Notes on Some Chinese Loanwords in Old Turkic

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As is known, the Chinese loanwords are among the oldest borrowings in Turkic. Numerous Chinese loanwords occurring frequently in Old Turkic, especially in the Uigur texts, have so far been studied and identified as such by many scholars.

In this paper, I would like to make some comments on some of the Chinese loanwords occurring in the Old Turkic inscriptions in general and in the Uigur manuscripts in particular.

Since the main theme of this colloquium is “The Languages and Cultures of the Silk Roads”, I think it would be appropriate to begin with the words meaning “silk, silk fabric” occurring in the inscriptions.

1. Orkh. išgiti / äšgiti “a kind of embroidered Chinese silk brocade” and kutay “white silk girdle”

The first word occurs twice in the Orkhon inscriptions, once with initial /I/ sign and once without it: išg(i)ti kut(a)y “embroidered brocade and white silk girdle” (KT S 5), kinl(i)g (ä)šg[(i)tis]in, kīrg(a)gl(i)g kut(a)yin “their musk-scented silk brocade and bordered white silk girdle” (BK N 11).

The first word which occurs as äšgürti in MK has not yet been identified. According to Clauson it looks Tokharian (EDPT 358a). But the second word kutay has recently been identified by Choi as a Chinese loanword. According to him it comes from a Chinese compound, i.e. ACh. g’ieu “a kind of silk” = Sino-Ko. ku “white silk” and ACh. 帶 tai > M. tai, C tai “girdle, sash, belt” = Sino-J. tai id. (Karl. 962) = Sino-Ko. tai id. (Choi: CAJ 32:165). This identification seems to be correct.

Apart from išgiti / äšgiti and kutay there are several words meaning...
“silk” or “a kind of silk fabric” in the Old and Middle Turkic sources, e.g. 
agı “silk brocade; treasure” (Orch., Uig.), barčın “silk brocade” (MK, etc.), 
cixansı “embroidered Chinese silk” (MK), čuz “Chinese gold brocade, red 
and black” (MK, KB, etc.), xolıň or xulıň “silk of variegated colors” (MK), 
loxtay “red Chinese brocade” (MK), torko “silk, silk fabric” (Uig., MK, 
KB, etc.), etc. Of these, only cixansı, xolıň / xulıň and loxtay look Chinese 
and actually have been identified as such by Clauson and Brockelmann 
(EDPT: 409, 622b, 763b).

OT (Uigur) and MT torko “silk fabric” survives today in the following 
languages: Tuv. torgu, Khak. torgi, Alt., Kirg. torko, Kzk. torka.

The Turkic native word for “silk”, on the other hand, is yıpäk. It is 
derived from yıp, the palatalized form of OT yıp “cord, thread, string”, with 
the diminutive suffix [+Ak] and means “thin thread” originally. It first 
appears in the Middle Turkic sources: Taf. (Bor. 154) yıpäk “silk”, Tarj. 
(Hoš. 104) yıpäk id., CC ipäk, yibek (ypac, jibek) id., etc. This word 
survives in the following languages: Trk., Gag. ipek, Az. ipäk, Trkm. 
yüpäk, Nog. yibek, Bšk. yibäk, Tat. yifäk, Kzk. žibek, Uzb. ipäk, NUig. 
zıpäk, Kirg. jibek, Khak. čibek.

2. Orkh. yenčü /yinčü/, Uig. yinčü “pearl” < Ch. 真珠 chen-chu 
“genuine pearl” (Rad. III 339), zhenzhu (chen-chu G. 589, G. 2549)

This word first occurs in the Orkhon inscriptions as the name of the Syr-
Darya (Jaxartes) River: yenčü /yinčü üğüz. According to Radloff, it is a 
translation of the Chinese name chen-chu ho “the genuine pearl river” which 
occurs as such in the Chinese inscription on the Kara-Balgasun monument 
left by the Uigurs. As is known, the Chinese name of this river is itself a 
translation of yaxša arta, the Middle Persian name of that river.

Clauson thinks that the identity of the first syllable remains a mistery 
(EDPT 944b). As it is known, the first element of the compound chen-chu 
occur as čin “real, genuine” in Old Turkic whereas the first syllable of 
yenčü /yinčü “pearl” is yen lyn. The initial /y/ here, however, could be a 
substitution for an original /j/.

OT yenčü /yinčü “pearl” survives in the modern languages as follows: 
Trk., Az. inči, Trkm. hünči “beads”, Uzb., NUig. inju, East.Trk. yünči, 
yünči, ünči, Tat. enje (> Chuv. enje), Bšk. įnči, Kzk. inčič, Nog. inči, 
Krč.-Blk., Kum. inči, Kklp. hinči, Alt. yinčy “beads”, Tob. yinči, Tuv. činči,
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Kumd. čińči, Shor šinje, Khak. ninjì "pearl; beads", Kač nenjì.

This word passed from Turkic into Hungarian and Russian at an early date: Hung. gyöngy [jön], Rus. žemčug (жемчуг), dial. zémčuh (земчуг). These forms are important; for they enable us to reconstruct the original Turkic form of the word.

The Hungarian word was borrowing from Old Chuvash or Old Bulgarian Turkic. The original form of Hung. gyöngy was probably *jenjì while that of the Russian zemčug something like *jenčug (cf. Ukr. ženčug, Old Rus. ženčug' [женчугъ]). In other words, they both indicate that the vowel of the first syllable was /e/, and not /i/. The Khakas form ninjì and the Kač dialect nenjì, too, testify to this assumption. We may therefore conclude that the OT form of the word was yenčü with /e/, but it soon developed into /i/ in the palatal environment.

It is not easy to reconstruct the original Turkic form of the Russian žemčug. Because of its initial consonant, there seems to be no doubt that it was borrowed, like Hung. gyöngy, from Old Chuvash or a language very close to it. The /m/ at the end of the first syllable is in all likelihood secondary going back to an older *ženčug, a form which is actually attested in the old Russian sources (cf. Vasmer II: 46).

It is difficult to explain the velar /g/ at the end of the Russian žemčug. Perhaps the Kazakh form infjuw which probably goes back to an older *yinčug can be of some help in explaining the final velar of the Russian form. But in this case, we would have to assume that the Chinese word in question came into Turkic in at least three different forms; i.e. yenčü, *jenčü and *jenčug.

3. Orkh. t(e)nsi /tinsi “son of heaven” < Ch. 天子 t’ien-tsu “son of Heaven, i.e. the Chinese emperor” (Thomsen 1912)

This word first occurs three times as tinsi in the Tunyukuk inscription: y(e)nčä üg(ü)z(ü)g k(ä)čä tinsi oglı (a)yt(i)gma b(ä)ŋl(i)g (ä)k t(a)g(i)g (ä)rtü “Crossing over the Pearl River and passing by the (white)-spotted Āk mountain which is (also) called Tensi’s son ...” (T 44). tinsi oglı (a)yt(i)gma t(a)g (T 47). The phrase tinsi oglı also occurs superfluously on line 46. The word tinsi of the Tunyukuk inscription occurs however as t(ä)nsi in the first line of Irk Bitig: t(ä)nsi m(ä)n “I am Ten-si (i.e. the Chinese Emperor)” (Thomsen 1912: 196).

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Ramstedt wanted to see a reminiscence of the Prometheus myth in the phrase *tinsi oglı aytığma* “where the emperor’s son lies on” occurring in the Tunyukuk inscription. According to him the participants in the expedition of Alexander the Great could have found the place of the captivity of Prometheus in a mighty cave in the Hindukush mountains. And the reference in Tunyukuk is thus to Prometheus. Grönbech, on the other hand, read the word * YTGMa* as *aytığma* “named, called” and translated the phrase accordingly (Aalto 1960: 58). I myself accepted Grönbech’s reading and interpretation in my Orkhon Turkic grammar written in 1965 and published in 1968. I still hold the view that the mountains which are referred to here with the phrase *tinsi oglı aytığma* are the Tien-Shan or Tengri Khan mountains (Turkish *Tanrı dağları*) in Kirghizia, especially the snow-covered peak of this mountain range which is called Ala-Too “the Speckled Mountain” (= *bânylig Ak Tag*) in Kirghiz.

4. *s(ā)ŋūn, s(ā)ŋun* < Ch. 將軍 *tsiang-küen* (Gab.) *sâŋün* “General”, Pinyin *jiang-jun* (< G. 1212, 3276)

In Old Turkic this word occurs in two different forms which came into being as results of regressive and progressive assimilations: *sâŋün* occurring in Orkhon I, II, T, Tariat and *saŋun* occurring in Irk Bitig, in the Miran manuscript and in some Yenisei inscriptions.

We know that in Old Turkic there were some native terms for officers at lower ranks, e.g. *yüz başı* “the head of a military unit consisting of one hundred soldiers” (Tariat W 7), *beş yüz başı* “commander of a military unit consisting of five hundred soldiers” (Tariat W 6; occurs twice), *bîn başı* “major, the head of a military unit consisting of one thousand soldiers” (Tariat S 7; occurs twice), but there was not any native term for “general” commanding an army. In the Tariat inscription, however, the periphrastic term *beş bîn är başı*, i.e. “head of five thousand soldiers” seems to occur as the Turkic equivalent of the Chinese title *sâŋün: b(e)š bîn (ā)r b(a)şi’i tı̃b(a)ra s(ā)ŋūn y(ā)gl(ā)r* (W 7).

Even the Chinese title *t(a)ly s(ā)ŋ(ūn)* “great general” < Ch. ta-tsiang-küen* occurs several times in the Old Turkic runic texts: *liśùn t(a)ly s(ā)ŋūn b(a)şi[a]d[u] biś yûz (ā)ŋ k(ā)lti* “under the leadership of the great general Li-Tsüan five hundred men came” (S 11), *(a)ltun t(a)ly s(ā)ŋun* “the great general Altun” (Tun. IV 5-6). *(a)z sîpa t(a)ly s(ā)ŋūn* “great general Sîpa of
the Az (tribe)” (Tariat N 3).

The Chinese loanword *sāgūn* also has a plural form in -t in the Tariat inscription occurring there twice. As it happens plural forms of other titles ending in -n (tegin: tegit, tarkan: tarkat) the final -n drops: s(ā)ŋūt būŋa “the generals and Băngas” (N 2), [b]i[ŋa] s(ā)ŋūt “the Băngas and generals” (S 4).

5. Orkh. *sin* “tomb, grave”, Uig. *sin* < Ch. 寝 *ts’in* “the rear hall in an ancestral temple; tomb” (Gab.), Pinyin *qin* (ch’in G. 2091)

This word first occurs in the Tariat inscription left by the Uigurs: *sin* s(i)zdā “the tombs (of our ancestors) are in your possession” (South 5). In the same line we also have *sinl(ā)g* “graveyard, cemetery”, derived from *sin* with the suffix *{+IAg}: sinl(ā)gdā “at the graveyard (of our ancestors)”.

This word is the older form of Turkish *sinlā* “graveyard” occurring frequently in the 14th-century OAT texts.

The word *sin* occurs as *sin* in some Middle Turkic sources; İM (Kilisli) *sin* “tomb”, تلَ‫ lm* sinlag “cemetery” (EDPT: 832b), Muk *sin* “mezar”, sin- *ga “into the grave” (Yüce: 175), etc. But this back-vocalic form is probably due to a contamination with *sin* “human body, stature, height, memorial statue” (cf. Uig. *sin* *sinjök* “body and bones, skeleton”). On the other hand, this word is always written with the letter س *sin* in the OAT texts and it lives on as such in many Anatolian dialects (SDD 1229). In the village Uçhisar of Nevşehir *sin* is used in curses, e.g. *sinine sic*- “to shit on one’s grave” (from M. Ölmez). Cf. also *sinlik “mezarlık* listed there as a local word used in Gavurdağı, Cebelibereket - Seyhan (SDD 1232).

6. Orkh. *ti* “firmly, constantly, steadily, persistently”, Uig. (Gab.) *ti, tii* “immer, beständig, fest” < Ch. 定 (< d’ieng ~ tei (Gab.), Pinyin *ding* (ting G. 11248) < Ch. *ting* “fest”.

This adj.-adv. occurs rather rarely in the Uigur texts: *ti turkaru mēnjilikin* “with a continuous and long-lasting happiness” (TT III 110), kūşayürlär ārți birgärū kümāmīk *ti sizni körgū ücüün* “they all together were wishing to see you every day continuously” (TT III 96), etc.

Apart from the binaries *ti turkaru* and *kümāmīk* *ti* in the Uigur texts, I believe we also have ārțiŋjū *ti* “exceedingly, constantly” occurring in the
Bilge Kagan inscription: (S 14) ... bunča m(a)ti b(ā)gl(ā)r k(ā)ŋ(t)m k(ā)g(a)nk(a) ū (ā)r(i)ŋū (S 15) (ā)r(i)ŋū ti m(a)g kült “(When my father, the Turkish Bilge Kagan, sat on the throne)... this many loyal lords lauded (and praised) my father, the kagan, exceedingly and constantly” (the second ārtiŋū is superfluous), [kaŋm kagan t]ūrūk b(ā)gl(ā)r in bod(u)nin (ā)r(i)ŋū ti m(a)g itdi ögd[i] “my father, the kagan, lauded and praised the Turkish lords and tribes exceedingly and constantly” (S 15).

7. Uig. sin “body, stature”, MK si:n “human body, stature, height, external appearance” < ACh. sien > M. səן, C. səן “body”; Sino-J. ʂin (< sin) id. (Karl. 869); Sino-Ko. sin id. (Choi: CAJ 32: 166).

This word is generally regarded as a native term in Turkic. Recently, however, it has been claimed that it is a Chinese loanword (see above).

The word sin first appears in the Manichean and Buddhistic Uigur texts. It also occurs in Middle Turkic in the binaries bod sin “body, stature” and sin sündök “body and the bones”. It survives in quite a many modern languages: Tuv. sin “stature; mountain range”, Khak. sin “stature; mountain range; height”, Tat. sin “figure, stature, body, statue”, Bsk. hin id., Nog. sin “stature, figure”, sinli “tall, well-proportioned”, sintas “statue, stone statue” < sin taš, Kzk. șindi “like” < šinlîg, Chuv. și in pî-sî “body, figure, stature” < Tat. buy-sîn, NUig. sin “stature, figure, external appearance”, Uzb. sinli “tall, well-proportioned” etc.

Clauson seems to have mixed this word with the following above-mentioned sin “tomb” which he wrongly reads si:n (EDPT 832). The example sin “a memorial statue” taken from CC 226 belongs here and not to the item sin “tomb”. The author of Tarjuman turki wa “arabi, united the two homographic words in one item: sin “al-qabr wa’l-sanam” (both read sin by Hou. 6, 11). Clauson is mistaken by citing these two examples, i.e. sin and sin, only in the item “tomb”. The example sin “statue” taken from Tuhfe 21a 5, too, belongs to the item si:n meaning “body, stature”.

8. bi “knife, sharp edge, blade” < ACh. ʰpyi, M pî “dagger” = Sino-J. pi / hi, Sino-Ko. pi “dagger, spoon, arrowhead” (Choi: CAJ 32: 163)

The late Sir Gerard Clauson suggested that Uig. bi (Br. pî) might come from some word like p’i “to split” (EDPT 291b). Recently Choi has offered
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a more convincing etymology for Old Turkic bi. According to him, it comes from Ancient Chinese *p’ī “dagger” > M pi, Sino-Korean pi “dagger” (CAJ 32: 163; Karlg. 713).

In Old Turkic, bi is normally used in the binary bi bičgu “cutting instruments”. When used alone it usually means “blade, sharp edge of a knife or razor”, e.g. yläjgünün bi “the sharp edge of a razor” (TT VIII A. 1).

OT bi [bi:] seems to have survived today only in Yakut bi: “blade, edge of a knife”, e.g. bihax bi:tä “edge of a knife”. It also survives in the root of Middle Turkic bilä- “to sharpen”, Trkm. bi:le- id., Yak. bi:lä- id., Trk. bile-id., etc.

In Uigur we also have bičak “knife” derived from bi, not from the verb bič- “to cut” as Clauson thinks (EDPT 293b). The back-vocalic form bičak occurring in some Middle Turkic texts and modern languages must have come into existence as a result of contamination. OT bičak seems to have survived today only in Tuvinian bižek “knife” < *bišäk < bi:čak.

9. čan “a cup” < Chinese 亜 chan “a cup for wine or fat/oil” (EDPT: 424a).
   čanak “a wooden bowl or dish” (BT IX: 71,1; Ham. 1986: 34, 1-2), Pinyin zhan (chan G. 300)

This word is well attested in the Uigur texts, e.g. birär čan kuma yagıň “one cup a day of linseed oil” (Heil. I 64), bir čan bor iki čan suv birlä čokratıp “boil a cup of wine with two cups of water” (Heil. I 122), etc.

In Uigur, apart from čan we also have čanak “a wooden bowl or an earthenware bowl, dish”, a diminutive form, e.g. čanaklarän kizartmış kizıl bakır suv susup ičärlär “Mit ihren Holzschalen trinken sie glühend gemachtes Kupfer” (BT IX: 71), ekki kümüş čanak “two silver bowls” (Ham. 1986: 34. 1-2). This word is attested in many Middle Turkic sources. MK: čanak “a wooden cone, bowl”, Tafs. čanak “bowl”, Chag. čanak/čanag “bowl”, CC čanak “an earthenware bowl”, Khwar. čanak “bowl, dish”, Qaw. sanak id., etc. (EDPT 425b), Yel.Uig. čınak, čınak “a tea cup”, etc. It survives in some modern languages: Trkm. ča:nak “a wooden bowl or cup”, Trk. čanak “an earthenware pot or pan”, NUig. čanag “a cup, a cone” etc. The Turkmen form indicates that the */a/ of the first syllable is originally long.

Another diminutive noun derived from čan is Kirg. čanač “a leather cup

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for serving kumiss or ayran”. It is formed with the suffix {+Aĉ}.

10. MK (Oghuz) sindu/sindu “scissors” < ACh. tsiän > M tsien, C tsîn + ACh. tau > M tau, C tou “knife”, Sino-J. to: “knife, sword, blade”, Sino-Ko. to id. (Choi 1992:194)

Middle Turkic (Oghuz) sindu/sindo occurs today only in the Oghuz group of languages, Azerbaijani not included: OAT sindu, sindı, Anat. dial. sindi, Trkm. sindi. This word does not have a convincing etymology in Turkic. Brockelmann regarded sindu as a deverbal noun derived from sin- “to be broken” with the suffix {-DU} (1954:99). But this etymology cannot be correct for phonetic and semantic reasons: 1. The /i/ of the verb sin- is long originally (cf. Trkm. si:n-) whereas that of sindu is short (Trkm. sindı); 2. Trkm. si:n- is a reflexive/passive stem meaning “to be broken” whereas sindu is an agent noun.

11. Uig. yan “a pattern, model; kind, sort, manner” < Ch. 様 yang (Gab., EDPT: 940b, Giles 12854)

This word occurs frequently in the Uigur texts, in MK, KB and other Middle Turkic sources, i.e. Kipchak, Chagatay and OAT texts. It survives in modern languages: Alt., Bar. yan “soul, state of mind”, Kirg. jаn “gesture, movement”, Yak. saŋ “quality, character”, Tuv. чаŋ “(human) character, disposition”, Alt.Kum. d’an “habit, custom”, d’anда- “to believe, to contract a habit”, Kir. jаŋ “gesture, movement”, jаŋда- “to make or use a gestures or gestures”, etc.

The same word is found also in Mongolian: jаŋ “character, nature; disposition, temperament; custom, habit, conduct”, Khal. žan id. According to Doerfer, the word yan passed from Turkic into Mongolian where it has an initial /ʃ/, and from Mongolian into Manchu-Tungus (TMEN IV: 202 ff., Tungusica: 115).

Apart from Kirg. jаŋда- (< yan+ла- ) mentioned above, the Chinese loanword yan have the following derivatives in Turkic: Chag., Tuhf. yanla “like” (< yan+la), and Uig., MK, Chag. yanlıg id. The latter seems to have survived today in the following languages: Tuv. çanlıg “having the character of”, Uzb. yanglıg “like”, Yel.Uig. yanlıg, yannıg “having the form of, like”, id., and Trkm. ya:lı “like” < yanlıg.

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