In 1931, Chinese and Russian revolutionaries in the Soviet Union joined hands to devise the Chinese Latin Alphabet (Latinxua sinwenz, CLA), the mother of contemporary pinyin. While the significance of the CLA in the history of Chinese language and script reforms is beyond doubt, its exact kinship to pinyin remains murky, for the CLA was markedly different from pinyin not only in its ideological make-up, but also in its letter-composition. Yuyan 言語 [language], for instance, was written as yyan in the CLA in the 1930s or Ladinghua 拉丁化 [Latinization] was written as latinxua. The 'y' of pinyin, in other words, was originally written with a 'j'; 'h' was written with an 'x'; and 'u' or 'ü' with a 'y'. Trivial as it may seem, an archaeology of these letters offers a history unlike the ones written before.

During the following decade, intellectuals from the Ottoman, Russian, and Iranian Empires were in conversation with each other regarding the future of the script, and for them, even more pressing than telegraphic correspondence was the question of typography. The industrialization of the printing press in the nineteenth century, exemplified by the global dissemination of the movable metal type, imposed a similar epistemology of ‘separate letters’ for typesetting. Because of the number of glyphs and the various ways of combining letters, an Arabic-lettered type case had more than 300 types, which, depending on the kind of calligraphy used for printing (e.g., ta’liq), the number could surpass 2000. The reformers used the exorbitant size of type cases to justify their call for separate letters, which, they argued, would increase efficiency and optimize labor not only in typesetting, but also in reading. In the eyes of the reformers who were supported by Latin, Cyrillic, Greek, Armenian, and Georgian alphabets, the future of a productive knowledge economy lay in separate letters.

The first proposals for a new alphabet in the Muslim world were not based on the Latin alphabet (fig.1). Some argued for a reformed Arabic script written in separate letters, while others proposed the use of Armenian letters or a combination of Cyrillic and Arabic letters. It was only in 1910s, in the aftermath of the Russian imperial reforms of 1905 and the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, that the Latin alphabet emerged as a serious contender to other script proposals. The Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War in 1918 strengthened the position of the Latin alphabet even further, as many reformers saw it as the embodiment of material and mental progress during national reconstruction. Amid incoherent debates in the post-imperial Russian and Ottoman space, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan was the first to officially Latinize its Arabic script in 1912.

Revolutionary, Dunganese, and Chinese Latin alphabet

The modernist values of efficiency, productivity, and progress that the Latin alphabet supposedly embodied turned out to be critical for the Bolsheviks, who promised a new socialist civilization based on the same principles. Indeed, during the 1920s, socialist thinkers in the USSR were preoccupied with the so-called Scientific Organization of Labor (nauchnoia organizatsiia truda), an industrialist craze introduced to the Soviet Union by Aleksей Гончаров (1882–1939). An aficionado of American Taylorism, Gostev established dozens of institutes and utilized cutting-edge technologies to optimize bodily movements and increase labor productivity. His philosophy of efficiency extended into the realm of writing and writing as well, which he claimed could also be measured and optimized in order to achieve ultimate mental productivity.

The Latinization Movement in Azerbaijan was coming to fruition in the midst of these debates. Even Lenin himself took a personal interest, allegedly claiming that ‘Latinization [was] the Great Revolution in the East!’ After all, eyes, hands, fingers, typewriters, printing presses, and telegraph operators all functioned within a network of humans and machines, linked via the script. The Latin alphabet seemed to offer the remedy that the socialists were searching for all along—in fact, many claimed that even the Cyrillic alphabet could be Latinized for an internationalist socialist civilization! While the Latinization of the Cyrillic alphabet never took place, the revolutionaries reached a peak in 1926 with the First Turology Congress in Baku, where more than a hundred participants representing various nationalities discussed the future of the alphabet in the world. After heated discussions, the Latin alphabet was selected as the new medium of intellectual production not only in the Turk-Musulm world under the USSR, but also in the rest of the non-Western world where socialism offered a strong alternative to extant political and economic conditions. Thus, in 1928, the Unified New Turk Alphabet (UNTA) was devised by the socialist internationalists to Latinize the Arabic script across the region. In the same year, the UNTA was exported to non-Turkic and non-Russian lands as well, forming the material basis of not only Latinized Kurdish, Persian, and Mongolian alphabets, but also of the first Chinese Latin Alphabet.

But before the Chinese Latin Alphabet, came the ‘New Dunganese Alphabet’ [nowy dunganeskii alfavit]. The Dungans were Chinese Muslims who had emigrated to Central Asia during the turmoil in Xinjiang in the 1870s, and settled in present-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. While it remained an unexplored subject, the Chinese Muslims had been using the Arabic alphabet to write their language in Mandarins, possibly since the thirteenth century, when the Mongol rulers invited Persian and Arabic scholars to their court to bring it closer to Dunganese, a dialect of Mandarin. With the wave of Latinization, however, the Dungan revolutionaries decided to adopt the Cyrillic script with a ‘j’ in the CLA, as in yyan 姜 or why ‘h’ written with an ‘x’; or ‘u’ written with a ‘y’? The response lies in the Latinization of the Arabic alphabet itself, because the ‘j’ of the CLA carried a secret Arabic yu ’; ‘a secret ha’; and ‘ü’ a secret ‘ö’? The response lies in the Latinization of the Arabic alphabet itself, because the ‘j’ of the CLA carried a secret Arabic ya ’; ‘a secret ha’; and ‘ü’ a secret ‘ö’? The response lies in the Latinization of the Arabic alphabet itself, because the ‘j’ of the CLA carried a secret Arabic ya ’; ‘a secret ha’; and ‘ü’ a secret ‘ö’?

Pinyin, an imperial lingua franca

When the Chinese and Russian revolutionaries began working on the Chinese Latin Alphabet during the same years, they already had the New Dunganese Alphabet as a template to work with, and they by and large kept its letters for the CLA. The origins of the CLA’s quixotic letters that I have noted at the beginning of this essay, may thus be revealed. Why was ‘y’ of pinyin written with a ‘j’? Or why was ‘h’ written with an ‘x’? or ‘u’ written with a ‘y’? The response lies in the Latinization of the Arabic alphabet itself, because the ‘j’ of the CLA carried a secret Arabic ya ’; ‘a secret ha’; and ‘ü’ a secret ‘ö’? The response lies in the Latinization of the Arabic alphabet itself, because the ‘j’ of the CLA carried a secret Arabic ya ’; ‘a secret ha’; and ‘ü’ a secret ‘ö’?

The Latinization of the Dunganese alphabet in the 1930s; or Ladinghua 拉丁化 [Latinization] was written as latinxua. Fig. 4: The New Dunganese Alphabet (fig.4). Although the significance of the CLA in the history of China and script reforms is beyond doubt, its exact kinship to pinyin remains murky, for the CLA was markedly different from pinyin not only in its ideological make-up, but also in its letter-composition. Yuyan 言語 [language], for instance, was written as yyan in the CLA in the 1930s or Ladinghua 拉丁化 [Latinization] was written as latinxua. The ‘y’ of pinyin, in other words, was originally written with a ‘j’; ‘h’ was written with an ‘x’; and ‘u’ or ‘ü’ with a ‘y’. Trivial as it may seem, an archaeology of these letters offers a history unlike the ones written before. The modernist values of efficiency, productivity, and progress that the Latin alphabet supposedly embodied turned out to be critical for the Bolsheviks, who promised a new socialist civilization based on the same principles. Indeed, during the 1920s, socialist thinkers in the USSR were preoccupied with the so-called Scientific Organization of Labor (nauchnoia organizatsiia truda), an industrialist craze introduced to the Soviet Union by Aleksей Гончаров (1882–1939). An aficionado of American Taylorism, Gostev established dozens of institutes and utilized cutting-edge technologies to optimize bodily movements and increase labor productivity. His philosophy of efficiency extended into the realm of writing and writing as well, which he claimed could also be measured and optimized in order to achieve ultimate mental productivity. The Latinization Movement in Azerbaijan was coming to fruition in the midst of these debates. Even Lenin himself took a personal interest, allegedly claiming that ‘Latinization [was] the Great Revolution in the East!’ After all, eyes, hands, fingers, typewriters, printing presses, and telegraph operators all functioned within a network of humans and machines, linked via the script. The Latin alphabet seemed to offer the remedy that the socialists were searching for all along—in fact, many claimed that even the Cyrillic alphabet could be Latinized for an internationalist socialist civilization! While the Latinization of the Cyrillic alphabet never took place, the revolutionaries reached a peak in 1926 with the First Turology Congress in Baku, where more than a hundred participants representing various nationalities discussed the future of the alphabet in the world. After heated discussions, the Latin alphabet was selected as the new medium of intellectual production not only in the Turk-Musulm world under the USSR, but also in the rest of the non-Western world where socialism offered a strong alternative to extant political and economic conditions. Thus, in 1928, the Unified New Turk Alphabet (UNTA) was devised by the socialist internationalists to Latinize the Arabic script across the region. In the same year, the UNTA was exported to non-Turkic and non-Russian lands as well, forming the material basis of not only Latinized Kurdish, Persian, and Mongolian alphabets, but also of the first Chinese Latin Alphabet. But before the Chinese Latin Alphabet, came the ‘New Dunganese Alphabet’ [nowy dunganeskii alfavit]. The Dungans were Chinese Muslims who had emigrated to Central Asia during the turmoil in Xinjiang in the 1870s, and settled in present-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. While it remained an unexplored subject, the Chinese Muslims had been using the Arabic alphabet to write their language in Mandarins, possibly since the thirteenth century, when the Mongol rulers invited Persian and Arabic scholars to their court to bring it closer to Dunganese, a dialect of Mandarin. With the wave of Latinization, however, the Dungan revolutionaries decided to adopt the Cyrillic script with a ‘j’ in the CLA, as in yyan 姜 or why ‘h’ written with an ‘x’; or ‘u’ written with a ‘y’? The response lies in the Latinization of the Arabic alphabet itself, because the ‘j’ of the CLA carried a secret Arabic ya ’; ‘a secret ha’; and ‘ü’ a secret ‘ö’? The response lies in the Latinization of the Arabic alphabet itself, because the ‘j’ of the CLA carried a secret Arabic ya ’; ‘a secret ha’; and ‘ü’ a secret ‘ö’?