

HISTORY OF UZBEK AND UYGHUR LITERATURE

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This article explores the historical development of Uzbek and Uyghur literature as two interconnected branches of Turkic cultural heritage. By tracing their origins from ancient Turkic inscriptions to the flourishing of classical poetry and the transformations of the modern era, the study highlights the common roots and distinctive features of both literatures. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which literature has functioned as a means of cultural continuity, identity formation, and resistance against external domination. The literatures of the Uzbek and Uyghur peoples occupy an important place within the broader framework of Turkic cultural history. Emerging from shared linguistic and cultural traditions, both literatures have evolved through a series of historical epochs, reflecting religious, philosophical, and political changes in Central Asia. They have preserved collective memory, transmitted ethical values, and served as powerful tools of identity construction.

While Uzbek literature is more closely associated with the legacy of Chagatai literature and the cultural flowering of the Timurid Renaissance, Uyghur literature demonstrates a strong reliance on folk traditions, oral storytelling, and didactic writings. Despite these differences, their parallel trajectories reveal common historical foundations and enduring ties.

Early Origins and Common Heritage The earliest evidence of Turkic literary expression can be found in the Orkhon–Enisei inscriptions (8th century), which embody the themes of statehood, loyalty, and heroic struggle. Later, the Uyghur script and Buddhist texts expanded the intellectual horizons of Turkic literature.

Two seminal works stand at the heart of both Uzbek and Uyghur literary heritage:

- *Qutadghu Bilig* (1069–70) by Yusuf Khass Hajib, a didactic poem blending Turkic wisdom with Islamic moral philosophy.
- *Divanu Lughat al-Turk* (1072–74) by Mahmud al-Kashgari, which not only systematized Turkic languages but also preserved proverbs, poems, and ethnographic data.

These texts reflect a shared literary beginning, bridging oral traditions with written scholarship and setting the foundation for later literary developments.

The Classical Era

The classical period marks the crystallization of Uzbek literature and the solidification of Uyghur literary identity.

- In Uzbek literature, Alisher Navoi (1441–1501) transformed Chagatai Turkish into a prestigious literary language, producing lyrical and didactic masterpieces such as *Khamsa* and *Divans*. His vision of language as a tool of cultural dignity had a long-lasting impact. Other figures like Zahiriddin Babur contributed with autobiographical prose (*Baburnama*) and poetry that combined literary elegance with historical depth.
- In Uyghur literature, classical traditions flourished in religious-didactic works, love epics, and folklore-based poetry. Oral epics such as *Tahir and Zohra* or *Ashiq Gharib* preserved social ideals, while mystical poetry expressed spiritual aspirations.

Both literatures shared the influence of Sufism, Persian poetics, and Islamic philosophy, while simultaneously reinforcing Turkic linguistic identity.

The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The 19th century brought profound changes as Central Asia experienced imperial expansion and colonial control. Literature became a platform for reform and national consciousness.

- In Uzbekistan, the *Jadid* movement promoted modern education and intellectual renewal. Figures like Mahmudhoja Behbudi, Abdurauf Fitrat, and Cho‘lpon combined artistic creativity with social critique. Their works emphasized freedom, progress, and cultural revival, often at the cost of political persecution.
- Uyghur literature experienced a parallel awakening. Ibrahim Mutii, Lutpulla Mutellip, and Abdurrehim Ötkür articulated themes of identity, justice, and cultural preservation. Their writings combined lyrical sensitivity with political engagement, reflecting the Uyghurs’ struggle to safeguard their heritage. Literature of the Uighurs in Kazakhstan, having common roots with Uighur literature of Eastern Turkestan (Xinjiang (East Turkistan)-Uighur Autonomous Region of China), has evolved by its own historical way. It has been influenced by all social and political perturbations in Soviet society from the first five-year plans up to perestroika. The mass repressions of the late 1930s adversely affected it. The best sons of the people like writers A. Mukhammadi, N. Israyilov, N.Niyazy, A.Mushrapilov, M.Iminov, M.Adilov and others were killed that time.

Based on rich oral material, democratic and aesthetic traditions of Uighur classical literature as well as on literary traditions of other Turkic peoples, Uighur literature appeared as an important aspect of cultural development of the Uighurs. Fundamentals

of Uighur classical literature were laid by Makhmut Qashqari (“Divan lugat at-turk” – “Dictionary of the Turkic peoples”) and by Yusup Khas-Khajip Balasaghuni (“Qutatqu bilik” – “Beneficial lore”).

Makhmut Qashqari in his “Divan lugat at-turk” – (“Dictionary of the Turkic peoples”) shows many examples of Uighur folklore of the 11th century.

Didactic poem “Qutadgu bilik” – (“Beneficial knowledge”) by Yusup Khas-Khajip Balasaghuni appeared as one of the earliest manuscripts of Uighur literature. In his work, poet, thinker, scholar Yusup Balasaguni discusses meaning and significance of human life; he determines responsibilities and behavioral norms within a society. Along with that, “Qutadgu bilik” gives plentiful of information on social, economic and political relations in the Qarakhanid state.

Doubtless, the works by Makhmut Qashqari and Yusup Khas-Khajip Balasaghuni had a great impact on evolution of all Turkic peoples.

Poem “Khibat-ul Khaqayiq” by Akhmet Yugnaki written in the 12th century also has great importance for development of Uighur literature. It is devoted to moral problems: issues on the struggle between the Goodness and the Evil; generosity and stinginess; modesty and conceit. This poem was widely spread and popular across Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

Literary monument “Qisass-ul-anbiya” (“Story about the Saints”) by Nasreddin Rabguzi emerges as an important source for studying Uighur poetry of the 13th century. Approximately in the late 13th – the beginning of the 14th centuries in Turpan, an epic work “Oguz-nama” by unknown author came into the world and played an important role in development of Uighur literature.

According to Dr. Murat Khamrayev, evolution of Uighur literature could be divided into two large periods: the 10-15th centuries and the 16-19th centuries. Direct descendant from Yusup Balasaguni, Makhut Qashqari and Akhmet Yugnaki, Uighur literature developed further along with literatures of Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

Development of Uighur literature was significantly influenced by a prominent Central Asian poet Alisher Navoi who, according to Mirza Duglat, “was a descendant from Uighur bakhshas, i.e. Uighur secretaries-clerks who wrote some official papers”¹¹. Influence of this poet could be traced in works of Zaleli, Novbati, Khirkati, A.Nazari, B.Nazyma, M.Sairami and others.

A Qashqar poet Khirkati (1634-1724) and his works left a considerable trace in history of Uighur literature. In his poem “Love and labor” (1670) which expresses his outlook and attitude towards people, the author develops a theory that a man has all his/her virtues owing to labor.

Zaleli, a remarkable Uighur poet who lived in the 1st half of the 18th century, created a number of works, which are distinguished by high-level artistry and musicality and are imbued with righteous ideas of humanism and love to Motherland.

Novbati, a well-known poet and a contemporary of Zaleli, is a part of Uighur literature who glorified humanism and justice.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s Uighur literature was enriched by works of talented poets such as Shakrakhun, Arip, Khislat Qashqari. In the 1st half of the 19th century, development of the literature was influenced by works of such poets as Abduraim Nizari, Garibi, Ziyai, and Saburi.

In the second half of the 19th century important political events took place and liberation movement of the Uighur people against the Chinese occupation affected evolution of Uighur literature at that time.

Poets such as Sadyr Palvan, Bilal Nazym, Seit-Mukhammet Kashi, Molla Shakir emerged in the literature of that period. Their works are imbued with profound sympathy with people. They exposed vices of their reality, and called to struggle for liberation from colonial and feudal oppression.¹² The awakening of ethnic self-consciousness of the Uighur people was reflected in their works.

Compositions of Bilal Nazym occupy a special place in Uighur literature. After completing his education at a medrese, Bilal Nazym collected and studied folklore of the Uighurs. Multi-talented poet composed music to his own verses and, playing musical instruments, sang them himself. Bilal Nazym together with his brother Jalaliddin participated in uprising in 1864-1867. Being a participant of the events, Bilal Nazym wrote a book “Kitab-gazat-dar Chin” (“War against Chinese oppression”) in which, using religious terminology, he gives an account of history of Uighur national liberation movement against Qin occupants. In his work “Chanmoza Yusupkhan” Bilal Nazym boldly unmasks greed and treachery of Muslim clergy, and his “Nazugum khaqqida kissa” (“Legend about Nazugum”), a deep innovatory composition, appears as one of the first prose works of Uighur classical literature.

This period thus represents a moment of convergence, where Uzbek and Uyghur intellectuals alike confronted external domination while fostering national consciousness through literature.

Contemporary Developments

In the second half of the 20th century and into the present, Uzbek and Uyghur literatures have continued to evolve under complex socio-political circumstances.

- Uzbek literature features authors such as O‘tkir Hoshimov, Erkin Vohidov, and Abdulla Oripov, whose works explore themes of morality, patriotism, and

philosophical reflection. Contemporary writers increasingly experiment with modern genres while maintaining links to classical traditions.

- Uyghur literature, though subject to political restrictions, remains vibrant. Figures such as Abdurehim Heyit (poet and musician) and Zordun Sabir (novelist) explore memory, cultural survival, and the meaning of identity under pressure. Folklore, song, and modern poetry coexist, preserving continuity with older traditions.

The histories of Uzbek and Uyghur literature reveal both shared origins and unique trajectories. From ancient inscriptions and classical masterpieces to modern novels and poetry, these literatures embody the resilience and creativity of their peoples. They serve as cultural archives, preserving traditions and expressing aspirations for freedom and dignity. In a global context, Uzbek and Uyghur literatures enrich world literature by offering perspectives rooted in Central Asian experiences, blending the universal and the particular. Their continued vitality demonstrates the enduring power of literature to sustain identity, resist erasure, and articulate the human condition.

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