

**Statement by Dolkun Kamberi, Ph. D.,  
Uyghurs and Uyghur Identity,  
At the Roundtable by  
The Congressional-Executive Commission on China  
On June 10, 2002**

Thank you for inviting me here to discuss Uyghurs and Uyghur identity. I have divided my presentation into nine topics: an introduction, Uyghur people, the linguistic identity of Uyghurs, the cultural identity of Uyghurs, the artistic identity of Uyghurs, the musical identity of Uyghurs, the historical Identity of Uyghurs, the regional Identity of Uyghurs, and a conclusion. It is very difficult for me to draw a complete picture of the subject in 10 minutes, but I will do my best to summarize. The full text also will be available soon on the Internet and in print.

#### Summary

Today the land of the Uyghurs consists of the Tarim, Junggar and Turpan basins, located in the center of Asia. The land has gained great importance since early times because of its favorable geographic location on the ancient trade routes between the East and the West, connecting Greco-Roman civilization with Indian Buddhist culture and Central and East Asian traditions. Burgeoning trade and cultural exchanges gave Uyghur-land a cosmopolitan character marked by linguistic, racial and religious tolerance. Uyghur culture and art has developed not only on the basis of inheritance and preservation of traditional culture, but also through cultural exchanges with others in the East and West.

The name "Uyghur-land" denotes a geographical location rather than a geopolitical entity. It is located in the eastern part of Central Asia. Uyghur-land comprises about one sixth of China's territory; it is now the biggest Autonomous Region of China. The Uyghur region includes a great portion of Central Asia, from the northeast to the southwest; it borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tibet, and India. Uyghur-land is not only located in a strategic position on a vital communication line in Central Asia-among three large imperial states China, India, and Russia-it also has a unique geographic environment, rich natural resources and special climate. Its arid climate has helped preserve ancient tombs, mummies, petroglyphs and city sites, Buddhist caves, innumerable cultural relics, underground antiquities, and treasures. There are 24 different manuscripts using 17 ancient languages, writings which were unearthed along with the Tarim and Turpan Basin oasis cities, well known to scholars. In different periods people called it "The Western Region" in Chinese sources, "Uyghuristan," "East Türkistan," "Chinese Türkistan," or "Chinese Central Asia" in the West. "Uyghur Äli," found in a medieval Uyghur manuscript, means "The Country of the Uyghur." In 1884, the Qing Dynasty Government of China started calling "Xinjiang," which means "new territory." After 1955 the name "Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region" was given to it by the government of China.

The basic meaning of the name Uyghur is "unite," but it may also be translated as "union," "coalition," or "federation." The name appeared first in records of the Orkhun Kok Turk inscriptions and in early Uyghur. Later forms of the name can be found in medieval Uyghur, Manichaean, and Sogdian scripts, and the Arabic script of the Uyghur Qarakhanid and Chaghatay period. Apart from these Central Asian forms, the name can be found in different periods and diverse texts in Chinese, appearing in more than 100 translated forms.

The Uyghurs and their forefathers are an ancient group of people who have inhabited Central Asia since the first millennium B.C. Their ancestors can be traced in Chinese historical sources to the "Die," "Chi Die," "XiongNu," "Ding Ling," and "Gao Che," who lived in the north of the Heavenly Mountain (Tängri Tagh), and along the Selenga and Orkhun rivers. That territory later became known as the Uyghur Empire. The Uyghurs have left historical traces along the ancient Silk Road, and also in Chinese historiography. The

Uyghurs, earlier than other peoples in Central Asia, started to settle and build cities. Certain kinds of evidence from both archaeological excavations and historical records show that Uyghurs lived a settled urban life, and adopted Buddhist and Manichaean culture. Facts from Uyghur manuscripts indicate religious and cultural interaction of medieval Uyghurs with other peoples of neighboring countries. An important part of Uyghur literature is devoted to the translation of Buddhist works from non-Turkic languages. That is one reason why so many borrowed words from different languages appear in medieval Uyghur language.

About early Uyghur culture and its history, Kingdom Professor Denis Sinor wrote: "The kingdom of Khocho [Idiqut Uyghur Kingdom], ruled by the Turkic Uyghurs, was multiracial, multilingual and [it] permitted the peaceful coexistence of many religions. It enjoyed a living standard unparalleled in medieval Central Eurasia.... Among the non-Muslim Turkic peoples, none has reached the degree of civilization attained by the Uyghurs, and they developed a culture in many respects more sophisticated than that of most of Muslim Turks. In the visual arts, they continued a tradition, non-Turkic in origin, of which they maintained very high standards. The script they used gained widespread acceptance both to the east and the west. The Uyghurs undoubtedly wrote one of the brighter chapters of Central Eurasian history."

German archaeologist A. Von Le Coq removed many wall paintings, which were shipped in several hundred cases to Berlin. British archaeologist Aurel Stein, who visited Bezeklik at the end of 1914, indicated that, in terms of richness and artistry, no other finds from similar sites in the Turpan Basin could match those of Bezeklik, which parallel the rich ancient paintings of the Dunhuang Thousand Buddha Caves. Professor Albert Grünwedel (1856-1935) writes in a letter dated April 2, 1906: "For years, I have been endeavoring to find a credible thesis for the development of Buddhist art, and primarily to trace the ancient route by which the art of imperial Rome, etc., reached the Far East. What I have seen here goes beyond my wildest dream. If only I had hands enough to copy it all, [for] here in the Kizil are about 300 caves, all containing frescoes, some of them very old and fine."

Historically the Turkic people have commonly used the Uyghur literary language. The ancient Uyghur language, which was used in the 8th century during the Uyghur Khanate, is the same as the language of Orkhun-Yenisay inscription, which is called ancient Türki. As we know, until the 14th century, the ancient Uyghur literary language was commonly in use among the Türki peoples. Shämsidin Sami the author of *Qamusul'Alam*, wrote: "Uyghur being most advanced in the cultural development, their language was common literary language among the Türki peoples. Since the period when Chaghatay Khan was in power, the Uyghur language, which was called Chaghatay Tili, has been famous."

Based on history, literature, religion, content, and the scripts of Uyghur linguistic materials, I have classified the Uyghur language into five different periods:

- 1) Pre-historical Uyghur language, before the 6<sup>th</sup> CE. No written material in Uyghur has been found so far, but the language came to us through Uyghur oral literature, idioms, idiomatic phrases, folk stories, folk songs, folk literature, and ancient mythology and legends in other language records.
- 2) Ancient Uyghur Language, 6<sup>th</sup> Century to 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Mostly pre-Islamic literatures, which were influenced by non-Altaic language.
- 3) Medieval Uyghur language, 10<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Mostly Islamic literature influenced by Arabic and Persian languages.
- 4) Contemporary Uyghur Language, 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Elishir Nawayi's works represent this era. 5) Modern Uyghur language, late 19<sup>th</sup> Century-present.

The modern Uyghur language belongs to the Ural-Altaic language family, Turkic language group of the eastern branch. Among the major six Turkic languages, the Turkish and Azari languages are very close, Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages are closely related, and Uyghur and Uzbek languages can communicate easily on simple subjects. The modern Uyghur language has two major dialects: southern and northern.

According to the Chinese 2000 official census, the population of Uyghur native speakers is near 9 million. But independent sources claims Uyghur population is about 16 million. In the past 10 years, the Han Chinese population in the region increased almost 32 percent. In 1949, Uyghurs accounted for more than 90 percent of the population while the Chinese accounted for only 5 percent of the roughly five million people in Uyghur-land. The Chinese population had increased 500 percent by the 2000.

The vast majority lives in the Uyghur Autonomous Region under Chinese rule. There are large Uyghur-speaking communities in the Central Asian Republics, Turkey, and smaller communities live in Russia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and also in the West. According to the Uyghur Autonomous Regional law, the standard Uyghur language serves as the official language of the Uyghur Autonomous government since 1955. But while more than 10 million Uyghurs live throughout a vast region of Central Eurasia, the Uyghur language has been greatly neglected by the international community. There are no generally accessible Western publications or education in the Uyghur languages and literature, except for a few early publications in Russian, and some German and Swedish. Uyghurs have used more than eight different writing systems from early medieval times to present. Now they are using the Arabic script-based, Persian-modified modern Uyghur writing system.

Among the states of Central Asia, the stateless Uyghurs historically formed the leading group of the region for centuries. They possessed a rich literature, strong economy and military, the ability to conduct state affairs, and to help others solve conflicts. They showed generosity and offered their hospitality. Uyghurs and their ancestors built their reign under the rule of the Hun (2<sup>nd</sup>BCE to 2<sup>nd</sup> CE), the Jurjan (3<sup>rd</sup> CE to 5<sup>th</sup>CE), and the Turk Empires (522 CE to 744 CE). Uyghurs also established their own states throughout history. Their states include the Uyghur Äli (744 CE to 840 CE), the İdīqut Uyghur (840 CE to 1250 CE), the Uyghur Qarakhan (10<sup>th</sup>CE to 13<sup>th</sup> CE), the Uyghur Chaghatay (13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> CE), the Yärkänt Uyghur Khanate (1514-1678), the Qumul and Turpan Uyghur Baks (from the end of 17<sup>th</sup> CE to beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> CE), and the Yakup Bak (1820-1877), which lasted until Qing's invasion. Uyghurs reclaimed Uyghur-land as the Republic of Eastern Türkistan in 1933 and the Eastern Turkestan Republic from 1944-49.

The president of Eastern Turkestan, Alihan Ture, was called back by Stalin in 1946 to Russia and lived in Tashkent until 1976. His successor, Ahmatjan Qasim (1914-1949), Eastern Turkestan army chief general Isaqbeg (1902-1949), deputy army chief general Dalilkan Sugurbayev (1902-1949), a member of Eastern Turkestan Central Government Abdukerim Abbasov (1921-1949) died in a mysterious plane crash on their way to Beijing on 22 Aug. 1949. (Abduruf Mahsum, the general secretary of the State of the Eastern Turkestan Republic is still alive in Almaty Kazakhstan). From 1946-1949, Russia and China engaged in many governmental structure reforms in the Uyghur-land. During the reforms, both Russian and Chinese government representative promised again and again to the Uyghurs that the presence of the Chinese army in Uyghur-land would promote democratization, free elections, and high autonomy, to help build the new Xinjiang, and achieve independence for Uyghurs in the future-as Zhang Zhi Zhong promised at the summit of Chinese Nationalists, Communists, and Uyghurs in Urumchi in 1946.

After 1950, several times "the communist revolutionary moment" in China has touched almost every aspect of traditional culture, especially crucial for Uyghur-land during the Cultural Revolution. The revolutionists found that every aspect of culture in Uyghur-land was different from that of China. That included languages, writing systems, the arts, literature, ideas, values, attitudes, history, religion, customs, music, dance, songs, the way that people thought, even the features of people-their clothes, house decoration, and food.

The Government twice changed the writing system of the Uyghurs, Kazaks, and Kirghiz, and punished all levels of educated intellectuals four times in 50 years for political reasons. Furthermore, the politicians reorganized and merged the Eastern Türkistan troops into the Chinese Army units, and made the army units of former Eastern Türkistan-as well as their generals and high-ranking commanders-disappear after 1966.

Besides giving serious thought to Uyghur identity, another goal of this presentation is to attract the attention of United States and international community to Uyghur issues. Therefore, this presentation also aims to present the evidence needed to understand Uyghur identity better. The archaeological excavations and historical records show that Uyghur-land is the most important repository of Uyghurs and Central Asian treasures.

Indeed, there are only a few places in the world that can claim the religious, linguistic, cultural, and artistic diversity at one period that Uyghur-land can. Shamanism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Nestorianism, and Islam flourished in the Uyghur-land side by side and one after another along with the tradition of early Uyghur original ethnic cults. Uyghurs are indigenous people of Central Asia; they have developed a unique culture and arts that made significant contributions to the Asian culture. The Uyghur intellectuals have struggled to renew and keep their cultural identity since 10th. Century CE.

After Sept. 11, China increased Chinese military along the Central Asian borders, and they sent more armed police and non-uniformed security forces into the big cities of Uyghur-land to control Uyghur people, intensifying already high tensions. Recently, Chinese authorities have stepped up its "Strike Hard" campaign against Uyghur dissidents. According to Amnesty International's 1999 and 2002 reports on human rights abuses, the Uyghur region is only region of China where political and religious prisoners have been executed in recent years. Chinese Government has also put tremendous pressure on Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, not to support Uyghur political activists or harbor Uyghur dissidents. They are pressuring Central Asian governments and Pakistan to return Uyghur dissidents to China with accusation of terrorism.

The Chinese government simply labeled Uyghurs as terrorists and tried to condemn two contemporary Eastern Turkestan republics, established during the 30s and the 40s, as origins of terrorists. As we know the terms "terrorism" and "terrorist" they are non-existent in Uyghur general knowledge and in their language throughout history. Modern Uyghur is using words directly borrowed from English terminology for that notion.

There is recent disturbing news in Urumchi. Xinjiang University plans to teach major subjects to Uyghur students in Chinese beginning 1 Sept. 2002 and it has burned Uyghur books in Kashgar. Not one Uyghur dared to comment publicly from the Uyghur-land regarding the news, but there is a very strong reaction from the exiled Uyghur community. Eyewitnesses saw the destruction of thousands of books during May in Kashgar. The government-owned Kashgar Uyghur Publishing House burned 128 copies of *A Brief History of the Huns*, and *Ancient Uyghur Literature*, which officials view as fomenting separatism. It also burned 32,320 copies of *Ancient Uyghur Craftsmanship*, also regarded as promoting separatist religious beliefs, according to sources in Kashgar. "Burning these Uyghur books is like burning the Uyghur people. Even under the Chinese constitution, these Uyghur books should protected as part of Uyghur cultural heritage," said one local Uyghur. According to the official Kashgar Daily, the Kashgar Uyghur Publishing House has also censored more than 330 books and stopped publication of other volumes. Another Uyghur intellectual sadly indicated: "Burning those Uyghur books recalls images of Hitler and Chairman Mao's campaign during the Chinese Cultural Revolution".

After carefully examining different aspects of Uyghur identity, I deeply believe that neglecting Uyghur civilization is neglecting Central Asian civilization; neglecting Central Asian civilization is neglecting Asian

civilization; and neglecting Asian civilization is neglecting world civilization. In other words, destroying Uyghur cultural heritage is destroying the world's cultural heritage.

It is time for the U.S. government to pay more attention to the seriousness of the political, economical, cultural, and religious discrimination and abuses facing the Uyghurs, and the Tibetans. Wide spread abuses of human rights, unequal treatment, unequal wealth distribution, economical, ideological, cultural exploitation, and joblessness are affecting almost every family of near 10 million Uyghurs in China. Saving the Uyghur culture is like saving our own culture.

I ask of you, the U.S. government, to establish a coordinator in the U.S. State Department on Uyghur issues to help consult the U.S. government on policy-making decisions regarding Central Asia and China. The Administration should consider opening an U.S. consulate in Urumchi. The State Department should establish an immigration quota to help Uyghur refugees hiding out in Central Asia and surrounding countries. And it should also establish an academic research institution focusing on Silk Road civilization, and create more educational opportunities in the United States for Uyghur youths. The U.S. government should coordinate with the United Nation and NGOs to promote human rights and religious freedom for Uyghurs. The United States should also put stronger pressure on China to release Uyghur businesswoman Rabiye Kadir. And periodically the United States should send congressional delegations including Uyghur dissidents to Uyghur-land to examine the state of human rights and religious freedom in the Uyghur Autonomous Region. Furthermore, the United States should provide funds for the Uyghur Non-Governmental Democratic institution.

Thank you for having me here today, and for your attention.

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1. Dolkun Kamberi, director of Radio Free Asia's Uyghur service, earned his M. Phil. and Ph. D. degrees from Columbia University and completed post-doctoral work at the University of Pennsylvania. His specialty has been Silk-Road archaeology and civilization. His career has included work as a university professor, museum curator, and field archaeologist. He has been published extensively in various languages on the Silk-Road culture, history, religions, languages, arts and archeology. Prior to joining RFA, Dr. Kamberi was a scientific consultant for the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, and a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He has taught the courses: "History & Archaeology along the Ancient Silk Road," "History and Cultural of Central Asian Empires," "Medieval Turkic Languages and Literature," and "Modern Uyghur and Uzbek Languages."