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When the Curtain Fell upon the Era of the Uighur Merchants

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Introductory remarks

After their westward migration in 840 CE, the Uighurs established their own regimes in the eastern Tianshan region and the Hexi Corridor, from which they directly controlled the key transportation routes of the eastern Silk Road. The Sogdian merchant network affiliated with the Uighur regime naturally exploited their political connections to monopolize the primary trade route from the eastern Tianshan region via the Hexi Corridor to central China. These Sogdian merchants not only directly represented the West or the Ganzhou Uighur regime in the tribute trade, but also gradually became Turkified (or more precisely, Uighurized) in their culture, eventually appearing as Uighur merchants themselves. As these Uighur merchants monopolized trade along the eastern Silk Road, the term “Uighur” (in the Chinese context at that time) gradually became a general term for foreign merchants.

Research on the Sogdian merchants who preceded the Uighur merchants and the Muslim merchants who followed them has been relatively extensive to date. Due to the limited records in extant literature, there is little understanding of the rise and fall of the Uighur merchants. However, the gradual interpretation of manuscripts written in Uighur and other non-Chinese languages unearthed in Dunhuang, Turfan, and other areas is providing us with brand-new materials for understanding the Uighur merchants; these documents include important texts left behind by these merchants, including letters, accounts, contracts, and other miscellaneous writings.¹ Research that has utilized this type of new materials to study Uighur merchants is perhaps best represented by the work of the late Prof. Moriyasu Takao, which has laid the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the origins, commercial activities, and influence of the Uighur merchants, who are so poorly documented in extant historical records. In particular, Moriyasu’s lengthy 1997 article utilized Uighur manuscripts to trace the origin of the *ortaq ~ ortoq* (*wotuo* 斡脫 in Chinese) merchants of the

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¹ P. Zieme has used Uighur documents unearthed in Turfan to comprehensively discuss commerce in the West Uighur Kingdom. In a 1976 paper, he identified letters written by Uighur merchants, making him the first scholar to pay attention to these materials; see Zieme 1976, pp. 247–249. Most of the Uighur documents from the 9th and 10th centuries found in the Library Cave of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes were left by Uighur merchants. This collection of documents was published by J. R. Hamilton (Hamilton 1985). Another set of materials from the same period and of a similar nature are the so-called Turko-Sogdian documents, which were also collected from the Library Cave, on which see Hamilton and Sims-Williams 1990 (translated into English as Sims-Williams and Hamilton 2015). The most recent publication of materials closely related to Uighur merchants is Moriyasu’s edition of the Uighur letters collected from Turfan and Dunhuang; see Moriyasu 2019.

Yuan dynasty back to the land cooperative relationships among Uighur peasants in Turfan, thus providing strong evidence that the *ortaq* merchant groups during the Yuan dynasty, which appeared to be mainly composed of Muslim merchants, must have been originally formed by Uighur merchants. In the same article, he also proposed the idea of the Turkification of the Sogdian merchants, thus hinting at their relationship with the Uighur merchants. Based on Uighur manuscripts unearthed in Dunhuang and Turfan, Moriyasu outlined the network of Turkic merchants in the 10th century, demonstrating their dominant position on the eastern Silk Road at the time.²

In this article, I will re-examine some of the materials discussed by Moriyasu *sensei* and, based on his pioneering research, further explore the process whereby Muslim merchants gradually replaced Uighur merchants as the dominant mercantile force along the eastern Silk Road.

1. Muslim Merchants in the eyes of the West Uighurs

In the early 11th century, the Muslim Qarakhanid dynasty, centered on Kashgar and Balasagun, conquered the Buddhist kingdom of Khotan on the southern edge of the Tarim Basin, pushing the boundaries of the Islamic world into the eastern half of the basin. The West Uighur kingdom became the last enclave to resist the complete Islamization of Central Asia. Although initially maintaining Manichaeism as their state religion, they gradually came under the influence of local Buddhist beliefs. By the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries, the Uighurs had largely converted to Buddhism and developed a unique Uighur Buddhist civilization that flourished down to the Mongol Yuan era. The cultural relics and written materials belonging to the Uighur era unearthed in Turfan and other places (such as Dunhuang) also show that Buddhist culture played a dominant role in Uighur society. In addition, texts and cultural relics of Manichaeism and the Church of the East have also been unearthed. However, no Islamic artifacts or textual materials from before the 14th century have been found.

In contemporary Islamic literatures, the Uighurs were portrayed as pagans. In the *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* (Compendium of the Turkic Dialects), compiled in the 11th century, the Qarakhanid noble Mahmūd al-Kāshgarī described the Uighurs as the “strongest of the infidels”³ and the main opponents of the Turkic Muslims in his time.⁴ In the Persian work *Tarīkh-i Jahān-gushā* (History of the World-Conqueror), compiled in the 13th century, the Muslim author Juvayni wrote, “The Uighurs adopted idolatry as their religion, and most of the other tribes followed their example. And there are none more bigoted than the idolaters of the East, and none more hostile to Islam”.⁵

The earliest record of any Muslim population within the West Uighurs can be found in al-Nadīm’s *al-*

² Moriyasu 1997. A revised edition is included in Moriyasu 2015. In the following references, I will cite the revised edition only.

³ CTD, vol. 1, p. 140.

⁴ See the entries of “kānd” (CTD, vol. 1, p. 270), “bākčām” (CTD, vol. 1, p. 359), etc.

⁵ Boyle 1958, p. 60.

Fihrist (The Catalogue). During the reign of Caliph al-Muqtadir I (908–932), the lord of the West Uighurs (*Toghuzghuz*) sent a message to the governor of Khorasan in order to protect the 500 Manicheans in Samarkand, revealing that “in my country there are many more Muslims than there are people of my religion in your country”.⁶ It can thus be concluded that by the early 10th century, there was already a significant Muslim population within the territory of the West Uighurs. Regarding the identity and origins of these Muslims, al-Nadīm provides no further information. According to the memorandum text housed at the Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage (xj222-0661.09), the West Uighur army once marched as far as the Talas region, causing “the whole Muslim people, both near and far” to subject themselves to the Uighur Khan.⁷ This event may have taken place between 893 and the beginning of the 10th century,⁸ which is close to the time period mentioned in al-Nadīm’s account. This may be the reason that Muslim residents appeared in West Uighur territory.

In the second half of the 10th century, the Qarakhanids rose to power in Central Asia and began to expand eastward, forcing the West Uighurs to close their borders, as Marvazī recorded:⁹

The kings of Qitāy and Yughur (Uighur), in spite of the fact that their countries are situated far from the countries of Islam, and that the roads leading to them are cut off, do not feel safe on the side bordering on the kings of Islam and Islamic armies because they have heard of, and witnessed the rise of this faith, its elevation, and the power of its adherents in punishing their enemies. Therefore, they protect themselves and their country by closing the road and stationing guards.

In this context, it would have been difficult for Muslim merchants to regularly travel through the eastern Tianshan region, which was under West Uighur control; thanks to Qarakhanid control of the south, the southern route around the Tarim Basin would have been more convenient for them. Thus, the merchants who controlled the routes along the Tianshan mountain range at that time were definitely Uighurs.

As for the image of merchants in the eyes of the West Uighurs at the time, illustrations of them in the wall paintings of *pradṇḍhi* (vowing) scenes from Bezeklik have been regarded by scholars as typical examples. More than 15 sections of such wall paintings were cut off by the German expedition from Cave 20 in Bezeklik (referred to as Cave 9 by Grünwedel at the time) and housed in the Museum for Indian Art (the present-day Museum for Asian Art) in Berlin. The donors’ images and names on the wall paintings, along with the cave’s large size and the magnificence of its decoration, indicate that the decoration was sponsored by the Uighur ruling house. Based on their style and features, some art historians have dated the murals to between the late 9th century and the mid-10th century.¹⁰ However, this dating may be too early from a historical perspective.

⁶ Moriyasu 1991, pp. 162, 165; Moriyasu 2004, 195, 198; Reeves 2011, pp. 228–229.

⁷ Zhang and Zieme 2011, pp. 141–142.

⁸ Fu 2019, pp. 119, 137.

⁹ Minorsky (ed., tr., and comm.) 1942, p. 19.

¹⁰ Jia and Qi 2002, pp. 454–455.

The Sogdian Manichaean letters unearthed from Bezeklik prove that the great patriarch (*Možak* > Chin. *mushe* 慕闍) of the eastern Manichaean Church was still residing in Bezeklik at the beginning of the 11th century, according to Prof. Yoshida Yutaka's study.¹¹ Therefore, it is quite unlikely that a large-scale Buddhist cave sponsored by the Uighur royal family appeared at the same site before this time. A more likely time would be sometime after the 11th century.¹²

Two sections of the *pradṇḍhi* scenes, No. 6 and No. 14, demonstrate images of merchants paying homage and offering treasures to the Buddha. On either side of the feet of the standing Buddha, the central figure of the mural, are depicted one to three merchants, respectively.¹³ Noting their Indo-European features such as deep-set eyes, high noses, thick eyebrows, and bushy beards, Moriyasu has argued that they must be represent Turkified Sogdian merchants (thus, Uighur merchants of that time).¹⁴ Moriyasu ruled out the possibility that they were Muslim merchants from west Central Asia, since "there is no reason for Muslim merchants to worship at a Buddhist cave temple, performing Buddhist offerings".¹⁵ Following Moriyasu's interpretation, these images have generally been accepted as typical images of Uighur merchants or (more precisely) merchants from the West Uighur Kingdom at that time.¹⁶



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Upon re-examining each individual merchant figure depicted in these wall paintings, the majority of them can be classified as Uighur merchant figures with Sogdian physical features (as proposed by Moriyasu), reflecting the general appearance of a merchant in the West Uighur Kingdom at the time. However, there are two exceptions worth noting. First, among the three merchant images depicted at the right foot of the central standing Buddha in the aforementioned *pradṇḍhi* scenes No. 14,¹⁷ the left figure in the upper row wears a significant white turban (Fig. 1). Interestingly, another section of the mural taken by the German expedition from the same cave, which features three merchant figures, is likely a fragment of another *pradṇḍhi* scene.¹⁸

¹¹ Yoshida 2019, p. 34.

¹² See Moriyasu 1991, 33–34; Moriyasu 2004, 36–38.

¹³ For the facsimile of these two scenes, see Le Coq 1913, Tafel 22 and 28.

¹⁴ Moriyasu 2015, pp. 424–425.

¹⁵ Moriyasu 2015, p. 425.

¹⁶ See Matsui 2014, p. 267.

¹⁷ Originally catalogued under IB 6889, along with another piece of wall painting from the same cave, this piece was lost during the Second World War.

¹⁸ Originally catalogued under IB 6905, this piece is now also housed in the Hermitage under the inventory number VD-813. For the recent facsimile, see Государственный Эрмитаж 2008, p. 454. See also Matsui 2015, pp. 284–285.

Among the three merchants, the left figure in the upper row also wears a white turban (**Fig. 2**). The distinctive white turbans of these two figures set them apart from the other merchants depicted in the scenes.

However, the turban was a distinctive attire of Turkic Muslims at the time from a Muslim perspective. In the Chapter “On the Chinese”, Marvazi states:¹⁹

The Chinese do not mix with the Turks, from whom they differ in most things, because the latter wear *jubbās* and turbans and not *qabās* and hats. (On the contrary) the Qitāy and Uighur mix with the Turks and have relations with them. They have relations and correspondence with the kings of Transoxiana, whereas the Chinese are different and do not allow strangers to enter their country and stay among them.

The so-called Turks here, as distinguished from the Uighurs by Marvazi, must refer to the Turkic Muslims in Central Asia. In addition, his reference to “the kings of Transoxiana” implies that these Turks may specifically denote Turkic Muslims under the western Qarakhanid state, centered in Transoxiana at the time.

On the other hand, manuscripts unearthed in Turfan prove that wearing a turban was also considered a symbolic feature of a Muslim in the eyes of Uighurs. The Uighur booklet Ch/U 7570, housed in Berlin, is a collection of Uighur Buddhist rhyming verses. Although titled “Insadi Sutra”,²⁰ it also contains, from page 48 onwards, another rhyming text, “Praise of the Holy Maitreya”. In order to highlight the greatness of the Buddha Maitreya, the text lists various non-Buddhist pagan figures and teachings in contrast. One section reads:²¹ *baši tastarlıy taşmanlar bayd(a)t urum ellär barıu yerlärin tapmatın baxşım sizingä ök inanyay*, “The Muslims (*taşman*) with turbans (on) their heads will just believe in you (Buddha Maitreya), my teacher, after failing to find the way to the countries of Bagdad and Rome (i.e., Asia Minor).

The term *taşman*, deriving from Persian *dānišmand*, refers to Islamic scholars, and thus to Muslims in general. From this section, we can infer that the symbolic attire of the Muslims in the eyes of Uighurs was the turban (*tastar*). Therefore, whether from the perspective of contemporary Muslim authors or of Uighurs, the two merchants depicted in the aforementioned wall paintings, both wearing a turban, must be identified as Muslim merchants rather than Uighur merchants.

As for Moriyasu’s claim that Muslim merchants did not make offerings to Buddhist temples, this was not always the case at the time. Here I can cite some counterexamples from Uighur texts. In Dunhuang, which borders the West Uighur Kingdom, a pilgrim named “iqbal sang” left five inscriptions in Uighur script at three different caves in the Yulin Grottoes. Prof. Matsui Dai has pointed out that the two words that make up this name originate from Persian *iqbāl* (“lucky”) and *sang* (“stone”) respectively.²² Therefore, this person must be a Turkic Muslim. One of the inscriptions he left in Cave 33 states: “We, *iqbal sang* and künčüsi, have

¹⁹ V. Minorsky (ed., tr., and comm.) 1942, p. 15.

²⁰ Tezcan 1974, p. 9. Regarding the name of this sutra, other scholars have proposed different readings, such as *avasti*, but no consensus has been reached yet, see Yakup 2015, pp. 181–184.

²¹ Tezcan 1974, p. 73; Yakup 2015, pp. 201, 212.

²² Matsui 2017, p. 65.

worshipped.”²³ It can thus be confirmed that this Turkic Muslim worshipped the Buddha statue in this cave. Additionally, in the inscriptions preserved at the White Pagoda in present-day Hohhot, there is also an inscription in Uighur script left by a traveler named Sulyman, whose name clearly derives from the common Muslim name “Sulayman”.²⁴ For merchants who traveled between different cultural regions and interacted with diverse populations, it was easier to integrate into local cultural customs and practices.

Of course, the scene, depicted in the wall paintings cited above, of Muslim merchants worshipping Buddha may not have actually occurred in the Buddhist caves of Bezeklik during the West Uighur era, but it nonetheless reveals the existence of Muslim merchants in West Uighur society at that time. At the very least, it indicates that some of the merchants Uighurs came into contact with were Muslims. This allows us to once again recall the Muslim population within the West Uighur Kingdom mentioned by al-Nadim in the early 10th century; they were likely Muslim merchants.

2. Shift of Mercantile Power on the Eastern Silk Road

In 1009, the Kaifeng Prefecture, capital of the Song dynasty, issued a public notice prohibiting brokers from arranging loans between citizens and Uighurs,²⁵ indicating that there were too many cases of high-interest loans being taken out from Uighur merchants within the capital city. The specific mention of Uighurs demonstrates the dominant position of Uighur merchants at the time. Various sources suggest that Uighur merchants not only controlled the trade between the two Uighur regimes and the central Chinese dynasties, but also managed cross-border trade and diplomatic missions on behalf of other regimes along the eastern Silk Road. Moriyasu has outlined the commercial network under control of Uighur merchants in the 9th and 10th centuries, which essentially covered the eastern part of the Eurasian continent.²⁶

The penetration of Muslim merchants into the east likely began in the 11th century. Right after their occupation of the Buddhist Kingdom of Khotan and the southern route of the Tarim Basin around 1007, the eastern khanate of the Muslim Qarakhanids began to use the name of Khotan to send tributary envoys to the central Chinese Song dynasty. According to Chinese literatures, the chief envoy was explicitly recorded as “Luo Siwen 羅廝溫, a Uighur”.²⁷ Qarakhanid literature, such as the aforementioned *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*, indicates that the Uighurs were regarded by the Muslims as pagans, so it would have been impossible for Muslims to refer to themselves as “a Uighur”.²⁸ Thus, this *Luo Siwen* was likely a Uighur merchant familiar with the trade route to central China via the Hexi Corridor. His name *Siwen* must be a phonetic transcription of the common Uighur title or name *sāngün*. During the first period after their conquest of Khotan, the

²³ Matsui 2017, p. 119.

²⁴ Bai and Matsui 2016, p. 31.

²⁵ *Xu Zizhi tongjian changbian* 72, p. 1631.

²⁶ Moriyasu 2015, pp. 419–422.

²⁷ *Xu Zizhi tongjian changbian* 71, p. 1598; *Songshi* 490, p. 14107.

²⁸ See Fu 2019, pp. 171–172.

Qarakhanids had to rely on Uighur merchants who were familiar with the routes as envoys and intermediaries for conducting tribute trade with the Song dynasty.

As the Qarakhanids consolidated their rule over the southern Tarim Basin, Muslim merchants from the Qarakhanid realm and other Islamic states further afield increasingly moved east in pursuit of profit. Later, political changes in the Hexi corridor provided them with more favorable opportunities. Following their conquest of the Ganzhou Uighurs in 1028, the Xi Xia (Tanguts) occupied the entire Hexi Corridor. The political advantages for the Uighur merchants in the Hexi Corridor disappeared from then on, allowing Muslim merchants to enter and trade in the Xi Xia territory on a relatively equal footing. The Xi Xia law code issued in the *Tiansheng* years (1149–1169) contained laws against the sale of prohibited items to envoys and merchants from other countries, which specifically mention *Dashi* (Tajik, i.e., Muslims) and *Xizhou* (Qocho, i.e., the West Uighurs) as representatives of envoys and merchants from other countries.²⁹ This indicates that the primary merchant groups engaged in trade within the Xi Xia territory at the time were Muslim merchants and Uighur merchants.

Due to the hostile relationship between the Xi Xia and the Song, merchants traveling to Song territory found it difficult to pass through the Hexi Corridor under the Xi Xia. As a result, the Qingtang route, which passed through the territories of Qingtang Qiang (Tsongkha) in present day Qinghai and eventually reached the Song border, emerged as a new route. This new route was more convenient for Muslim merchants following the southern route of the Tarim Basin, but more distant for the West Uighur merchants from the eastern Tianshan region. According to Chinese texts, a large number of Yutian (Khotan) and Uighur merchants gathered along the Qingtang route. The so-called Yutian merchants referred to Muslim merchants from the Qarakhanid realm. However, by the early 12th century at the latest, this route seems to have been monopolized by Muslim merchants. I hereby reveal clues to this change from the Chinese book *Dongjing Menghua lu* “A dream of splendors past in the eastern capital”.

Written by Meng Yuanlao during the Southern Song dynasty, the book records the author’s observations and experiences of his early life in Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song dynasty. Its sixth volume, titled “New Year’s Day court ceremony,” describes the appearance of envoys from various countries who came to Kaifeng to celebrate the first day of the New Year, including those from Liao (Khitans), Xi Xia, Gaoli (Goryeo), Jiaozhi, Huihe (Uighur), Yutian (Khotan, i.e., Qarakhanids), Srivijaya, and Nanman (the Southern Barbarians). Among these, “Huihe” was the old name for the Uighur people, and the Song people still used this name to refer to them.³⁰ Meng Yuanlao described the appearance of the Huihe envoys as follows:³¹ “The *Huihe* all had long beards and high set noses, wrapped their heads in cloth, and let their robes hang loosely.”

Meng Yuanlao’s description of wrapping heads in close and loose-fitting robes is consistent with the

²⁹ Shi, Nie and Bai 2000, pp. 284–285.

³⁰ For example, the Uighurs were sometimes referred to as Huihe and sometimes as Huihu in *Xu Zizi tongjian changbian*.

³¹ *Dongjing menghua lu*, pp. 516–517.

features of Turkic Muslims wearing a turban and a *jubba* (“long robe”), as cited from Marvazi above. As discussed in the previous section, the practice of wearing a turban was a distinctive Muslim feature in the eyes of Uighurs. Therefore, the Huihe recorded in *Dongjing menghua lu* seem to be Muslims, rather than Uighurs.

In addition, the text also records the arrangements made by the Song court for the lodging of envoys from various countries:³²

The Liao envoys stayed at the *Duting* post station, the Xia envoys at the *Duting* West Post station, the Gaoli envoys at the Tongwen Hall in Anzhou alley outside the Gate of Liang, the Huihe and Yutian envoys at the *Libin yuan* (guesthouse), and the envoys from other foreign countries at the *Zhanyun* Hall or the *Huaiyuan* Post Station.

Meng Yuanlao moved to Kaifeng in the second year of *Chongning* (1103) and fled the capital in the second year of *Jingkang* (1127). The scene from the “New Year’s Day court ceremony” which he described placed the Liao envoys in a position of honor and did not include the Jurchen-Jin envoys, indicating that this event must have occurred before the Jin conquest of the Liao “upper capital” Shangjing (1120).³³ At this time, “Yutian (Khotan)” was already under the control of the Muslim Qarakhanids. Among the envoys from other countries, only the Huihe envoys were housed together with the Yutian envoys at the *Libin yuan*, suggesting that the two groups of envoys shared similar cultures and had close ties. Among the foreign countries recorded in the same book as paying tribute to the Song dynasty, there is also the “Dashi,” which must refer to Muslim merchants who entered China via the sea route from the southeastern coastal ports, listed after the southern tributary states such as Srivijaya, Nanman, Chenla, and Dali.³⁴ Therefore, the “Huihu” mentioned by Meng Yuanlao were likely Muslim merchants from Central Asia who, along with envoys from Khotan, traveled via the southern route of the Tarim Basin under the control of the eastern Qarakhanids to pay tribute to the Song dynasty. Hence, they had close ties with the “Yutian” envoys.

Based on the above information, it can be concluded that, by the early 12th century, Muslim merchants may have been impersonating the so-called “Huihe” envoys officially received by the Song court. It is possible that after the Song overthrew the Qingtang Qiang (Tsongkha) regime in 1104,³⁵ the West Uighurs, who had been allied with the latter through marriage, lost their political influence over the Qingtang route. Subsequently, Muslim merchants traveling along the southern route of the Tarim Basin, who were closer to this route and in greater numbers, flooded in, thereby monopolizing the trade route which directly connected the Western Regions to Song territory.

Why were these Muslim merchants from Central Asia pretending to be Uighurs in order to conduct

³² *Dongjing menghua lu*, p. 517.

³³ It may have occurred before the Song planned to join forces with the Jin to attack the Liao, that is, before they sent envoys across the sea to the Jin in the third year of Chonghe (1118).

³⁴ *Dongjing menghua lu*, pp. 516–517.

³⁵ *Xu Zizhi tongjian changbian* 516, p. 12265.

tributary trade with the Song dynasty? After the Qarakhanids conquered Khotan, they adopted the name “Yutian (Khotan)”, when they sent envoys to the Song. In 1089, a previously unknown state *Miaoli* 邈黎 from the Western Regions, made its first tribute mission to the Song on the recommendation of Yutian. The Song officials, noting that this state had never paid tribute before, requested the emperor that the tribute trade conditions of Yutian be applied.³⁶ It can be inferred that when the Qarakhanids paid tribute to the Song for the first time, they must have obtained the same tribute trade conditions as the previous Buddhist Kingdom of Yutian. This must be the reason why they adopted the name of Yutian, which they had conquered. Among the various countries and tribes engaged in tribute trade, the Uighurs had the closest ties and were the most familiar group of merchants to the northern Song dynasty; thus, they undoubtedly enjoyed the most favorable trade conditions. It can thus be inferred that these Central Asian Muslim merchants used the name of the Uighurs in order to enjoy the same trade conditions granted to the Uighur merchants by the Song. In summary, by the early 12th century at the latest, Central Asian Muslim merchants had not only replaced Uighur merchants in the Song dynasty, but had also appropriated the name of the Uighurs. This is likely the earliest literary evidence of Muslim merchants being referred to by the name of Uighurs, including *Huihe*, *Huihu* or *Huihui*.

A similar case can be observed in northern China under the Jin. Hong Hao 洪皓, an envoy of the Southern Song, was detained by the Jin from 1129 to 1142. In *Songmo jiwen* 松漠紀聞, he recorded that the main merchant group in northern China at the time was the Uighurs and they “were the most devout followers of Buddhism”.³⁷ However, there are clues that Muslim merchants had already begun to infiltrate the Uighur merchant network in the Jin dynasty at that time. The Biography of Niange Hannu 粘割韓奴, contained in the *Jinshi*, records such an incident.³⁸ During the years of Dading (1161–1189), three Huihe Yixilan 回紇移習覽 from *Gusi eluduo* 骨斯訛魯朵 arrived at the Jin border. “Yixilan” is clearly the phonetic transcription of “Islam”, while “*Gusi eluduo*” the phonetic transcription of “Quz Ordu”, previously the capital of the eastern Qarakhanids, then occupied by the Qarakhitai. These details indicate that the three so-called “Huihe” travelers were actually Turkic Muslim merchants from Central Asia. Notably, they referred to themselves as “members of the Huihe *Zoukuo* 鄒括 tribe from their homeland.” Although the original meaning of the term *Zoukuo* is unclear, their self-identification as “Huihe” suggests that these Muslim merchants came to the Jin dynasty for trade under the name of the Uighurs.

What exactly did “Huihe” refer to in the context of the “Biography of Niange Hannu”? The records before and after this incident make it quite clear that it refers to the West Uighurs.³⁹ The fact that the Jin officials placed them among the Uighur population in Xianping Prefecture indicates that the Jin dynasty also

³⁶ *Xu Zizhi tongjian changbian* 429, pp. 10372–10373; *Songshi* 489, pp. 14087–14088.

³⁷ *Songmo jiwen*, p. 15.

³⁸ *Jinshi* 121, p. 2781.

³⁹ *Jinshi* 121, pp. 2781–2782.

accepted the self-identification of these Muslim merchants as Uighurs and treated them as Uighur merchants. It is reasonable to assume that there were already a certain number of Muslim merchants from Central Asia mingling among the Uighur merchants at that time. Although they came from different regimes and had different religious and cultural backgrounds, they, for the most part, shared the Turkic language, engaged in the same trade activities, and shared similar Central Asian oasis cultures, likely resulting in a relationship of both cooperation and competition. By this time, Chinese people under the Jin dynasty had probably already regarded both the West Uighurs and the Central Asian Turkic Muslim merchants as “Uighurs” (Huihe).

The above situation indicates that the 12th century was the period when Muslim merchants began to replace Uighur merchants along the eastern Silk Road. In the Hexi Corridor (under Xi Xia rule), they outnumbered Uighur merchants. In Song territory, they completely replaced Uighur merchants. Even in north China, under the Jin dynasty, where Uighurs were still the main merchant group, they had also infiltrated the networks of the latter.

3. Influence of Muslim Merchants in Turfan

Scholars generally agree that, under Mongol rule, Muslim merchants had completely replaced Uighur merchants and had thus become the dominant commercial force in central China, as well as along the eastern Silk Road. One significant indicator of this shift is that, by the 13th century, the Chinese began to use *Huihe*, *Huihu* and *Huihui*, variant forms of the term for Uighur, to specifically refer to Muslim merchants, at the same time that new terms, such as *Weiwu* and *Weiwer*, were used to denote the ethnic Uighurs. In this section, I would like to argue that Muslim merchants at this time also had significant influence in Uighur territory, centered on Turfan. The Uighur manuscript U 5266 in the Berlin collection pertains to a contract established by a merchant to sell red lapis lazuli on behalf of the owner. It was first noted by Yamada Nobuo and published in *Sammlung uigurischer Kontrakte* (SUK).⁴⁰ Moriyasu specifically examined this document and regarded it as evidence for the role of Uighur merchants in commerce during the Mongol era. However, I have a different view on the identity of the merchant who signed this contract. In order to discuss the details, I first translate the contract into English based on Moriyasu’s transcription and Japanese translation as follows:⁴¹

On the eighth day of the tenth month of the Year of the Dog, after traveling east and west for trade, I, S’DY, agreed with my partner Adaq Totoq to sell a three-*qian* (*baqir*) red lapis lazuli (*lal*) for 100 ingots of silver. If I receive 100 ingots of silver, I, S’DY, will give Adaq Totoq 50 ingots of silver. If I do not receive 100 ingots of silver, I will return this piece of ruby stone. Witnessed by Uruz. Witnessed by Somači. This is my signature, S’DY. I, Yaraq, asked S’DY and wrote this down.

⁴⁰ SUK vol. 2, pp. 172–173.

⁴¹ Moriyasu 2015, pp. 411–412.

The name of the person who made the contract appears three times, written in Uighur script as *S'DY* (Fig. 3). Previous scholars simply transcribed this name as *Sadī* without further investigation.⁴² Moriyasu explicitly regarded it as a Uighur personal name and used it as evidence to discuss the role of Uighur merchants in the gemstone trade at that time.⁴³ However, a thorough search of Turkic-derived personal names reveals no instance of *Sadī*, and the word itself cannot be analyzed from the perspective of Turkic etymology. I propose reading the name as *Šādī*, representing the Persian word *Šādī* (شادی), meaning “happiness”. It is a typical Muslim name, quite common among the *Huihui* (Muslim) people during the Mongol era, which is regularly transcribed in Chinese texts as *Sha di* 沙的.



Fig. 3

The contract states that this *Šādī* had been “traveling east and west for trade”, indicating that he was a Muslim merchant. He hired a local Uighur scribe named Yaraq to write the contract in Uighur script. Under the entry “*Huihui* stones” of *Nancun chuogeng lu* 南村輟耕錄, Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 records 19 types of gem stones valued during the Yuan time, including red lapis lazuli, which were collectively referred to as “*Huihui* stones”.⁴⁴ In the Chinese context of the Yuan era, *Huihui* specifically referred to Muslims, not Uighurs. It is worth noting that these gem stones also included stones like the *Jingzhou* stone from Xiangyang, which originated in south China, indicating that these gemstones were collectively referred to as “*Huihui* Stones” not because they all originated from the Islamic world, but because the *Huihui* (Muslim) merchants were the dominant players in the gemstone trade at the time. As late as the first half of the 12th century, the dominant players in the gemstone trade in China were still Uighur merchants. The majority of the merchants seen by the Song envoy Hong Hao in the Jin capital were Buddhist Uighurs. In *Songmo Jiwen*, he specifically noted that they were “particularly skilled at distinguishing precious stones.” Without their assistance, any Chinese or non-Chinese who were to sell precious stones would not be able to set high prices.⁴⁵ It is clear that, between the 12th and 13th centuries, Muslim merchants not only replaced Uighur merchants as the primary merchant group within the commercial networks of the eastern Silk Road, but also infiltrated the West Uighurs’ heartland in Turfan.

In the Uighur secular documents unearthed in Turfan, there are certain words and concepts from the Islamic world that have been borrowed into the Uighur language, confirming the close contact at that time between Muslim merchants and local Uighurs in their daily lives.⁴⁶ The most compelling evidence of the interaction is the new Persian and Arabic elements in contracts. When entering into a contract, the two parties and witnesses normally affixed their signatures or seals to the document as evidence of the agreement. In the

⁴² SUK vol. 2, pp. 172–173.

⁴³ Moriyasu 2015, p. 416.

⁴⁴ *Nancun chuogeng lu* 7, p. 76.

⁴⁵ *Songmo jiwen*, p. 15.

⁴⁶ For New Persian and Arabic loan words in Uighur, see Zieme 2005, pp. 285–295.

Uighur language, the signature or seal was originally denoted by the word *tamya* (“emblem, seal”), a pure Turkic word. However, after the 13th century, Uighur documents began to use the term *nišan*, borrowed from New Persian. Thus, the fundamental term for a transaction document shifted from Turkic to Persian, likely as a result of the influx of Muslim merchants into the region and their trade interactions with the local Uighur population.

When did Muslim merchants begin to dominate commerce in the Uighur territory centered on Turfan? I assume this probably occurred before the 13th century. By the first half of the 12th century, the Qarakhitai had established dominance in Central Asia, not only conquering the Qarakhanid territories, but also incorporating the West Uighur Kingdom as a vassal. Within their sphere of influence, the political barriers between the Islamic world of Central Asia and the Buddhist West Uighurs began to weaken, allowing Muslim Turks from Central Asia to enter the territory of the West Uighurs with relative freedom. In 1209, the West Uighur ruler killed the Qarakhitai governor and submitted to the Mongol Khanate. According to Juvayni, one of the Uighur envoys sent to Genghis Khan was named Umar Oγul, clearly a Turkic Muslim, indicating that the Muslim community had established close ties with the ruling class of the West Uighurs. In 1251, the year Mongke Khan ascended the throne, West Uighur ministers even incited their ruler to collaborate with the nobles of his country to assemble an army of 50,000 men in a plot to exploit the opportunity of Friday prayers at the mosque to lure and kill the Muslims in the capital city of Beshbaliq and its surroundings, and to loot their property. It is evident that, by the mid-13th century, there were already a significant number of Muslim merchants within the West Uighur territory and they had developed substantial conflicts of interest with the Uighur nobility.

Concluding Remark

In the early 11th century, the Muslim Qarakhanid dynasty conquered Khotan and the southern route in the Tarim Basin. This enabled Muslim merchants from the Qarakhanid territories and beyond to enter central China via the Hexi corridor, which was controlled by Uighur merchants. In 1028, the Xi Xia conquest of the Hexi Corridor marked the end of Uighur mercantile dominance over this route. Thereafter, Muslim merchants began traveling in large numbers to central China, utilizing the trade routes of Uighur merchants and mingling freely with them. They also deliberately claimed to be Uighur merchants, in order to gain benefits from tribute trade with the Chinese central dynasties. Perhaps for the sake of convenience in management, the Chinese central dynasties came to regard them as Uighur merchants and to regulate them the way they did Uighur merchants. This is likely why Muslim merchants were later referred to as *Huihe* or *Huihui*, the former or colloquial term for Uighurs, when they came to significantly outnumber the Uighurs in China.

As one of the earliest groups in the west to submit to the Mongol Khanate, the West Uighurs held a prominent status in the eyes of the Mongol rulers. Consequently, Uighur merchants experienced a revival of sorts in their activities within the Mongol Empire. They leveraged these political advantages to engage in

trade in central China and other regions under the Mongol Khanate. Greatly outnumbered by the Muslim merchants however, the Uighur merchants ultimately failed to reclaim their former dominance over the eastern Silk Road.

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