On the Braille Script

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Languages are the means by which human beings communicate, exchange ideas, and understand each other. With the development of human society, the written languages gradually evolved from oral languages. With the advent of writing, human beings have made great strides, which increased people’s expectation for social equality as well as social status improvement of individuals. In other words, people with disabilities need to interact and communicate with each others in some way via written languages. First in developed countries, and then later on in underdeveloped countries, two different writing scripts gradually formed: one for ordinary people and the other for visually impaired people. Meanwhile, sign languages emerged for deaf and mute people. This way, visually impaired people, just like the ordinary members of the society, have the opportunity to interact, to have access to a normal education, to work in a unique way in society.

In 1825, at the age of 16, Louis Braille (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-Braille) invented the first Braille script to enable the blind people to read, write, and communicate in writing. It is an alphabet consisting of 6 dots in 64 different forms, based on which the Braille scripts of various languages were created. In 1850, the French Academy of Pedagogy officially designated the Braille Script, which was created as the language of the blind, in order to commemorate his significant contribution. Since then, the Braille script has been introduced to various languages, and the blind people have had the opportunity to communicate via the script with ordinary people in the society.
The world's first school for the blind people was founded in Paris in 1784, long before Louis Braille invented the Braille script. The second was founded in 1790 in Liverpool, England. In 1801, a third school was established in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. The School of the blind was founded in 1804 in Vienna, Austria and in 1806 in Berlin, Germany. Currently, there are more than 43 million blind people around the world, more than 90% of whom live in poor countries in Asia and Africa.

In the People's Republic of China in 1952, the Chinese version of the Braille script was created. In 1953, the Ministry of Education of China announced that it would be adopted nation wide. On December 3, 1953, the first printing house for the blind, the Blind Welfare Publishing House was founded in the People's Republic of China. In 2018, the Ministry of Education of China, Chinese National Language and Literature Working Committee, and the Chinese National Association of the Handicapped jointly launched the "Language Standardization" guide. Although this is an improved version of the Braille script, it is very different from the previous version. Since the introduction of the Chinese version of the Braille script to those Chinese people that are blind, they have made some progress and found themselves in a better position in the society.

China is home to more than 6.7 million blind people and about 9 million visually impaired people. What exact portion of that are Uyghurs is unknown. In China, the disabled or the blind are not provided with sufficient care or legal protection from the state. The plight of the so-called "minorities" in China, especially the Uyghurs, is an unimaginable tragedy. The first school for the blind and deaf in Urumqi was founded in 1958. The fact that the students were admitted to the school and started their studies was recorded in some documents, but their ethnicities were not mentioned.

Since the 1980’s, Chinese governmental and educational organizations have conducted some investigations on the implementation and use of the Braille script in seven ethnic groups, including Uyghur, Mongol, Tibetan, Kazakh, and Korean. It turned out, only one government-run school for the blind ethnic Korean people was founded in Jilin Province, and there was no school for the blind
in Lhasa, Tibet other than a Germany-funded school, which was run by German teachers. They taught three Braille scripts: English script, Chinese script approved by Chinese government, and Tibetan script, which was developed by German researchers.

In 1983, the Ethnic Affairs Committee and Ethnic Language and Literature Work Committee together with City School for the Blind, Deaf and Mute, developed a series of "Drafts of Uyghur Language for the Blind" (Preliminary Experimental Version) in Ürümchi. The project was led by Ms. Gulbostan Ghopur and the initial draft for 32-point Uyghur Braille script was developed by comparing the characteristics of the Uyghur and English languages. Although the draft was approved in the beginning, the official version was never allowed later by the government. Professors from different universities in East Turkestan conducted some research on this project, but the results have not been forthcoming due to the Chinese government's relevant policies towards it. Among the participating intellectuals is Ms. Patem Ahmed from Normal University in Ürümchi.

In 2003, Primary and Secondary School Textbook Inspection Committee in Ürümchi approved the "Uyghur Braille Script Experimental Curriculum" prepared by Ms. Gulbostan Ghopur and published it at the Education Publishing House in Ürümchi to conduct full-time teaching in Uyghur Braille Script Schools. Unfortunately, this type of teaching was soon discontinued. Currently, education in Chinese Braille Script is being implemented in the East Turkestan.

On November 15, 2005, for the first time in history, a map of East Turkestan (so-called Xinjiang in China), printed in Braille Script, was introduced at the Ürümchi City School for the Blind.

The School for the Blind was founded by Germans in 1998 in Lhasa, Tibet. The visas of the teachers working there for 19 years were not extended by the Chinese government. As a result, German personnel were forced to return and the school was shut down. In other words, the Chinese government did not allow such a school to continue.

In 2006, according to a survey conducted on the disabled people in China, there were 12.33 million people with disabilities, including blindness, in the country. Among that, 1.7 million were from minority ethnic groups, but the number from Uyghur ethnicity was not disclosed. Since 1963, in our homeland, a lot of work on the education of the blind and disabled has been done in accordance with the policies of the Chinese state. Despite the efforts on education for the blind and seeing it as a special education, the work on the Uyghur version of the Braille Script was started and abandoned not long after, leading to no results. Later, especially after 2015, this type of work was
hampered by the Chinese state's policy of assimilating the Uyghur language and pushing it out of normal use in social life. In such a political and social context, it is impossible for Uyghur Braille Script to emerge and to be used for education of the blind.

Given this situation, our linguists and intellectuals living abroad, our organizations such as the World Uyghur Congress and the Uyghur Academy, continue to seek to fill in the blanks in this regard for our nation. Although there is no clear statistics on the number of our blind brothers and sisters abroad, it is up to the Uyghurs to create a script for the blind to preserve the Uyghur language, which is seriously endangered, and to ensure that in the future our blind brothers and sisters in our homeland can have a normal education. Creating and improving it is one of the most important tasks our intellectuals and organizations have to deal with.

Harris Mowbray (https://harrismowbray.com), a passionate American University Washington, DC (https://www.american.edu) student who has creatively compiled Braille for more than 80 different languages, including Uyghur, by comparing the Braille languages of the world's minorities with those of the world's majorities. With the efforts of Mr. Mowbray and the research team of Uyghur researchers organized for this work, we had been started this work in early 2021. The experts and staff of the team, after thoroughly examining and analyzing the history of the Chinese state and the origin of the Braille language in the country and the country, as well as the obstacles to the emergence of the Uyghur Braille language in the East Turkestan, created the Uyghur Braille script in the works of Mr. Harris Mowbray. In this regard, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to Mr. Harris Mowbray, who has contributed to the emergence of the Uyghur Braille, and to all members of the research team.

Harris Mowbray is a undergraduate student of International Relations at American University in the District of Columbia. He is very interested in computer programming and linguistics and is keen to use his skills to help the development of minority languages around the world. He is currently collaborating with the Osage tribe from Native Americans by using computer technology to help preserve their language, which is on the verge of extinction. Since the beginning of 2021, Harris has been working independently to create Braille Scripts for languages that have not developed it yet.

Note: We have been able to contact neither the Chinese state and its relevant organizations nor the Education Bureau in East Turkestan and other agencies that may be related to the Braille languages, education for the blind to get specific information in this regard. Our calls and emails were not answered. Given this difficult situation, this article is about the introduction of Braille Scripts in the
Chinese state as well as in East Turkestan and their development and current situation. It is based on documents, scholarly articles, survey reports, and fact-finding statistics on blindness published by Chinese National Ethnic Work Committee, Chinese Ministry of Education, Regional Education Bureau, Special Education Department, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Academy of Social Sciences and Universities in East Turkestan.

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In Germany

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