform into three types in his article *The Contrast between the Reform of Turkey Language and Writing System and the Reform of Chinese Uyghur and Kazakh Writing System*, which include those of improving the writing system on its original basis, renewing the alphabetical system, and changing the nature of writing system. [2] Uyghur people's writing reforms in the 20th century belong to the first two types. The reform of the writing system is a complex and arduous task. We must take the overall situation into consideration, show our long-term interest and adapt very cautious attitudes towards it. (Zhang Lei, 2002:5:48). As is known to all that it is an important social phenomenon. The purpose of the writing reform is to solve the problems existing in the system itself so as to integrate it into the development of various fields in the society. Of course, new language problems will also arise in this process. Therefore, if it can achieve a certain success, it will also naturally advance the modernization of a country, a nation or a society, and promote the healthy development of the language and writing system. If not, it may bring irreparable losses in the long run. China, like other countries in the world, has been lenient in its policies, laws, and regulations about the use of minority languages, and advocated the principles of equality, harmony, freedom and scientific development. There are specified provisions in the relevant regulations about language usage. For example, Article 3 of the 1954 Constitution of the People's Republic of

China stipulates that all ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own languages. Regulations on Language in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region stipulates that we should follow the law of the development of the language, respect the will of the majority and carry out the writing reform cautiously and steadily in order to strengthen the usage management and scientific researches of the national languages and promote the process of standardization.

The above laws and regulations clearly show that in a nation, the majority's demands for the language planning and writing reform should be consistent with the nation's language and writing system and people's should be free for their wills and choices. Therefore, when carrying out the writing reforms, we must take the national policies on the language as the guarantees, fully consider the current situation of the language and the wills of people, and take scientific and reasonable objective laws as the guidance. Only in this way we can achieve the ideal goals of the reforms. In the world of the 20th century, the language planning activities were extremely vigorous in the world. In order to meet the needs of the times, the nationalities of all countries and regions in the world planned and reformed their writing systems. Like other ethnic groups, in the 20th century, the Uyghur people have carried out three writing reforms which ended in failure because of various factors, such as the ideological measures, the wrong path of the reforms, and the failure of the Uyghur intellectuals who underestimated the impacts of the reforms etc. Two of the reforms had a larger scale and produced particularly profound impacts in the society. After several reforms, the so-called new language, the Latin Uyghur language, was abandoned in 1984, and the Arabic Uyghur language was eventually restored and adopted as its national language.

III. CHINESE UYGHUR PEOPLE'S WRITING REFORMS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

As mentioned above, the Uyghur people have reformed their writing systems many times in the long history. The 20th century was a very uncertain period of the development of the Uyghur people's writing system. It is worth mentioning that the Uyghur people's writing improvement in a modern sense began in the 1920s among the Central Asian Uyghur nationality. At first, they designed a Latin Uyghur program and had several publications in this language. Because of the unified writing policy of the former Soviet Union, they had to change the Latin Uyghur language into the Slavic alphabetic Uyghur language, which is still widely used by Uyghur in Central Asia. Under this influence, the Chinese Uyghur people also began to carry out researches of the language standardization and the writing reform. Especially in terms of the writing reform, three reforms were carried out in the past century. One of them was tried out in very few areas. Meanwhile, because of the deterioration of the Sino-Soviet political relations, the refinement was soon stopped. Compared with the first one, the other two ameliorations are much better, no matter in scale, impact or promotion. What needs to be explained is that the old language in the article refers to the Arabic alphabetic Uyghur

language. The specific situations of the three reforms are as follows.

A. Changing from the Old Language into Cyrillic Uyghur Language

As the academia knows, the modern Uyghur language is inherited from the Chagatai Uyghur language which serves as a written language based on the Turkic of Karahan Dynasty. From the 13th century to the 1930s or 1940s, the Uyghur language was recorded in Chagatai (i.e. late ancient Uyghur language), which had left rich cultural heritage. The Chagatai Uyghur language plays an irreplaceable role in the Uyghur language because it had recorded extensive literature in a long history and has far-reaching impacts. The modern Uyghur language mentioned in this paper gradually formed based on the revised Chagatai from the late 19th century to 1930s. By 1956 when China and the Soviet Union (Russia) were on good terms, Stalin sent Russian linguists to China to participate in the writing reforms of Chinese ethnic minorities and the creation of the written languages for the ethnic groups who had no formal languages. The Russian linguists designed a writing system to express the languages of Xinjiang ethnic groups in the Cyrillic alphabet. Language workers of Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other ethnic groups in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, pointed out the shortcomings of the Arabic Uyghur language, and fully recognized the advantages of the Cyrillic Uyghur language. Eventually, they worked out a new system. The new system was announced in the newspaper Xinjiang Daily on December 10, 1956. However, before long, the trial work was carried out only within certain areas because of the Rectification and Anti-Rightist Movement. At the end of 1957, Latin letters were adopted in the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet, and the State Council approved some principles for designing letters in the language scheme for Chinese ethnic minorities. It was clearly pointed out that when reforming the original writing system and adopting a new one.[3] Because of this historical background and the breakdown of the relations between China and the Soviet Union, the Slavicisation of the Uyghur writing system in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was not widely promoted but completely stopped afterward.

B. Changing from Cyrillic Uyghur Language into New Uyghur Language

After the failure of the last writing reform, several principles of writing reform were put forward at the Working Conference on the National Languages held in Beijing in May, 1958. According to these principles, the Second Work Conference on Language of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which was held in Urumqi in December 1959, discussed the new Uyghur writing system based on the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet. And the resolution of trying out the new system for three to four years was passed. Four years later, the First Session of the Third People's Congress of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, held in April 1964, adopted the new writing system and submitted it to the State Council for approval. And it was approved on October 23, 1964. On October 1, 1965, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region People's Government

issued the presidential decree for the full adoption of the new writing system. In accordance with the approval of the State Council and the order of its people's government, the new Uyghur writing system began to be fully fulfilled in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

C. Changing from New Latin Uyghur Language into Old Arabic Uyghur Language

The new Uyghur writing system based on the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet was used for about 17 years, which ranged from 1965 to 1982. However, in the beginning, the problem of the system itself was not truly found. With the passage of time, the problem was more and more prominent in the process. Although departments at all levels in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region made great efforts to promote the new writing system in material and spiritual aspects, it was not actually accepted by Uyghur people because of its own shortcomings and the Uyghur people's long-term use of the Arabic Uyghur Language. Under such circumstances, the People's Congress and People's Government of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region widely solicited the public opinions. Finally, the resolution got passed at the 17th Session of the Fifth People's Congress of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region which was held on September 13, 1982, and the Notice on the Restoration of the Old Uyghur and Kazakh Writing Systems was issued by the People's Government on November 11, 1982. Both announced to stop using the new Uyghur writing system and to restore the old Uyghur writing system based on the Arabic alphabet. [4] The abandoned old system was restored and widely used in education, publication, letters, broadcasting, television and other fields in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. However, there are some unsolved problems and shortcomings in the handwriting during the process of the refinement. Through the efforts of language workers, such problems as the handwriting rules, the letterforms and the order of the written languages were further solved by making necessary adjustments, complements and changes. And the old writing system has been widely used since January 1, 1984.

IV. THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHINESE UYGHUR'S WRITING REFORMS

As mentioned earlier, the written language is the physical form of language itself and the symbol system for language recording. Language carries the meanings of the national culture. However, the cultural inheritance needs to be completed through the reforms of the written languages. According to the relevant research, the Uyghur language used in history mainly includes ancient Turkic, Uyghur, Chagatai Uyghur, modern Uyghur and languages used to record the Uyghur language in some fields and so on. This shows that the in the course of development, due to various factors such as communication, culture and economy, Uyghur people have changed or reformed their writing systems many times in order to learn the useful things from the history and promote its long-term development and prosperity. Although the writing reforms promoted their unique development to some extent, each reform brought

about various degrees of losses, which is mainly reflected in the interruption of the cultural inheritance, great disturbance of the purity of Uyghur vocabulary, the decline of expressing ability of Uyghur people, and so on. It is not surprising that, in the 20th century, Chinese Uyghur people have carried out three writing reforms: One of them was not fully implemented and tried out only in some areas, and eventually it was canceled. So generally speaking, scholars did not recognize it as a real writing reform. Obviously, the reform process was full of frustrations. It is rare for a nation to carry out so many writing reforms in such a short period of time. Although it seems to be a very normal phenomenon of language planning, it has a far-reaching impact on Uyghur people's culture, education, economy, art, and other fields. What's more, written language is closely related to a nation's development. From this point of view, the changes of the written system will impede the undertakings such as a nation's development, the cultural inheritance, and the pace of modernization, because the Uyghur writing reforms, just like Chen Zongzhen put it, "(It) is not just the replacement of more than 30 letters, but the change of reading and writing habits over the decades, which takes a long time". Indeed, writing reforms brought certain unexpected impacts on the Uyghur people and their social life. According to the author's research and study, the influence of the Uyghur writing reforms in the 20th century on the Uyghur people can be simply summarized as the following four aspects.

First, the cultural inheritance was impacted. Looking back on the Uyghur people's history, the Uyghur writing system has been reformed several times until now. Every time the cultural heritage accumulated and inherited by the Uyghur ancestors in different historical periods would be interrupted or ignored. For example, the Arabic Uyghur language was used for centuries. The Uyghur people created a magnificent culture and left a rich cultural heritage which has become an integral part of the whole Uyghur culture. Starting from the writing reforms in the last century, the study of classical literature and the inheritance of historical and cultural heritage have been greatly impacted during the 17 years when the old writing system used for hundreds of years was replaced by the Arabic Uyghur language. The knowledge of scientific and technological resources, as well as research achievements accumulated in the long history, has become the unexpected progressed. And the massive literature related to medicine, history, and education has lost its original value. When going to the Kashgar Library in April 2016 to collect information, the author saw a large number of books and newspapers written in Latin Uyghur language, relating to literature, history, art, economy, education, mathematics, as well as literary journals published in various regions of Xinjiang were either not well-preserved or placed in disorder on the bookshelves. Almost no one would browse through them. This is only the case of the library in Kashgar. As for how the cultural institutes like the libraries in other areas manage the books and materials published in Latin Uyghur language, the cases appeared during the research may provide us with some enlightening or warning information. In addition, some ancient documents spelled in Latin became paralyzed and appeared to bring a lot of trouble in the field of studies and excavations. Especially

for young people, it is difficult to understand and inherit the historical civilization and cultural heritage, thus causing the cultural discontinuity.

Second, the illiterate population increased. It is rare in the world for a nation like the Uyghur people who have changed their writing system so frequently during the process of development. Moreover, it is inconceivable to reform the writing system several times in just a century. This instability of the writing system brought great trouble to the development of the Uyghur people. In those years when new schools were opened up, new teaching methods were adopted widely and the enlightenment movements were carried out everywhere, the work of eliminating illiteracy gradually took effect. However, people's literacy level did not improve every time when the writing system was reformed. On the contrary, the illiterate population increased rapidly. Especially during the period when the new Uyghur language based on the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet was replaced by the old Uyghur language, the overall situation was improved. However, people just got used to the new writing system. They didn't adapt to the handwriting rules of the old system, so they hesitated to go forward between the two languages, which naturally led to thousands of illiterates. According to the author's observation, it is very common for the grass-roots to use the writing system when signing certificates and registration. The author went to the Kashgar Library last winter vacation. On the list of the entrance register placed before the security office, the author saw many signatures written in the new Uyghur language. For example, when people fill out forms in the banks, certain public security areas, hospitals, educational institutions, village communities etc., they would ask, "I can only use the new writing system. Can I use it to fill out the forms?" or "I didn't learn the new writing system. Can someone else help me fill it out?" most of the things are like that. This shows that many grass-roots can only use the new system. They use the new writing system to sign their names and to fill in the forms. Thirty-two years have passed since the restoration of the old writing system. The problem of literacy has been basically, not completely solved. According to the author's research, there are two kinds of Uyghur illiterates at present in China: First, people can only use the new writing system, but cannot use the old ones; and secondly, people can use neither of the above. There is no doubt that such a situation is caused by the frequent writing reforms which are very unfavorable to the development of a nation or a region. This is a problem that cannot be neglected.

Third, the process of the socialist modernization among the Uyghur people has been slowed down. The writing system is closely related to the development of a nation. If a nation wants to develop, its writing system must be improved. This indicates that a writing system plays an important role in nation development. The Uyghur people experienced the ups and downs in history because of the writing reforms from the 1950s or 1960s to the early 1980s. For a nation having a desire for development, the writing reforms slowed its pace toward modernization and hindered the common development between the Uyghur people and other ethnic groups. After the restoration of the old writing

system in 1984, with the concern of the Communist Party of China and the nation, the problems in the Uyghur language and writing systems were gradually solved, and the Uyghur causes in various fields developed rapidly with tremendous changes. The current Uyghur writing system keeps pace with the information age and advances with the times. And the Uyghur language has been fully used in the information technology. Today we can use it in all kinds of electronic products, such as brand mobile phones or computers. It is also widely used in the development and application of the voice technology and systems. For example, in the writing system developed by Microsoft, Uyghur language can be found. This is also a concrete manifestation of the development of the national writing system. Many writing reforms slowed down the modernization of the Uyghur people for many years. Without these reforms, the socialist modernization of the Uyghur people will go more smoothly and more optimistically.

Fourth, the complex phenomenon of “polysemy” appeared. When we look at the current Uyghur writing system, we can find its disorder, complexity and embarrassment, that is, “polysemy” or “one word with two meanings”. Although the Arabic Uyghur language is predominant and plays an important role in various fields of the society, the influence of the “new writing system” has continued up to now because of the “Latinization” before. This is fully illustrated by the frequent use of the new writing system in dealing with the common people’s affairs like leaving signatures, filling in the forms, writing working reports and surfing the new dedicated Uyghur websites, like the official Uyghur websites which are opened by some important national and autonomous region’s departments, in the writing forms of the old Uyghur language, new Uyghur language and Slavic Uyghur language. The instances are including the Website of Tianshan, Xinjiang Broadcasting Network, the official website of CCTV Uyghur Channel, and so on. In addition, there are similar situations in the official websites of some private enterprises. Although these websites facilitate the Uyghur ethnic groups to use new Uyghur language or Slavic Uyghur language, such situation will bring some trouble to the Uyghur’s normalization, the improvement of its spelling rules, and foreign Uyghur teaching. After all, it is the frequent writing reforms that brought the unexpected influence to the Uyghur language.

In a word, the Chinese Uyghur language had undergone several changes in just a century, which brought certain unexpected effects to Uyghur people’s culture, education, science, medical treatment, economy, literacy and poverty alleviation. During the 20 years or so when using the new writing system, the accumulated technological and the spiritual wealth were not able to promote the social development, people’s living standards and their educational standards become “worthless wastes”. Moreover, a large number of illiterates began to appear in society before the work of eliminating illiteracy was completed, which greatly hindered the social progress and the dissemination and promotion of the modern civilization and scientific knowledge. Nowadays, some intellectuals and language workers wish to reform the Uyghur writing system again.

First of all, it must conform to the relevant laws and regulations of China, the actual demands as well as the choices of people. Writing reform is important, so we must consider the overall situation, carefully study and plan the reform schemes, mobilize people from all walks of life and arrange their related assignments according to their reasonable opinions. The unauthorized reform is in line with neither the relevant laws of China nor people’s democratic choices. Obviously, any reform that isolated from the people will be failed. As the famous linguist Professor, Chen Zongzhen said in an interview with the author of *I Go to Xinjiang*, “For me, it has taken decades to reform the writing system and in the end, all reforms were failed. Anyway, the past is over. But recently, some people say we should reform the writing system. I said no and we cannot reform the writing system right now. We cannot treat a nation’s writing system as a joke. We changed the writing system every twenty years. Numerous books have been published over the past forty years. How can you solve the problem? I have my own opinions about the writing reform, and history has been formed in this way.”[5] This is probably the best answer to those intellectuals who still want to reform.

V. CONCLUSION

Chinese Uyghur language had undergone stability in just a century. After that, it finally stepped in a stable and prosperous period in 1984. Although some intellectuals have advocated for replacing the current writing system with the system based on the Latin alphabet or using the two systems at the same time. Their opinions have not been fully recognized by the academia. Up to now, the current Uyghur writing system has made considerable achievements in research and its problems have been gradually solved and improved. However, it should have basically adapted to various needs of the society, and play an important role in the path of modernization and keep pace with our times. It serves for the construction of the socialist Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region with the help of the policy of the language equality and harmony and the sound development of the language in the long run. It promotes exchanges among all ethnic groups in Xinjiang and provides guarantees for the rapid development of the economy, culture, technology, information, education, television, broadcasting, and even trade. In addition, when the author had the dialogue with the grass-roots in the process of the language investigation, it is found that the majority of people have profound feelings for the current writing system. However, some young intellectuals and linguists actively express their opinions about changing the current writing system into the Latin Uyghur language by drawing on foreign countries’ experience. Whether it is language planning or the writing reform, it is a huge project, which includes all aspects of the national life and requires a comprehensive consideration of all the factors involved. Therefore, it is unwise to reform the written system without sufficient realistic conditions or if the conditions do not permit. Moreover, in this case, reforming the writing system will only making things worse and far outweigh its advantages. Therefore, in my opinion, it is an urgent task for all language workers to study the achievements of language planning at home and abroad to

absorb the essence which is beneficial to Uyghur language, establish a scientific concept of language planning, take a new look at Uyghur language, and strengthen its standardization, informatization, and modernization. We should work together to solve the existing problems so that it can play a better role in the socialist construction of Xinjiang and Xinjiang's strategic position in the core area of the Belt and Road Initiative.

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