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Reforms of the Modern Oirat-Kalmyk Language and Literature in the 20th century

Johannes Reckel¹

¹ Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (1, Platz der Göttinger Sieben, 37073 Göttingen, Germany)

Ph. D. (Philology)

E-mail: reckel@sub.uni-goettingen.de

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The Oirats are Western Mongols, today living between the Altai mountains, the river Volga, the Kukulunor Area, the Ili River and Kyrgyzstan. In 1648, Zaya Pandita from the Hoshut (Hoshud) tribe of the Oirats created the ‘Clear Script’ (Oir. *Todo Bičig*), nowadays also known as Oirat Script. This script was originally meant to be used as a reformed script by all Mongols, but it caught on with the Western Mongols, the Dzungars (Oirats, Kalmyks), only. The 20th century witnessed the introduction of new writing standards for individual groups of Oirats/Kalmyks in the Soviet Union (Russia), China and Mongolia, which led to a weakening of the West Mongolian identity. Three of the most influential Kalmyk scholars, who worked on the reform of the written language and who were active as teachers and researchers in Tashkent, Sinkiang and Western Mongolia in the 1920s and 1930s, were Aksen Suseev, Ijil Čürüm and Ceren Dorži Nominhanov. *Goals.* The study aims to investigate the connection between ethnic identity and (written) language against the background of global political upheavals. The work focuses on the change of the Oirat written language in Sinkiang (Xinjiang) in a multi-ethnic region compared to the Kalmyk written language in Russia, as well as the Oirat language in Mongolia over the past 100 years. *Materials.* The research project, given as an outline in the following article, analyzes school-books, dictionaries, grammars and other printed materials of the 20th and 21st centuries in the West Mongolian Oirat script collected in Sinkiang Kalmykia since 1986. *Results.* Since the 1940s, the Oirats in Sinkiang have been taking up a development in their reformed written language that was originally initiated in Kalmykia by Kalmyk scholars during the period of 1915–1938, but was not carried on there due to the political conditions which resulted in the deportation of the Kalmyks to Siberia in 1943. After the return of the Kalmyks to Kalmykia since 1957/58 the old traditions were broken, and the development of the written language focused solely on the use of a modified Cyrillic alphabet. The community based on a common script of the Kalmyks and Oirats – in China, Russia (Kalmykia) and Western Mongolia – broke up, and the three or four groups went their separate ways. For example, the orthography and grammar of the Oirat written language in reformed *Todo Bičig* in Sinkiang

is not standardized until today. The Oirats in Mongolia, like the Oirats in Kyrgyzstan, no longer have their own written language in which they can express themselves in writing. Another desideratum is a textbook of modern Kalmyk and modern Sinkiang Oirat for Western students and scholars. Although some institutions and scholars have some Oirat language archives, like the State and University Library Goettingen has good collection of Kalmyk-Oirat and Mongolian literature, there are a lot of aspects to deal with.

Keywords: Oirat, Kalmyk, Xinjiang, Kalmykia, reform, language, Clear Script, Cyrillic, N. Ochirov, Ts. Nominkhanov

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Реформы современного ойрат-калмыцкого языка и литературы в XX веке

Йоганнес Рекель¹

¹ Геттингенский университет им. Георга-Августа (Геттингер Зибен 1, Геттинген, Германия, 37073)

Ph.D. (Philology)

E-mail: reckel@sub.uni-goettingen.de

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Ойраты — западные монголы, потомки которых ныне проживают в Монголии, КНР, России, Кыргызстане. В 1648 г. Зая-пандита из ойратского племени *хошуд* создал «ясное письмо» (ойр. *todo bičiq*), сегодня также известное как ойратское письмо, которое предполагалось использовать как преобразованную письменность для всех монголов, но оно прижилось только у западных монголов. XX век стал свидетелем введения новых стандартов письменности для ойратских по происхождению групп в Китае и Монголии и родственных им калмыков в СССР (России). Тремя самыми влиятельными калмыцкими учеными, которые работали над реформой письменного языка и были учителями и исследователями в Ташкенте, Синьцзяне и Западной Монголии в 1920-х и 1930-х гг., были Аксен Сусеев, Иджил Чурюм и Церен-Дорджи Номинханов. *Цель.* Целью данного исследования является изучение связей между этнической идентичностью и письменным языком в условиях глобальных политических потрясений. Особое внимание уделяется изменениям в ойратском письменном языке в мультиэтническом регионе в Синьцзяне в сравнении с калмыцким письменным языком в России, а также с ойратским языком в Монголии в течение последних 100 лет. *Материалы.* В данном исследовании анализируются школьные учебники, словари, грамматики и другие печатные материалы XX–XXI вв. на западно-монгольской ойратской письменности, собранные в Синьцзяне с 1986 г. *Результаты.*

С 1940-х гг. ойраты в Синьцзяне продолжили развивать реформы письменного языка, изначально инициированные в Калмыкии калмыцкими учеными с 1915 до 1938 гг., но они так и не были продолжены с 1943 г. из-за политических условий, результатом которых стала депортация калмыков в Сибирь. После возвращения калмыков в Калмыкию с 1957–1958 гг. старые традиции были утрачены и развитие письменного языка заключалось исключительно в использовании усовершенствованного алфавита кириллицы. Общество, которое основывалось на общей письменности калмыков и ойратов в Китае, России (Калмыкии) и Западной Монголии, развалилось, после чего эти языковые группы пошли каждая своим путем. Например, орфография и грамматика ойратского письменного языка в исправленном *тодо бичиг* в Синьцзяне еще не стандартизованы до настоящего времени. Ойраты в Монголии, так же как и ойраты в Кыргызстане, больше не имеют своего письменного языка, на котором они могли бы выразить себя письменно. Еще один пробел — это учебник современного калмыцкого и современного синьцзян-ойратского языка для западных студентов и ученых, хотя в некоторых институтах и у некоторых ученых сохранились архивы на ойратском языке. Так, например, в Геттингенской государственной университетской библиотеке хранится хорошая коллекция калмыцко-ойратской и монгольской литературы. Тем не менее, остается много вопросов, которые необходимо решить.

Ключевые слова: ойрат, калмык, Синьцзян, Калмыкия, реформа, язык, ясное письмо, кириллица, Н. Очиров, Ц. Номинханов

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The Oirats¹ are Western Mongols, today living between the Altai mountains, the river Volga, the Kukurin Area, the Ili River and Kyrgyzstan. In 1648, Zaya Pandita from the Hoshut (Hoshud) tribe of the Oirat created the “Clear Script” (Todo Bičig), nowadays also known as Oirat Script². It was originally meant to be used as a reformed script by all Mongols. However, it caught on with the Western Mongols, the Dzungars (Oirats, Kalmyks), only, thus establishing a dualism in the language and script standards for Mongolian and reflecting the political opposition between Western and Eastern Mongols. This dualism was broken up in the 20th century by the introduction of new writing standards for individual groups of Oirats/Kalmyks in the Soviet Union (from 1991: Russia), China and the People’s Republic of Mongolia (from 1990 Republic of Mongolia) which led to a weakening of the West Mongolian identity. The connection between ethnic identity and (written) language against the background of global political upheavals is the theme of an ongoing project at Goettingen University.

Since 1986, I have regularly visited Sinkiang (Xinjiang) in western China. I have built a close network of academic contacts and collected schoolbooks, dictionaries,

¹ In most cases I have dropped the plural “-s” after ethnonyms like Dörbet, Torgut, Hoshut and also Oirat, retaining it for the Kalmyks as an established expression.

² The expressions Oirat Script, Todo Bičig and Clear Script are used as synonyms in this article. Likewise, the expressions Classical Mongolian Script, Uiguro-mongolian Script, Hudum Mongol(ian) are used as synonyms.

grammars and other printed materials of the 20th and 21st centuries in the West Mongolian Oirat script. My research focuses on the change of the Oirat written language in a multi-ethnic region in Sinkiang compared to the Kalmyk written language in Russia, as well as the Oirat language in Mongolia over the past 100 years. This research is carried out under the thematic focus of language change, language education and endangered languages. This includes didactic, educational and linguistic aspects as well as aspects of contemporary history.

“Language, writing and ethnic identity” is the overarching question of my research which I will outline on the next few pages. Why have the Kalmyks on the banks of the lower Volga been trying to revive the old Oirat script, the Todo Bičig, since the 1990s? Why do the Oirats in Sinkiang fight to keep the Oirat Todo Bičig against the political guidelines from the authorities? What is the connection between language and writing? Kalmyk, as a living language in Russia, is increasingly endangered. Why then is there a struggle for the revival of an old script, which was abandoned in favour of the Cyrillic script as early as 1924? Are there parallels to Mongolia, where the reintroduction of the old Uiguro-mongolian script also triggered great discussions in the context of national identity?

Nowadays, different writing systems exist for Eastern Mongolia: Cyrillic in the Republic of Mongolia, which had been for a long time under strong Soviet influence, and the Uiguro-mongolian script in Inner Mongolia in China. So, can the Oirat in Western Mongolia preserve their own ethnic identity only through the spoken language given that they have not been using their own Oirat script for many decades and can express themselves in writing only in the Eastern Mongolian written language of the Khalka, the state-bearing people in the Republic of Mongolia? Is an ethnic identity beyond the language possible in the long run due to a common history and other common cultural elements? Is there a separate Oirat and Khalka ethnic identity?

It should be noted that other Mongolian scripts like the Phagspa script and the Soyombo script existed but never had a long-lasting impact [[Otgonbayar 2008](#)]. A special character of the Soyombo script, the *Soyombo symbol*, became a national symbol of Mongolia proving the connection between script and national identity.

The Oirat were the most important ethnic group amongst the Mongols. The etymology of the word ‘oirat’ is uncertain - mongol. oi = “forest”, and (< *harad = “people”), thus perhaps “the forest people”. The Oirat are also known as Dzungar (mongol. *jegün yar* = left hand), *Ölöt* (Eleut) or under individual tribal names such as Torgut, Dörbet (mongol. *dörbed* = the four), Hoshut etc. As a confederation of West Mongolian tribes, the Oirat became increasingly independent after the collapse of the Mongol empire of the Chingiskhanids in the late 14th century and since then stood in political opposition to the Eastern Mongols, especially the Khalka, Tümed and others. In 1757, the Dzungarian Khanate of the Oirat, which had its centre between the Altai Mountains and the Ili region in today’s Sinkiang, was destroyed by Manchurian-Chinese troops and large parts of its territory annexed by China. Shortly before, the Eastern Mongolian Khalka in Mongolia had submitted to Manchu China, which gave them military support against the Oirat who at that time were much stronger than the Khalka. It’s worth noting that the northern part of the modern province of Sinkiang (Xinjiang) is still known today as Dzungaria.

Around 1600, the main parts of the Oirat tribes of Torgut and Dörbet had moved towards the steppes north of the Caspian Sea along the lower Volga. They became known as the Kalmyk.

In 1648 Zaya Pandita, an Oirat monk of the Hoshut, a tribe of the Oirat, had created the “Clear Script” (Todo bičig), which eliminated the many ambivalent spellings of the old Uiguro-mongolian script and closed the gap between spoken and written language. The new script was rejected by the Eastern Mongols and spread as Oirat script only among the Western Mongols. From 1648 onward, there are two written Mongolian languages: a Western Mongolian written language and the old written language of the Eastern Mongols, based on the Eastern Mongolian standard of the 12th/13th century, which is still used today in Inner Mongolia and more recently again in the Republic of Mongolia.

After the devastating defeat of the Oirat Khanat in 1757 a central authority for the Oirat was missing, so that the Oirat written language also slightly changed [Namjavin 2003]. In 1771, after problems with the Russian authorities, some of the Oirat/Kalmyks, especially Torgut, who lived at the lower Volga area in Russia migrated back from the Volga to the almost deserted Ili area in Sinkiang, where they settled and still live today. Overall, however, the Oirat-Kalmyk written language remained quite homogeneous and conservative until the beginning of the 20th century. The different tribes between Volga and Sinkiang, between Kyrgyzstan and the Mongolian Altai used one and the same written language for communication. For this early language level there are dictionaries and grammars from the 19th and 20th century in Western European languages [Zwick 1852; Krueger 1978/84; Rahmn 2012]. The study of the Mongolian languages in Europe was mainly initiated through members of the mission station in Sarepta, which the Herrnhuter from Germany established amongst the Kalmyks on the Volga around 1765. Sarepta is now a part of greater Volgograd where the old “German style” town and the archives still exist.

The initial question posed in the project is how a development that resulted in the Oirat and Kalmyk languages in Kalmykia, Sinkiang and Western Mongolia becoming endangered languages could have taken place during the 20th century. The following tentative theses, which are to be checked by analyzing the written language material may be defined as: the language and script community of the Western Mongols of the old Oirat Federation broke up in the course of the 20th century after a short consolidation phase in the 1920s and 1930s as a result of world political upheavals, which made the Kalmyks and Oirat objects of the great world powers, the plaything in geopolitics between Hitler, Stalin and Mao Tse-tung. Unity falls apart, the remaining three (four) groups in three states experience individual fates. They remain isolated and weakened as small groups and become assimilated.

Since the 1940s, the Oirat in Sinkiang have been taking up a development in their reformed written language that was originally initiated in Kalmykia by Kalmyk scholars during the period of 1915–1938, but was not carried on due to the political conditions which resulted in the deportation of the Kalmyks to Siberia in 1943. After returning to Kalmykia, since 1957/58 the old traditions were broken and the development of the written language focused solely on the use of a modified Cyrillic alphabet. The community based on a common script (Schriftgemeinschaft) of the Kalmyks and Oirat in China, Kalmykia and Western Mongolia broke up and the three

or four groups went their separate ways. There is a fourth group of Oirats who now live in present independent Kyrgyzstan that originally used to be part of the Soviet Union and Russia and that borders on China (Sinkiang). Unfortunately, the language has been almost completely lost there.

Even within the Oirat writing community in Sinkiang a uniform standard is not developing, since the Oirat are not recognized as a minority in their own right in China [Todaeva 2001]. The orthography and grammar of the Oirat written language in reformed Todo bičig in Sinkiang is not standardized until today. It has been changing over the decades and is divers even within a shorter period of time. The standard which was taught to each young generation in the schools never corresponded exactly to the standard of individual newspaper presses and book publishing houses. This lack of a uniform standard led to ambiguity and in certain intellectual circles to a rejection of the Oirat written language in favour of the Eastern Mongolian written language of Inner Mongolia. In as so far as the Oirat written language, Todo Bičig has been revived during the last few years in Kalmykia and in Western Mongolia, it picks up the spelling of the 17th–19th centuries, which differs greatly from the reformed spelling commonly used in Sinkiang today.

Oirat in Sinkiang/China and Kalmyks in Russia or the Soviet Union and Mongolia had comparable experiences under different socialist systems in the 20th century. In Russia it was the deportation of the Kalmyks to Siberia under Stalin's regime. In China, Oirats were subjected to severe reprisals during the Cultural Revolution and other political campaigns from 1950 to 1977. Consequently, an active assimilation policy put Oirats on an assimilation course with the Eastern Mongols in Chinese Inner Mongolia which was to rob them of their linguistic and cultural independence.

Oirats and Kalmyks in the Soviet Union, China and the People's Republic of Mongolia all went through collectivisation of their herds and destruction of the traditional tribal structure with a slight time lag. In all three groups of Western Mongols, this has left deep traces in the language, especially in the vocabulary and active command of the language. This change in language due to external political influences led to a break-up of the Oirat-Kalmyk language community in the 20th century. Kalmyks in the Soviet Union absorbed Russian vocabulary and syntax on a large scale, the Oirat in China absorbed Han Chinese and Eastern Mongolian language material of the Tümed, Khorchin, Chakhar and the Oirat in Mongolia Eastern Mongolian language material of the Khalka.

The Oirat in Mongolia, like the Oirat in Kyrgyzstan, no longer have their own written language in which they can express themselves in writing. Since 1941, under Soviet pressure, Khalka-Mongolian (Eastern Mongolian) in Cyrillic script has been binding in Mongolia. So they use Khalka-Mongolian, written with Cyrillic letters, in their correspondence. The latest developments in email correspondence, text messaging by SMS and in blogs and forums also show the advance of the Latin script among western and eastern Mongolians. Here the survival of Oirat is in great danger. In cooperation with SOAS in London, Prof. Tsendee has made numerous language documents available as audio and video recordings on the SOAS Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR). Unfortunately, she passed away in 2019.

The Oirat have always lived in Central Asia in a multi-ethnic context. Nowadays, Sinkiang and the Caucasus region — with the Kalmyks living immediately north of

the Caucasus — can still be seen as multi-ethnic microcosms. The larger context of the nomadic peoples of the steppes of Central Asia is, however, today disturbed by fixed borders. Linguistically and culturally, the various Oirat groups today are more strongly influenced by the state-bearing peoples of the Russians and the Chinese, both of whom are not steppe peoples.

In the 1930s until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1938, the University of Tashkent in Central Asia served as an intellectual centre, where Uighur and Oirat scholars and students from Sinkiang, Kalmykia and also Mongolia came together to reconsider jointly the spiritual culture and language of their peoples and to adapt it to the social and linguistic conditions of the 20th century. Although the Uighurs in Sinkiang constitute the majority of the population of that region and most of the Oirat from Sinkiang also speak Uighur and Chinese, the Uighur development, which is closely related to the Uzbek development, will not be discussed in detail here. The multilingualism of the Oirat people in a multilingual, multiethnic context influences their mother tongue. The exact nature of this multilingualism is different in Kalmykia, Sinkiang, Kyrgyzstan and Western Mongolia.

Three of the most influential Kalmyk scholars, who worked on the reform of the written language and who were active as teachers and researchers in Tashkent, Sinkiang and Western Mongolia in the 1920s and 1930s, were Aksen Suseev, Ijil Čürüm [Baturbayar 2016] and Ceren Dorži Nominhanov (1898–1967) [Očirova, Bakaeva 2008; Reckel 2020]. C. Nominhanov and A. Suseev went back to Elista in 1938. Ijil Čürüm stayed in Sinkiang and wrote an Oirat-Tibetan dictionary, which has survived as a manuscript. It was hidden in a cave during the difficult times and was not discovered until the 1980s. Hopefully it will be published sometime in the future.

To. Badma, who was a student of Ijil Čürüm, published numerous linguistic works since the 1950s in Urumchi in Sinkiang and a Mongolian-Oirat dictionary in 1979, which has been reprinted since and has been serving as the major reference work especially for the spelling of modern Oirat until today. In 1953 a new grammar of the Oirat written language was published in Urumchi, based on the grammar used by C. Nominhanov at the University of Tashkent from 1936 with handwritten hectographed copies of a shorter version (“Učebnik mongol’skogo jazyka – Ojrat-mongol’skaja pis’mennost”) made in 1935 [Očirova, Bakaeva 2008: 16; Reckel 2020]. It reforms the Oirat written language, introduces some new letters from the Galik alphabet and brings the written Oirat language closer to the spoken language of the Oirat of the 20th century. When C. Nominhanov circulated his grammar of reformed written Oirat in Todo bičig at the University of Tashkent in 1935/36, it was an effort to create a vibrant, practical written language in a script that had been replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet in his native Kalmykia



Fig. 1. Ceren Dorži Nominhanov (1898–1967)

for more than a decade. On more neutral ground, in Uzbekistan, it was once again possible to bring old traditions to new life.

The originally close relationship between the Kalmyks of the Soviet Union and the Oirat in Sinkiang, broke up gradually after the communist takeover in China in 1949. The relations between the Soviet Union and China deteriorated increasingly during the 1950s and 1960s, especially after the death of Stalin in 1953 and the reforms and de-stalinisation under Khrushchev since 1956. It was not until the early 1990s that a growing relationship between Russia and China made closer communication possible once again.

In 1923, the Kalmyks on the Volga were given a new standard written language in Cyrillic letters. From 1931 to 1938 it was also written with Latin letters. From 1943 to 1957/58, the deportation of Kalmyks to Siberia prevented the free development of the language. During these years most Kalmyks no longer dared to speak Kalmyk publicly or to pass the language on to their children. The trauma of the deportation is still felt today [[Wartmann-Burataeva, Cholutaeva 2011](#)]. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990/91, there have been attempts to teach the old Oirat clear script in schools again. New schoolbooks bear the title on the spine in Todo Bičig, while the text between the book covers is almost exclusively printed in Kalmyk in Cyrillic script. For a short time after 1990 even a newspaper in clear script was published in Elista. Co-publisher was Sodmon Namjavin, who originally hails from Sinkiang. The script has a high symbolic value for the ethnic identity of the Kalmyks. It appears today in Elista on cars, business headlines, posters etc., but has little practical value in everyday life.

Unfortunately, the spelling rules for writing Kalmyk in Cyrillic script are very complicated with unstressed vowels not written at all. The orthography of the written Kalmyk language used today has peculiar rules. Schwas from second syllable onward will not be written. Up to 11 consonants could and can be written without a vowel in between thus creating big clusters of consonants (For ex.: Көдлмшчнртвдн [to our workers]). These rules make written Kalmyk different from other Mongolian languages written in Cyrillic script, like Buryat and Khalka. These rules for Kalmyk go back to Nomto Ochirov (Očirā) and followed by M.B.Narmaev, D. A. Pavlov and others. There have been made attempts to change these unsatisfactory spelling rules in the 1920s and 1930s, and again after the period of deportation, all to no avail [[Arai Yukiyasu 2006](#)].

Nomto Ochirov (kal. Очра Номт, rus. Очиров Номто Очирович) was born 10.10.1886 in Khonch in Kalmykia [[Badmaev 2009](#)]. He studied at the Oriental Faculty of St Petersburg University. In 1908, he spent some time with the famous Kalmyk Jangar singer Elyan Ovla from whom he wrote down the epos Jangar. Nomto Ochirov recorded and published the first monumental edition of the Kalmyk epos “Dzhangar” (Jangar), published the first newspaper in the history of the Kalmyk people “Oirat Izvestia”. In the 1920s Nomto Ochirov participated in the reform of the Kalmyk writing system. Since 1929, Nomto Ochirov was arrested four times: in mid-1929, in the fall of 1930, June 1941 and December 1950. In all these cases, he was accused of his activities in the Kalmyk military government and he was accused of participation in the “Kalmyk nationalist counter-revolutionary insurrectionary organization Nar-na Girl.” Since 1950, he was in a special settlement in the Semipalatinsk region of

Kazakhstan. He returned in 1956, paralyzed. He died in 1960 [Ulanova 2020].

In 1942, Kalmykia was occupied by German troops for about five months. After the Germans left, Stalin accused the Kalmyk of collaboration with the Germans. The period of deportation of the Kalmyks to Siberia in 1943–1957 as a traumatic experience is not in itself sufficient to explain the continued decline of the Kalmyk language in Kalmykia. For this purpose, language education in kindergartens, schools up to the university in Kalmykia will have to be looked into: curricula should be analyzed, teachers should be interviewed. How many lessons are taught in Kalmyk language? How interesting are the lessons and textbooks? How are the native-speaking teachers trained? How well do they know Kalmyk? To this day, new textbooks for language teaching are being developed and published in Kalmykia.



*Fig. 2. Nomto Ochirov
(1886–1960)*

In Sinkiang, the last textbooks in Clear Script were printed around 1982. Nonetheless, the clear script is still used there. There is no clear standard that is widely communicated since it is no longer taught in the schools. Scholars like Adiyān Galcan offer online videos teaching written Oirat (reformed standard) on the Chinese platform Youku, the equivalent of YouTube [Galcan 2020]. Since 2017, the use of textbooks in the indigenous languages of Sinkiang has been strictly prohibited in Sinkiang schools. Teaching is now allowed only in Chinese. Finally, the influence of the Internet, television and radio and the language or languages used in these media must be included in the analysis on language change and decline. Some newspapers are available online now, including the Daily Newspaper of Xinjiang (Šinjiyang-giyin ödör-yin sonin) which even in 2020 is still published in Oirat script, at least partly [http://mongol.xjdaily.com/].

Three groups of written materials are particularly suitable for the analysis of the language change of modern Oirat and Kalmyk, as they reflect the current and contemporary language standard: schoolbooks, newspapers and official documents including political literature such as pamphlets, party programs etc. Fiction, on the other hand, is less suitable for our research as it often uses vocabulary of older or artificial language levels in prose and poetry. Written folk literature occupies a special position close to oral traditions and recordings. For Sinkiang, we should mention the series Hān Tenggeri, which has been published in over 30 volumes since 1981. The incorporation of vocabulary and quotations from fiction and folk literature is reserved for a later phase of the planned corpus-based dictionary.

Textbooks used in schools have a strong normative power in language education and also reflect the utopian ideas of an ideal society to which the older generation wants to draw children. Since textbooks reflect a strongly standardized language, they also document the break-up of the old Oirat language community into different standards.

A transcription, analysis and comparison of selected textbooks from different decades, for the Oirat in Sinkiang from the 1920s to the 1980s, for the Kalmyks from the

1920s to the present day, is intended to work out the changes in society and language of the Oirat and Kalmyks. For this purpose, textbooks not only for language teaching but also from other fields of knowledge are to be used in selection. Until the 1950s the Oirat language in Sinkiang was strongly influenced by Russian, later by the East Mongolian language of Inner Mongolia and also by Chinese. This is reflected in the respective vocabulary, orthography and sentence structure.

For the Kalmyks on the Volga, the deportation in 1943–1958 was a profound break. Linguistically and socio-scientifically, textbooks from the time before and after the deportation period can therefore provide important insights into the changes in society and the Kalmyks' self-image. Kara published excerpts from textbooks from the period 1925 to 1930 in 1997 [Kara 1997]. They will be compared with Kalmyk textbooks published after 1958. It is possible that Kalmyk textbooks were even written in Siberia between 1943 and 1958.

After schoolbooks, the most important source for tracing the changes in a language are newspapers. Newspapers report in the up to date language of the day and thus reflect the latest developments in the language very promptly. The language here is more flexible than in textbooks. Some Oirat-Kalmyk newspapers are available online.

The development of the new Oirat written language in Sinkiang can also be documented by the new school grammars and lexicons or dictionaries, which have been published since about 1950. The comparison of the orthography of Sinkiang Oirat in the grammar of 1953, that of the lexicon of 1961 which further develops the spellings of 1953 and also in some cases introduces its own developments, and that of Badma from 1979 and from the grammar of Jamcha from 1999 will show a movement from a spelling of the 1930s to 1950s strongly influenced by the Kalmyk scholar C. Nominhanov, followed by a development of an orthography strongly based on the spelling of the East Mongolian of Inner Mongolia, as Badma prefers it, to the recent countermovement under Jamcha, an oscillating movement which continues until today.

In the first years of the Soviet Union around 1922, commissions were formed to determine the nationalities in the Soviet Union and a separate written language was established for each people. In China, on the other hand, this happened around 1955 to 1957. The Commission for the determination and definition of minorities in China consisted of Chinese and Soviet experts. 56 nationalities were determined and recognized in the P.R. China. There was a discussion in the commission of experts whether the Oirat should be recognized as a minority in their own right. The Soviet experts were in favour of this, as the Mongolian Kalmyks and Buryats in the Soviet Union had also been granted the status of separate nationalities. The Chinese commissioners, however, were opposed to this and classified all Eastern and Western Mongolian peoples as one minority: the Mongols. Oirat language was classified as a Mongolian dialect. Only small Mongolian fringe groups, such as Dagurs, Yugurs, Dongxiang and Bonan were given independent status. The Oirat of Sinkiang were grouped together with Tümed, Chakhar, Khorchin and other East Mongolian peoples of Inner Mongolia as Mongolians. However, the Oirat from Sinkiang did not understand the radio program and newspapers from Inner Mongolia because of the strong differences between Western and Eastern Mongolian. Therefore, the Oirat in Sinkiang were left with their Oirat script and were given their own radio station. One

of the leading newsreaders for decades was the wife of Prof. To. Badma. The Oirat and Kalmyks still see themselves as an independent ethnic group [Lee 2016].

The time of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) stifled intellectual activities for over ten years. In the 1980s and 1990s a series of 21 volumes under the title *Mongγol törül-ün kele ayalxun-u sudulul-un čubural /Menggu yuzu yuyan fangyan yanjiu congshu* (“Series of research on dialects of the language family of Mongolian (Mongolic) languages”) appeared in print in Hohhot in Inner Mongolia. Volume 20 and 21 are an Oirat dictionary [Čoijungjab, Gereltü 1998] and a collection of oral Oirat tales [Čoijungjab 1987]. These publications are the result of field work done amongst the different groups of Mongols in China in the 1950s which could not be published at the time because of numerous political campaigns that started with the “Let 100 Flowers Bloom” campaign in 1956 and ended only with the downfall of the “Gang of Four” in 1976 and their trial and conviction in 1981.

A major publication was Prof. To. Badma’s Mongolian-Oirat dictionary in 1979, also published after the Cultural Revolution. In 1983, at a time when the Oirat Clear Script officially ceased to be taught in state run schools a small dictionary for primary schools in Hudum Mongol and Todo Bičig was published. In 1999 Jamcha published his groundbreaking work on grammar and spelling of written Oirat [Zamčha 1999].

It was not until 1982 that an educational campaign apart from the Oirat script began in Sinkiang. Bilingual books were published in the Uiguro-mongolian script (Hudum Mongol) with an interlinear parallel version of the text in a smaller Oirat script to slowly introduce the Oirat to the written Mongolian of Inner Mongolia [Qoyijingjab 1986]. Many monographs and text editions are still published in two versions: in Uiguro-mongolian script (Hudum Mongol) and in Oirat Todo Bičig. Since about 1982 the Oirat written language is no longer taught in schools. All textbooks until 2017 came from Inner Mongolia. All Oirat should use the old Uiguro-mongolian script as it is used in Inner Mongolia [Erdeni 1983]. There were various reasons for that. For example, the Chakhar, which were moved from Inner Mongolia to Bortala on the Kazakh border after 1757, were originally Eastern Mongols. However, they have been using the Oirat written language without any problems for over 200 years until today. It is often said that all Mongolians in China must stick together and should be able to communicate in writing. Most of the Oirat oppose the abolition of clear writing, so that even today newspapers and books are published in Oirat writing.

The Oirat written language in Sinkiang has gone through a major reform process in the 20th century. However, it has not yet found a uniform standard in orthography. This makes it difficult for outsiders to access Oirat documents. There is no Oirat-Mongolian or Oirat-Chinese dictionary of the 20th century existing in China, though Mongol-Oirat dictionaries that serve a different purpose of leading the Oirat towards using the Uiguro-mongolian script exist. Considering that the existing corpus of modern Oirat written material is available, a corpus-based dictionary of modern Sinkiang Oirat is a strong desideratum.

Another desideratum is a textbook of modern Kalmyk and modern Sinkiang Oirat for Western students and scholars. The Kalmyk grammar of Johannes Benzing is partly outdated and useless as a textbook [Benzing 1985]. The didactic method should follow recognized good modern textbooks, e.g. Linguaphone’s language course for Korean, which is an Altaic language just as Kalmyk.

A textbook for modern Sinkiang-Oirat is completely missing, even in China. There are only lexicons and grammars for Old Oirat, as it was in use until the end of the 19th century, take for example the works of Krueger (1975, 1984), Zwick (1851) etc. The modern written Oirat of the 20th and 21st century, as it is used in Sinkiang and which differs greatly from Old Oirat in vocabulary, grammar and orthography, has so far received almost no attention in science outside Asia. A. Rakos' introduction to written Oirat offers only a very limited approach [Rakos 2002].

For audio and video material, there is the much broader Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR), which is administered by the School of Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London and into which Oirat such as Prof. Tsendee from Ulan Bator contributed material. Access to this archive is password protected and a prerequisite for active and passive use of the archive is personal registration as a researcher. This guarantees a certain scientific standard. Comparable archives for endangered languages have been established as DoBeS (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nimwegen) and LELA (Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig). Unfortunately, DoBeS and LELA do not contain Kalmyk-Oirat language material. The three archives mentioned above are to be regarded as repositories. They do not evaluate the linguistic material. Access to DoBeS and LELA is strongly regulated and restricted to a small circle of research assistants. LELA is a completed project. Further projects and archives like the Vienna based VLACH are given in the bibliography below.

The State and University Library Goettingen has a good collection of Kalmyk-Oirat and Mongolian literature. The catalogue can be accessed via the library homepage www.sub.uni-goettingen.de. Use the slot in the right top corner and insert spr xal to see all titles in Kalmyk language or spr mon for Mongolian titles and spr bua for Buryat. Unfortunately, the system has no language code for Oirat. You may try to insert JTH as classification for modern Oirat, JTD for old (classical) Oirat and JTF for Kalmyk. Otherwise many Oirat books from Sinkiang are under the general language code spr mon.

There is also a Specialised Information Service for Central Asia and Siberia based at Goettingen. See its homepage www.fid-cassib.de. Here you may find elaborate instructions for a more detailed search.

The Oirat written language has a history of over 370 years. Many documents have been saved in various archives, collections and libraries. Research on the old documents has been relatively regularly published by many scholars. Research on modern Oirat-Kalmyk language has on the other hand been rare. To ensure the survival of the Oirat-Kalmyk language more attention should be paid to the modern language and its everyday use.

In China and Mongolia the Oirat language has been under immense political and cultural pressure for decades. In Kalmykia the language is not suppressed but has government support. This is a good basis to develop and propagate the use of the Kalmyk language.

The project at Goettingen University tries to work together with Kalmyk scholars and native speakers to promote the language by writing a Kalmyk textbook including audio material for learners outside Russia, further to analyse the existing everyday language in modern Kalmyk literature, be it printed or online, to gain material showing the development of modern Oirat-Kalmyk over the decades.

The aim is to prove that the Oirat-Kalmyk language is relevant in a multiethnic society, parallel and not in opposition to a dominant state language like Russian or Chinese. Multilingualism helps to understand different aspects of society in general by using different focus points. Each language has a different approach to nature, daily life, religious or philosophical thinking etc. The Eskimo or Inuit supposedly have 50 different words for snow, the Kalmyk have numerous words for horses or cattle, the whole language structure with long agglutinative verbal constructions works on a different line from Russian, Chinese, English. This otherness and richness and in general different views on the world by uniquely naming phenomena disappears when a language dies. That is why it is worth to ensure it remains a living language.

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Appendix. Selective Classified Annotated Bibliography

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