

WRITING AGAINST OBLIVION

*Culture and Language as Means
of Oppression and of Resilience
in the Xinjiang Region*

SVENSKA P·E·N

FÖRSVARAR DET FRIA ORDET

GRUNDAT 1922



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INTRODUCTION

Starting in 2017, a growing number of articles and reports concerned with the oppression in the far-west region of Xinjiang began to spread, raising international awareness of the alarming persecution of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the region. Leaked documents have repeatedly confirmed the oppressive nature of Xi Jinping's leadership, manifested in the widespread eradication of Muslim culture and identity throughout Xinjiang. Repeatedly stressing the importance of a unified Chinese nation under the pretext of countering religious and ethnic separatism, we have learned how China's government under Xi Jinping seeks to erase ethnocultural differences, allegedly threatening the Chinese neo-nationalist project. Through an increased spread of information and knowledge on this issue, we can now say with absolute certainty that the Beijing government is resorting to show trials, and arbitrary detention to silence China's Muslim population.

However, despite the extensive amount of reports from civil society organizations, academic articles, and news stories, all pointing out a severe systematic persecution of Xinjiang's Muslim minorities, decisive action on the part of the international community is still awaited.

For a long time, the Uyghur community has called for international attention, asking for recognition and for their voices to be heard, urging us to listen to their stories. As international attention is gradually drawn to the issue, and awareness is slowly spreading, we must start calling for action. Having the facts on the table, including innumerable testimonies given by witnesses and stories shared by thousands of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim minorities, Swedish PEN is of the firm opinion that the international community is enlightened enough to agree on joint and decisive action.

In this report, Swedish PEN voices some of those who have taken it upon themselves to act by speaking for the innumerable victims who have fallen prey to China's systematic oppression. Five diasporic writers and poets are featured in this PEN report, all living in exile due to the Chinese government's particular targeting of the Uyghur cultural and intellectual elite. Deeply concerned about the situation in their homeland, and painfully aware of the worsening conditions for Uyghur writers, poets, and other cultural figures, the voices raised in this report are cracked yet powerful, they express pain and suffering as well as resilience and strength, echoing a determination that the Uyghur identity will not be erased.

For a long time, the Uyghur community has called for our attention. Now it is time we use our raised awareness and increased knowledge to join them in their call for action. For the Uyghur cultural and linguistic heritage not to cease in oblivion, and most essentially, for the Uyghur community not to be eradicated, Swedish PEN is not confining itself to your attention. Rather, we urge you to read this text as a call for long-awaited and vital action.

OUTLINE AND METHODOLOGY

Swedish PEN's report *Writing Against Oblivion* brings together a wide range of primary and secondary sources to provide a comprehensive image of the severe human rights violations in the Xinjiang region. Emphasis is primarily put on patterns of violations of the freedom of expression concerning writers, poets, and other cultural figures.

The report draws partly from interviews – all conducted between June and August 2020 by the author of the report Elin Alfredsson Malmros – with writers and poets from the Xinjiang region, now living in exile in Australia, the United States, Sweden, and Norway respectively. Additionally, an extensive array of secondary material has been reviewed, including reports from civil society organizations, news coverage, and other materials of interest.

The first section, "Towards a Sinification of Religion and Culture throughout Xinjiang," outlines the cultural and linguistic policies implemented by the Communist party since the Mao era until the 1990s, discussing how, since the early years of the Communist Party, Muslim minorities have been facing the threat of strict cultural assimilation, manifested in limited cultural and linguistic autonomy. Section two, "Cultural Genocide and the Assault on the Uyghur Language under Xi Jinping," draws attention to the increasingly exacerbated situation under the leadership of Xi Jinping. With emphasis on the circumscribed freedom for Uyghur writers, poets, and other cultural figures, this section discusses the individual experiences as well as societal consequences of a threatened ethnic, cultural, and linguistic collective identity.

This report was drafted and researched by Elin Alfredsson Malmros, political scientist, freelance writer, and a member of the Swedish Writers in Prison Committee. Swedish PEN takes responsibility for this report and any errors are our own.

PRESENTATION OF WRITERS



Tahir Hamut

The poet Tahir Hamut was born in 1969 in a small town near Kashgar in the Xinjiang region. Starting his poetic work in the 1980s with his first poem published in 1986, he is now considered one of the foremost modernist poets in the Uyghur language. After his bachelor's degree in Uyghur language and literature in Beijing in 1992, Hamut attempted to study abroad but was arrested and sent to a forced labour camp on charges of attempting to divulge state secrets and working against the Communist Party. Released in 1999, and after having published a collection of poetry, he was in 2016 again subjected to harassment by Chinese authorities. The year after, together with his family, Hamut left Xinjiang for the US where he now lives in exile, continuing his poetic work.



Mutallip Saydulla

Poet and translator Mutallip Saydulla was born in 1972 in the village of Laysu in Kerye County, Xinjiang. In 1993, he graduated from Xinjiang Petroleum College with a degree in petroleum engineering and worked as a professional technician and assistant engineer in the Karamay Petroleum Administration. Back in college in 1994 he began his literary career and has since then published more than 300 poems in Uyghur literary magazines such as *Tengri Mountain Magazine*, *Tarim Magazine*, and *Turfan Magazine*. Currently living in exile in Oslo, in 2019 Saydulla published a poetry collection, *Thus Spoke the Sea*, and recently, his latest collection of poems, *Two Eyes Two Faces*, was published in the Uyghur and Turkic languages.



Fatimah Abdulghafur

Poet and writer Fatimah Abdulghafur was born in 1980 in Kashgar in the Xinjiang region. Having graduated from the Jilin University in Changchun she left China in 2010 for Europe, Canada, and the US, eventually settling in Sydney, Australia where she is currently living with her family. Today a researcher and a PhD candidate in geophysics, her life is devoted to Uyghur literature and poetry. Abdulghafur writes mainly poems and literary prose concerned with the Uyghur collective suffering and the strength and resilience demon-

strated by the Uyghur people. She is the author of the poetry collection *The Mystery Land* (Uyghur Edition) and a member of the World Uyghur Writer's Union as well as PEN Sydney.



Abdushukur Muhemmet

Abdushukur Muhemmet, poet from Kuchar in Western Xinjiang was born in 1967. Passionately interested in literature and poetry, in his early twenties Muhemmet studied to become a teacher in Uyghur literature, poetry, and history and in 1987 he started his own literary career, becoming a well-known poet among Uyghurs in the 1990s. During the chaotic times of the mid-1990s, having worked as a teacher for thirteen years, Muhemmet was eventually subjected to severe control and harassment in his role as a teacher promoting the Uyghur language and culture. Realizing the system was hurtling towards a tipping-point, Muhemmet left Xinjiang with his family in 2001. He has published several poetry collections, including *Strange Face* and *Wandering Thoughts*, an article collection named *My Mother's Memories*, and a biography titled *Struggle Never Dies*. Since 2003 Muhemmet lives in exile with his family in Stockholm.



Abdumeli Ayup

Writer, poet, and linguist specialising in Uyghur language education, Abdumeli Ayup was born in 1973 near Kashgar in the Xinjiang region. Upon graduation from Minzu University where he completed his bachelor studies in literature in 1997, he got his master's degree at Xinjiang University 2001. For nine years he was a professor at Xinjiang Financial and Economic University and was later invited to study at the University of Kansas in Lawrence where he took a master's degree in linguistics. A proponent of linguistic rights and an active promoter of Uyghur language education, he returned to Xinjiang in 2011 after graduation. Ayup opened Uyghur language schools and kindergartens in the city of Ürümqi and Kashgar. Subjected to repeated interrogations and harassment by the Chinese authorities, Ayup was arrested in August 2013, accused of promoting separatist activity. After fifteen months in detention, he fled from China with his family. Since 2019 Ayup lives in Bergen as a writer-in-residence through the ICORN programme.

THE XINJIANG REGION

Xinjiang, officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), located in the northwestern corner of the People's Republic of China, is mainly home to indigenous Turkish-speaking Muslims, primarily Uyghurs, but also to Kazakhs and other ethnic minorities. The Chinese name "Xinjiang," meaning "New Frontier" or "New Dominion," was adopted in the late 19th Century when the region was incorporated into the new Chinese Empire.¹ In non-Chinese sources however, based on its Turkic geo-political root, the region is referred to as "Uyghuristan" or "East Turkistan," names used to signal resistance against the Chinese perspective and Han socio-economic dominance reflected in the Chinese official name.²

Geographic scope

Located along the Silk Road, connecting the Greco-Roman civilization with Indian-Buddhist culture and Central and East Asian traditions, the Xinjiang region has since early times been marked by a high degree of cultural exchange, embodying a melting pot of cultures and traditions from neighbouring central Asian as well as Turkic populations.³ Politically ruled by China since the 19th Century, Xinjiang is yet more closely linked to the Central Asian world by historical, cultural, ethnic, and religious ties with a strong Muslim identity apparent in the cultural landscape. Due to its favoured geographic location and important resource potential, Xinjiang is of enormous political and economic importance to the Beijing government. The largest province-level division of China, occupying one sixth of the country's landmass and bordering on eight Central Asian countries, the Xinjiang region provides a number of important resources sustaining China's economic growth. Besides being the largest cotton-producing region in the country, having produced 67 percent of the national total in 2016, Xinjiang also holds large deposits of gold, uranium and other minerals.⁴ In addition, in 2020 the region is expected to produce 35 million tons of crude oil – a 23 percent increase over 2012 – and deposits the largest reserves of coal and natural gas in the country. Designated one of China's future five "energy bases," turning Xinjiang into a national hub for oil, gas, coal, and other natural resources, is part of Xi Jinping's vision of a "New Silk Road"⁵ – the Communist Party's ambitious plan to boost its economic and political reach worldwide through an immense extended network of new train and shipping lines crisscrossing from Asia to Europe and Africa.⁶

History

Historically incorporated into several empires and states, what is known as Xinjiang today came under Chinese rule in the 19th Century. Renamed "Xinjiang" and established as a province under the Qing Dynasty in 1884, Uyghur culture and stature, that previously dominated the region, went into a steep decline. Gradually weakening in the face of challenges from abroad, in a desperate search for solutions to secure the fraying empire, the Manchu ruling house embraced a more "Chinese" way of ruling, the underlying argument put forward by proponents of provincehood being that a Xinjiang demographically and culturally more like China would be both easier and cheaper to govern.⁷ Albeit an incompletely realized one, Chinese provincialization has arguably been an important step in the Sinification agenda that has dominated through to the present in minority areas of China.⁸

During the first half of the 20th Century, the first anti-colonial movements were established in the Xinjiang region. After the collapse of the Manchu Empire and the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, East-Turkistan independent states were established twice – first as the Turk Islamic Republic of East Turkistan (TIRET) between 1933 and 1934, and second as the East Turkistan Republic (ETR) between 1944 and 1949. However, the re-emergence of a centralized power enabled China to reassert sovereignty over the region and in 1949 Xinjiang was officially declared a part of Communist China.⁹

In 1955, the Chinese government announced the formal establishment of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, again making Xinjiang a part of China, although now as a region granted formal autonomy.¹⁰ That notwithstanding, 65 years later, in stark contrast to the real political independence that the population of Xinjiang has long been hoping for, decades of repression and coercion under the control of the Communist Party has proven the autonomy to be merely symbolic.¹¹

Population

Besides a Uyghur population of officially 12 million,¹² Xinjiang is also home to smaller populations of Kazakhs, Kyrgys, Oyrat Mongols, Sibes, Chinese Muslims (Huis), and other minority groups. While the Uyghurs still constitute the largest group in the region, with around 46 percent of the total population,¹³ the past decades have witnessed a significant demographic shift as a result of a massive inflow of Han immigrants. During the years of

the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government conducted a forced Han migration into Xinjiang, first by sending demobilized former soldiers from the Civil War to settle down in the region under the flag of the military unit XPCC¹⁴ (commonly known as *Bingtuan*) and later, using economic incentives such as discounts on land prices, by encouraging Han families to do the same.¹⁵ Largely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and eventually abolished in 1975, the XPCC was revitalized in the 1980s in response to challenges from the Soviet Union and ethnic unrest in the region. As Chinese authorities considered Han immigrants vital to secure the region, the following decades witnessed an intensified influx administrated in order to boost the manpower needed to protect the land from foreign exploitation and ethnic tension.¹⁶

In 1949, the Uyghurs represented about 75 percent of the total population in the Xinjiang region.¹⁷ In stark contrast to this period, during which the Han constituted around 5.5 percent of the region's total population, today their numbers do not fall below 50 percent of the overall population in the most titular Autonomous Region cities.¹⁸ In Ürümqi, the capital of the Xinjiang region, Uyghurs make up about 13 percent of the total population, in contrast to the 75 percent Han.¹⁹ This ever-increasing number of Han Chinese has created a non-ethnic identity, *Xinjiang ren* (“a person of Xinjiang”), and even prompted a debate whether the ethnonym *Uyghur* should be erased from the administrative toponym “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region,” entailing an overall dilution of the individual Uyghur identity.²⁰



SECTION I.

Towards a sinification of religion and culture throughout Xinjiang

BANNING RELIGIOUS FAITH AND PRACTICE

Home to about 20 million Muslims, China officially guarantees its population the freedom of religion,²¹ but unofficially, the Beijing government is forcefully striving to transform Muslims into secular and loyal supporters of the Communist ideology, a campaign argued to be the harshest against faith since the end of the Cultural Revolution.²²

Muslim minorities subjected to Sinification is not a new phenomenon in China. In the course of the late 1800s, the imperial government of the Qing dynasty sought to transform the Islamic faith into Confucianism through a system of state-funded schools, and forced Han Chinese in-migration to the region of Xinjiang and other Muslim-dominated areas.²³ Discarding Muslim culture and faith in favour of Chinese customs was regarded as an important step in the unification of Muslim inhabitants of the region and Han Chinese into ‘a single family,’ which in turn was regarded as a prerequisite for the consolidation of the Qing rule.²⁴

As this campaign failed, the Communist Party of today seems to do everything necessary to ensure they will accomplish the same goals.²⁵ After decades of relative openness for people of East Turkestan to practice their religion, starting in the 1980s, Chinese authorities are now imposing harsh restrictions on Islamic customs and practices in Xinjiang, including regulations limiting the role of religion in education as well as banning Islamic dress and customs.²⁶ According to Human Rights Watch, the Chinese restrictions are now so stringent that they have outlawed the practice of Islam throughout the region.²⁷

The religious suppression the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities now face can be traced to 2001 when the Chinese regime launched its own “War on Terror,” culminating in 2015 when Xi Jinping initiated the plan to “Sinicize” Islam, saying that all faiths must be subordinate to Chinese culture. In his 2017 speech²⁸ at the CCP party conference, Xi Jinping announced that the party must seek to ensure that “religions in China must be Chinese in orientation,” and in 2018, a confidential directive entitled “Reinforcing and Improving Islam Work in the New Situation” was issued by the Chinese government, ordering local officials to prevent Islam from interfering with the secular life and warning against the “Arabization” of Chinese culture and rituals.²⁹

The restrictions are driven by the idea that the Islamic culture is in conflict with the cultural values of the

majority Han Chinese population and the Party’s fear that adherence to Islam could subvert social and political conformity.³⁰ In the state’s view, banning Islamic customs and practices is necessary in order to stamp out religious extremism, separatism, and terrorism,³¹ by the Chinese regime referred to as the “Three Evils.”

The examples of restrictions on religious freedom in Xinjiang implemented by the Chinese authorities are innumerable. Any sign of religious faith, including wearing a long beard or a veil, can be construed as signs of “extremism.”³² Reports allege that Chinese officials have ordered Uyghur Muslim minority families to hand in religious items, including prayer mats and copies of the Quran to the authorities.³³ The most apparent aspect of the religious crackdown has been the eradication of the Islamic identity from the physical landscape, involving an unprecedented number of demolished Islamic buildings such as mosques built with domes, minarets, and other architectural features characteristic of Central Asia or the Arabic world.³⁴ Satellite imagery have shown that in 2016 almost 70 percent of the mosques in Kashgar, a city in far western Xinjiang, were destroyed,³⁵ and a new report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute estimates that around 8500 mosques have been demolished across Xinjiang since 2017 – more than a third of the number of mosques the government says exist in the region.³⁶

By 2017, the Sinification campaign had spread beyond the sphere of religion; Chinese authorities were no longer just targeting everyday religious practice, but all signs of Uyghur descent. As emphasized by the Uyghur poet and translator Mutallip Saydulla, it is no longer sufficient to reject Islam; today Uyghurs are required to fully adopt the Chinese cultural identity while abandoning the Uyghur language, cultural expressions and customs. “Increasingly, the issue of religious extremism appears to serve as a pretext for attacking the entire Uyghur cultural identity,” he tells Swedish PEN.³⁷

“This is not about religion. They tell us what to eat, what to wear, what to read, and what to think.”³⁸

FROM RELATIVE CULTURAL PLURALISM TO STRICT ASSIMILATION POLICIES

The Communist Party's ambitions to promote cultural Sinitification represents a distinct shift from a long-standing official policy of relative cultural and linguistic pluralism, to a strict advocacy of overt assimilationist policies. Before they took power in China, the Communist Party condemned the Chinese empires of the past as unjust, unequal, and oppressive while recognizing minorities as oppressed nations in need of national liberation.³⁹ In contrast to the ruling Kuomintang (the Nationalists), who in part advocated a unified Chinese citizenship, the Communist Party promised justice for the national minorities, including the constitutional right to full separation and political independence from China.⁴⁰ That the Party accepted this possibility is evident in the 1931 Communist state constitution, which proclaimed:

“... the right of self-determination of the national minorities in China, their right to complete separation from China, and to the formation of an independent state for each minority nationality.”⁴¹

Under the flag of Marxism and egalitarianism, the Communist Party insisted that all disagreements among minority groups were a matter of class struggle, maintaining that there is a harmony of interest among the proletariat regardless of group affiliation.⁴² Hence, early policies were founded on the heady principles of equality for and unity of all officially recognized ethnic groups, which was further endorsed by the Common Programme of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference 1949; besides promoting a degree of local autonomy in areas with concentrations of minority groups, article 53 stipulates that national minorities should have “the right to develop or reform their cultures and oppose ‘nationalism’ and ‘chauvinism’”⁴³ as well as the “freedom to develop their dialects and languages, and to preserve or reform their traditions, customs, and religious beliefs.”⁴⁴ In the end however, the Communist Party would not fulfil such promises.

CULTURAL ASSIMILATION DURING THE MAO ERA

During the years of the disastrous Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution of the late 1950s, and throughout to the early 1970s, cultural pluralism and linguistic egalitarianism were jettisoned in favour of a monocultural model aimed at assimilating Muslim minorities to the dominant Han Chinese culture.⁴⁵ In order to deepen the minority nationalities' sense of identification with the Communist ideology, this period was characterized by repeated attempts to reduce hundreds of ethnic histories, identities, and languages into one simple overarching Chinese category.⁴⁶ The anti-imperialist approach was abandoned and the former policy of liberating the people once seen as conquered nations was discarded, giving way to a system of ethnic administration.⁴⁷ Even though formally maintaining the concept of nationality (*minzu*), this period marks a change of view among the Chinese Communists, who no longer regarded the Uyghur culture as a coherent, independent whole, but rather, just like the Kuomintang before them, as a small branch (*zongzu*) of the majority Han culture.⁴⁸

There is much documentation of the extreme, assimilatory cultural policies pursued by the Chinese government during the period of the Cultural Revolution. In all-out attacks on vestiges of traditional cultural expressions, Xinjiang among other minority areas was made a major subject of circumscribed cultural freedom.⁴⁹ During the chaos of this time, hundreds of thousands of books and old manuscripts were removed from libraries and private homes throughout the region.⁵⁰ Also, many special-treatment measures towards minority nationalities were abolished and academic institutions involved in research into minority cultures or in training minority cadres were closed down.⁵¹ Nationwide, linguistic diversity was decreased, manifested in the shift from Arabic- to Latin-based scripts but also in the closing down of almost all minority ‘nationality’ schools in the Xinjiang region, forcing minority children to attend Han Chinese schools and to reject their mother tongue. For over a decade, minority languages, including Uyghur, were not taught at all.⁵²

An intellectual during the Cultural Revolution, the father of the Uyghur poet and linguist Abduweli Ayup was a victim of the atrocities committed during this period. Considered a “stinking old nine intellectual,”⁵³ he and his friends were sent to one of the rural labour camps, where they were meant to rewire their “pro-bourgeois-thinking” and learn from farmers how to cultivate the land. Ayup describes the time in the labour camp as a long stretch of imprisonment: during the days, his father recounts, they had to work hard in the fields, and in the evenings, they were subjected to political sessions where they were forced to study the communist ideology.⁵⁴

Noting the revival of the political and social techniques of the Mao era in Xinjiang today, including spectacles of revolutionary fervour involving coercive re-education and self-criticism, many fear that Xi Jinping is trying to turn back time and relive the dreadful period of the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁵ According to Tahir Hamut, Uyghur poet and film director, the similarities between the two periods and their associated techniques of oppression are evident, not least with regard to the feeding of political and cultural polarization: “Just like during the 1960s and 1970s, parts of the population are being set against other parts of the population, encouraged to hate and punish each other,” Hamut tells Swedish PEN.⁵⁶

“You are asked to draw a line between yourself and other people around you. If someone is considered politically problematic, you will be forced to distance yourself from this person, often a loved one or somebody close to you. In many cases, children are even encouraged to denounce their parents.”⁵⁷

At the same time, as Hamut underlines, the oppression of today is significantly different from that of the Cultural Revolution. Like other comparable Maoist campaigns before it, the Cultural Revolution was something that was carried out throughout China, exposing a relatively wide range of people with different backgrounds: “What is happening now is not targeting everybody but first and primarily Uyghurs and other peoples with the same religious belief, which is to say other Muslims. In other words, in contrast to the Cultural Revolution, it is evident that the ongoing systematic repression is first and foremost targeting ethnicity.” What is more, Hamut tells Swedish PEN, in terms of magnitude, “during the Cultural Revolution we did not see this sheer number of people being incarcerated. Now people are being locked up *en masse*.”⁵⁸

“The specific targeting of ethnic minorities makes this a case of genocide.”⁵⁹

Ayup, sentenced to a Xinjiang labour camp in 2013, underlines how new technology and advanced methods have radically changed and exacerbated the oppressive nature of the Communist Party since the Cultural Revolution: “As we were surveilled all day and night, constantly surrounded by cameras and prohibited to speak Uyghur, I could not talk to the other inmates and certainly not read or write poetry. As a detainee during the Cultural Revolution, after the political sessions late at night, my father would secretly write poems and then recite them for his fellow inmates. He was freer in the sense that he could communicate with others, and perhaps more importantly, use pen and paper to speak his heart out.”⁶⁰

Taken together, in contrast to the post-revolutionary official storyline of the Communist Party, which suggests that the years of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution ‘saved’ the minorities from ‘extinction’ under the Nationalists, “imposing the Chinese culture as a gesture of benevolence that cannot be rejected,”⁶¹ innumerable witnesses offer evidence that this period was marked by nothing but cultural experiments manifested in policies of repression and coercion. Although sharing some of the oppressive features of this dreadful period, we can conclude that the situation of today is significantly different – both in terms of manner and magnitude.

TOWARDS RELATIVE CULTURAL AUTONOMY

The tumult of the Cultural Revolution was followed by a period of relative relaxation, manifested in cultural and political liberalization in the 1980s, with central and local governments strengthening local autonomy in language and culture policy. In 1984, important laws were enacted, including the *Law on Regional Autonomy* encouraging literature, the arts, the news media, publishing, broadcasting, film, and television “in nationality form and with the characteristics of the relevant minority.”⁶² Moreover, the new legislation supported the publication of nationality books and the preservation of a nationality historical and cultural heritage; with the introduction of these new conciliatory policies that recognized the importance of cultural and religious freedom, a number of philological, literary, and textual works important to Uyghur culture were reprinted or published for the first time, including two important Uyghur literary anthologies: *Specimens from Classical*

Uyghur Literature and *A Collection of Ancient Uyghur Written Remains*, which together constitute the earliest sources of information on Uyghur cultural heritage.⁶³

*“The end of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent relaxation unleashed a great deal of energy and a sense of freedom among people who for ten years or even longer had not been able to express themselves.”*⁶⁴

Besides the reprinting of previous literary work, the period after the Cultural Revolution also marked a revival of the contemporary Uyghur literature scene: edited volumes of various literary genres became available and Uyghur literary journals containing poems, short stories, and editorials, began to appear, making minority voices heard in the literature for the first time in many years.⁶⁵ Recognized as the foremost poet of his generation and one of the leading lights of the Uyghur New Poetry Movement (*gungga*) emerging in the 1980s, Ahmatjan Osman was an important figure in the new awakening era of Uyghur poetry. After years of repression and isolation, the new movement was shaped by different international strands of influences, including modernist literary trends such as symbolism and surrealism.⁶⁶ For Swedish PEN, Uyghur writer and poet Fatimah Abdulghafur, still drawing inspiration from Ahmatjan Osman in her literary work, mentions how he brought back hope, not only to the Uyghur literary scene, but to the Uyghur society at large: “He completely reshaped the Uyghur writing of this time, unleashing a sense of freedom in Uyghur literacy circles that still inspires Uyghur writers and poets to this day. I would say this movement gave us all a string of hope for a moment.”⁶⁷

*“The 1980s was a period of flourishing Uyghur literature and poetry.”*⁶⁸

However, as emphasized by Ayup, reality did not always reflect policy. Although this period was marked by a relative forward-movement, officially heralding efforts to provi-

de stimulus for minority cultural expression, Chinese covert cultural policies became increasingly reactive during this period and thus the notion of liberalization should be treated with some caution.⁶⁹ Correspondingly, as linguist Arienne M. Dwyer points out, “the 1980s Xinjiang was still Chinese-dominated and by no means represented an equal division of cultural and linguistic resources.”⁷⁰ While officially promoting pluralism, the Chinese government was simultaneously implementing unofficial reactive cultural policies focused on diluting minority culture.⁷¹ Language policies, including the expansion of Chinese language domains at the expense of minority languages, constituted an important part of these covert policy shifts during the 1980s: “Indeed there was some liberation, but minorities’ linguistic rights, as well as the freedom for minority writers and poets, have always been under severe threat, even under the relative relaxations of the 1980s,” Ayup tells Swedish PEN.⁷²

This period of relative freedom was to last about fifteen years. Thereafter, the Chinese government would launch an overt crackdown on minority culture, shifting towards a monocultural model that has lasted through to the present: while Chinese language instruction was expanded, minority-language instruction was curtailed, and minority and Chinese schools were consolidated.⁷³ For most Uyghurs, these overt policy shifts, including the elimination of Uyghur-language instruction in schools, was perceived as an all-out attack on Uyghur identity, eroding the already deficient acceptance of the Chinese rule, and exacerbating tension and ethnic unrest in the Xinjiang region.⁷⁴

BACKLASH 1990s

Attributing isolated events of unrest and violence to the cultural accommodation implemented a decade earlier, in the mid-1990s, the Chinese government initiated a cultural crackdown that has lasted until this day.⁷⁵ After the outbreak of violent episodes including the Baren Township Uprising in 1990,⁷⁶ the argument arose among China’s top decision makers and influential scholars that the ethnic differentiation heretofore supported was undermining national unity. Official recognition of ethnic and cultural differences was considered the source of ethnic tensions in the country, and therefore, relaxed restrictions on religious and cultural freedom were by the Chinese state henceforth deemed dangerous, and were argued to encourage separatist activity and violent extremism.⁷⁷

The turning point really came in 1996–1997, following the launch of the national campaign “Strike Hard” (specifically intended to include the targeting of religious activity), when an exhaustive list of strict directives aimed at tightening the control of the Xinjiang region were issued.⁷⁸

During this period, what were described as illegal mosques and religious schools were closed down, and religious leaders, deemed to be too independent or “subversive,” were dismissed or arrested.⁷⁹ In April 1998, the *Ürümchi Evening News* reported on police searches carried out in several mosques in the Aksu district in Mid-Western Xinjiang: “Recently, the police have searched these mosques and tightly controlled their activities, their Imams and Muezzins. Activities not seen as normal have been halted.”⁸⁰ Among many Uyghurs this tightening control, exercised in and around mosques and other religious places, was considered a restriction on their cultural freedom,⁸¹ as emphasized by Ayup, the destruction of religious places is not only an act against religion, but also against cultural expression and practice. In a society that allows no other space, he casts the mosque in terms of a safe haven where Uyghurs can practice their culture and speak their language without daily humiliation at the hands of Chinese authorities: “as the police breaks into our mosques, they are targeting the very last outpost for cultural and linguistic freedom.”⁸²

This overt political crackdown, ushering a new period of high-profile police activity, was accompanied by extensive shifts in language and cultural policies aimed at further restricting Uyghur cultural expression and practice. Compared to the period of relative relaxation a decade earlier when Chinese was taught as a second language in minority-language schools, during this period Chinese became the language of instruction as from third grade.⁸³ Moreover, in contrast to the 1980s when publications relating to Islam and Muslim culture re-appeared, this period was marked by re-implementations of policies limiting the freedom of expression, including restrictions on religious publicity materials as well as Uyghur literary magazines.⁸⁴

“Following the 1980s, the relatively good situation that had existed for Uyghurs began to deteriorate. Particularly people working in the arts and in literature were subjected to these worsening conditions.”⁸⁵

Illustrating the cultural suppression of this time, young and aspiring poet in the 1990s, Abdulghafur describes how her teenage self was prohibited by her teachers to write poems about the blue colour of the sky. She was

effectively taught that due to the colour’s association to the Uyghur flag, an alleged symbol of the Uyghur separatist movement, poems addressing the sky were not accepted. Literature and linguistics student at Xinjiang University during the early 1990s, Ayup similarly describes a coercive and fear-driven educational environment manifested in tight restrictions on the students’ intellectual freedom. For Swedish PEN, he mentions the Uyghur student-led newspaper that was banned after a year of publication, and of his master’s thesis on Uyghur poetry, subjected to strict limitations and political pressure: repeatedly having refused to write from a Marxist point of view, his thesis was not accepted until it included acknowledgement of the Communist Party: “After accommodating them [the Chinese authorities], including praise for the Communist party and their leader of that time, Jiang Zemin, my thesis was finally accepted.”⁸⁶

In 2001, following the events of 11th September, the severe restrictions on minority cultural expression implemented in the late 1980s and early 1990s, still shaping the cultural life in Xinjiang, were further exacerbated.⁸⁷ As China saw the opportunity to position itself alongside the United States in the global ‘war against terror,’ hoping to be given free rein from the international community to take whatever action they saw fit, Chinese authorities began to target artist and writers, allegedly using the arts and literature to counteract the government.⁸⁸ The situation exacerbated further in 2002 when an allegedly Uyghur ‘nationalist’ poem was read out during the *Navruz*⁸⁹ celebrations in Ürümchi, leading Chinese authorities to further intensify the already severe censorship of the cultural sector.⁹⁰

Repeatedly claimed by Chinese authorities as a means of nullifying the alleged threat of religious extremism, or an economic necessity to stem minority unemployment,⁹¹ in reality these restrictions should be understood as nothing but a cover for repression, implying a brutal attack on Uyghur cultural and religious identity – one that would exacerbate dramatically during the forthcoming presidency of Xi Jinping.

SECTION II.

Cultural genocide and the assault on the Uyghur language under Xi Jinping

REINTRODUCING THE MONOCULTURAL MODEL

The idea of rewiring political thinking and transforming the cultural identities of minorities in order to establish national unity is deeply rooted in the Chinese Communist Party. However, even though the idea of a Chinese national unification has been prominent throughout China's modern history, since 2012 when Xi Jinping became the paramount leader of the Communist Party, the efforts to create an overarching Chinese identity appear to have intensified sharply.⁹² In response to what the PRC considers its failed 1980s policy of relative cultural liberalization, the Communist Party under Xi leadership has rapidly oriented towards a new, intensified policy of monoculturalism through which it seeks to gain complete political control. By increasing the level of “contact, exchange, and integration”⁹³ between the region's ethnic groups, aggressively nurturing the sense of national unity, the government is establishing a system based on the strictest assimilationist policies hitherto witnessed in the region of Xinjiang.

“Every ethnic group must tightly bind together like the seeds of a pomegranate.”⁹⁴ - Xi Jinping

Ever since the declaration of the mission to realise the “China dream” in 2012, calling for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the ideal of a single “Chinese race,” *Zhonghua minzu*, has been omnipresent in the government's overarching nationalist strategy. As a case in point, in his keynote speech at the National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference in August 2013, Xi Jinping specifically called for “uniting,” and “coalescing” people of all nationalities for the cause of Socialism with Chinese characteristics, and for fostering “cohesiveness” within the Chinese nation.⁹⁵

“Cultural identity is the foundation and long-term basis for strengthening the great unity of the Chinese nation; we must build a shared spiritual homeland and energetically foster a shared consciousness of the Chinese nation.”⁹⁶ - Xi Jinping

According to historian Rian Thum, among others, in the past years the Chinese government has gone as far as violating the privacy of Uyghur homes in pursuing its assimilationist policies.⁹⁷ Since 2014, as a part of the increasingly invasive “Strike Hard” campaign, the Beijing government has imposed over 200,000 visits from government agencies, state-owned enterprises, and public institutions in Uyghur homes. The initiative, known as “*fanghuiju*” (an acronym that stands for “Visit the people, Benefit the people, and Get Together the Hearts of the People”), argued by Chinese authorities to be designed to “safeguard social stability,” is in reality aimed at assimilating Uyghur families into the dominant Han Chinese culture. As part of the mission to realise the “China dream,” cadres impose a forced sense of ethnic unity (*minzu tuanjie*) between Uyghur families and the Han majority, for example by ensuring that Uyghur families participate in Han Chinese festivities and traditions, Human Rights Watch reports.⁹⁸ Similarly, ethnic unity being considered the “lifeline” of Xinjiang's nationalities, the Xi leadership has further called for the strengthening of the “interior Xinjiang class,” promoting inter-ethnic contact by enabling Uyghur students to study in Mandarin-speaking schools in inner China.⁹⁹

“The Chinese state has redefined minority identity to be a mere aspect of Chineseness.”¹⁰⁰

According to Abdulghafur, these strict assimilationist policies have had a significantly damaging effect, especially among young Uyghurs who feel increasingly distanced from their cultural descent. As a young student at a Chinese university in Changchun, Abdulghafur describes how, after some time of resistance, she gradually adopted Chinese manners and disconnected herself from the Uyghur culture and community: “I began to act and speak like a Chinese, and gradually I felt there was no necessity to speak my mother language anymore. Even with my parents I spoke Chinese.”¹⁰¹ Paradoxically, she renders how the assimilation process during her adolescence was related to a sense of pride, a feeling of belonging to the Chinese society that further encouraged her to improve her Chinese language skills. “This is a perfect example of how the assimilationist process works,” she tells Swedish PEN. “Learning that Chinese on the one hand is related to success and prosperity, and Uyghur on the other to shame and scarcity, you start to cut yourself off from the roots of yours, at times even from your own family and friends. In accordance with the assimilationist plan, you start questioning the value of your own identity.”¹⁰²

*“I asked myself: what is the point of my own culture?”*¹⁰³

It may be concluded that this invasive assimilationist campaign, indicating the importance and particular value attached to ethnic and cultural identity in the formation of the overarching Chinese national unity, is forcibly leading to the marginalisation of the Muslim minority under the presidency of Xi Jinping, eradicating the very identity of non-Han Chinese nationalities throughout Xinjiang. Besides assimilating minorities into the unified China culturally, linguistically, and politically, the Xi government devotes considerable time and effort at shaping these minorities’ sense of belonging and their very awareness of who they are.¹⁰⁴ The fact that the Sinification process, which includes systematic efforts to erase Uyghur and other Muslim minority identities, has intensified sharply during the leadership of Xi Jinping, was made clear in 2017 when the first troubling reports that described a network of “education camps” were brought into the light.

INDOCTRINATION OF MUSLIM MINORITIES

Over the course of 2017, news began to leak out revealing information about a massive clandestine network of detention camps, by Chinese officials labelled as “transformation-through-education centres” or “counter-extremism training centres.” One of the most significant

leaks of government documents from inside China’s ruling Communist Party, which includes over 400 pages of internal information, shared with the *New York Times* in 2019, provides information that over one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim minorities – over 10 percent of the adult Muslim population in the region – have been detained in these camps for indefinite periods of time.¹⁰⁵

The leaked papers consist of 200 pages of internal speeches by Xi Jinping and other leaders, and more than 150 pages of directives and reports on the control of the Uyghur population in the Xinjiang region. Among the documents are four secret speeches held by Xi Jinping against the backdrop of the violent episodes of 2014,¹⁰⁶ the year of his first and only visit in Xinjiang as China’s leader. The speeches provide a revealing insight into the ambitions and beliefs of Xi Jinping, calling for an all-out “struggle against terrorism, infiltration, and separatism,” urging his officials to use “the organs of dictatorship” and to show “absolutely no mercy.”¹⁰⁷ What is more, the leak suggests that on the second day of his trip to Xinjiang, Xi Jinping told officials that “there must be effective educational remoulding and transformation of criminals” and that “after these people are released, their education and transformation must continue.”¹⁰⁸ Within a mere couple of years, these directives were put into full effect; the documents offer a picture of the most far-reaching internment campaign in China’s history since the Cultural Revolution, with former detainees, teachers, and guards describing a network of more than 100 detention facilities throughout Xinjiang, some of them large enough to hold more than 100,000 detainees.¹⁰⁹

*“Although there are similarities with what was going on during the Cultural Revolution, what we witness now has never happened before in human history.”*¹¹⁰

Recently argued by China’s UK Ambassador to be part of the “false accusations against China,”¹¹¹ the camps are designed to strip the Uyghur population of their identity and to replace it with absolute loyalty to the Communist Party and to garner their support for the current socio-political order.¹¹² Experiences of being forced to repeat slogans and self-criticism are prominent in the camps; detainees are being made to praise the Communist Party and to repeatedly recite promises of rejecting what has been defined by the Chinese government as “The Three Evils”: religious

extremism, separatism, and terrorism.¹¹³ Moreover, we know from witnesses that detainees are forced to renounce their own language, culture, and religion; they testify to months and years of indoctrination aimed at transforming them into secular Han Chinese citizens.¹¹⁴ Some testimonies describe over-crowded cells where detainees are under constant surveillance and are severely punished if seen performing any semblance of prayer.¹¹⁵

“The purpose of these camps is essentially to take incarcerated individuals, brainwash them and make them into the kind of citizens that the state wants.”¹¹⁶

Confirming the coercive and oppressive nature of the crackdown, the leaked documents, alongside the increasing number of witnesses, undermine the official story put forward by the Chinese government, who describe the so-called education camps as a means of nullifying the alleged threat of Islamic extremism.¹¹⁷ The leaked official records show that people can be detained for simply “wearing a veil,” “growing a long beard” or reading or owning “illegal books.”¹¹⁸ Together the information alarmingly reveals that these camps are simply for people who fall into the “wrong” category, or who practice the “wrong” culture or religion, which are deemed as a threat to the creation of a unified Chinese nation.

UYGHUR INTELLIGENTSIA AS THE MAIN TARGET

In systematic efforts to break the Uyghur cultural identity, scholars, artists, writers, poets, musicians, and other cultural figures of the Uyghur community have been the main targets of the strict assimilationist approach under the Xi leadership – their only crime being their promotion of Uyghur language, culture, or history.¹¹⁹ For Swedish PEN Hamut, friend of many artists, writers, and poets who have been detained in the past years, alarmingly pictures a worsening situation since 2014 where the Chinese government is placing intensified pressure particularly on the Uyghur cultural elite, subjected to increasingly severe censorship and investigation: “Beginning at that point, many works that haven’t been published since the 1980s, whether books or audio-visual media, began to be rephrased by the state as problematic and the situation became very dangerous for the authors and creators of these works.”¹²⁰

“Writers and poets are sent to different parts of China where they get training on what to write and how to write.”¹²¹

The Uyghur Human Rights Project has documented 435 indigenous writers, artists, and others who have “disappeared,” been detained, or have even died in captivity since 2017.¹²² Among their number are reported to be the well-known and respected academics Gheyret Abdurahman, Rahile Dawut, and Abdukerim Rahman, all of them arrested in 2018 for promoting Uyghur culture and language; the award-winning novelist, essayist and editor Halide Israyil; the much-loved poet Chimengül Awut, reportedly arrested for her involvement in editing the novel *Golden Shoes* by Halide Israyil; the prominent critic, poet, and translator Abduqadir Jaleleddin; Perhat Tursun, the famous poet and screen-writer known for his well-received poetry collection *One Hundred Love Lyrics* and his controversial novel *The Art of Suicide*; and the musician Ablajan Awut Ayup, much-appreciated for his passionate promotion of the Uyghur musical tradition.¹²³ In 2018, Radio Free Asia reported that at least fourteen staff members of the famous Uyghur-run Kashgar Publishing House, releasing books deemed as “problematic” by Chinese authorities, have been arrested, including the aforementioned poet Chimengül Awut, working as a senior publisher at the time of her arrest, Ablajan Siyit, the publisher’s current deputy editor-in-chief, and Osman Zunun, a former editor-in-chief who retired 10 years ago.¹²⁴ Believed detained in re-education camps, all of the above mentioned intellectuals, writers, artists, and publishers, who constitute only a small fraction of all those being sentenced, were taken into custody on unclear grounds between 2017–2018, most of them without any explanation even to their families.¹²⁵

“Among the millions of Uyghurs thrown into these camps are some of my closest friends, people including writers, artists, painters, and translators. One after one they have disappeared.”¹²⁶

The much-appreciated children's book author Ablikim Hasan, a good friend of Uyghur poet and teacher in literature Abdushukur Muhemmet, is one of the hundreds of Uyghur writers who have been detained in the past years. For Swedish PEN Muhemmet reports how his friend's children's poetry and prose was early deemed harmful by Chinese authorities that aggressively stressed the importance of a high competence in Chinese among Uyghur children: "He was sent to one of the camps without any judicial process, his only crime being publishing children's books about anything but politics or religion. The fact that children's books are subjected to censorship and even eradication is nothing but the ample evidence that the use of the Uyghur language itself is deemed a crime."¹²⁷

As Magnus Fiskesjö points out in Swedish PEN's online magazine *PEN/Opp*,¹²⁸ the reason why cultural figures are particularly targeted by the Chinese state is that "they represent the pride of being Uyghur." Promoting Uyghur culture in their work, they manifest the *raison d'être* of the Uyghur population and identity – a manifestation considered by Chinese officials to hinder the efforts to rewire Uyghurs and reorientate them towards the Han Chinese cultural identity. As emphasized by Fiskesjö, the removal of high-profile intellectuals and cultural figures is aimed at erasing not only the Uyghur cultural identity, but also the very ability to defend this identity.¹²⁹

THE ASSAULT ON THE UYGHUR LANGUAGE

*"Language is your identity, your thoughts, your food. When you lose your language, you lose yourself and become someone else. This is why the Chinese government is so ambitiously targeting our language. They are aware it is an effective tool."*¹³⁰

As an indicator of how crucial language is for the creation of a unified Chinese nation, only months after they established control in the Xinjiang region the Communist Party opened a language planning office. In order to reform the region's Arabic-based scripts, linguists were

employed to its manifestation in Ürümchi, known as the Autonomous Region Language and Script Committee.¹³¹ Inspired by the belief that ideographic and logographic scripts were barriers to mass literacy and modernization in the minority areas, the new Latin-based transliteration system known as *pinyin*, was formally proclaimed in 1957 and came into wider use in the Xinjiang region in 1974. As early as 1978, this orthography was employed by all the mass media as well as a reported 50 percent of the general citizenry in the Xinjiang region.¹³² The long-term effects of these changes are evident, not least among those born during the two decades following the CCP's take-over;¹³³ an entire generation of Uyghurs have been slowly cut off from their cultural and linguistic roots, including the large body of literary and historic material written in Arabic script prior to the introduction of the Latin-based system, as well as from written communication with generations who have been educated in an Arabic script.¹³⁴

*"Language planning, often overlooked as the arcane dominion of orthographic rules and bilingual signs, is actually one of the most effective tools for enacting social and public policy ... Language policy affects the domains, status, and use of language varieties and the rights of their speakers. It shapes the media, the education system, and provides a rallying point for or against ethnic identity ..."*¹³⁵

Although all ethnolinguistic minorities are equal under the 1984 *Nationality Law* and the aforementioned *Law on Regional Autonomy* for minority nationalities,¹³⁶ the attempts to destroy the Uyghur language is something that has been going on for years, Hamut tells Swedish PEN: "first with the introduction of the so-called bilingual education system,¹³⁷ and then with the elimination of primary education in the Uyghur language."¹³⁸ Until the mid-1990s, Chinese (*Putonghua* or *Mandarin*) had been taught only as a second language in minority language schools, all subjects

apart from Chinese being taught in Uyghur. Since the mid-1990s however, inspired by the belief in the principle of one language for one nation, Chinese has become the language of instruction in minority primary schools while Uyghur language instruction has gradually been reduced at all levels. In 2004, the Chinese government decided to implement Chinese as the language of instruction from first grade in minority language schools and in 2002 it was decided that the Xinjiang University would no longer offer courses in the Uyghur language.¹³⁹

“The fact that our children are not taught Uyghur make younger generations strangers to their own language and hence their own culture.”¹⁴⁰

For Swedish PEN, Muhemmet shares his fear that within a few generations the Uyghur language will be eradicated, which emphasises the difficulties of keeping your mother tongue alive when living in exile: “Living in Sweden, me and my family are slowly being cut off from our own language and culture,” he says, stressing the importance of a community where children through shared cultural expressions and practices can maintain and develop their mother language: “My children speak Uyghur, but the loss of the ethnic cultural community will eventually imply a disconnection from their home language and hence their culture. Their children in turn will be even more limited in their knowledge of the Uyghur cultural heritage.”¹⁴¹ He puts particular emphasis on the importance of a shared physical space within which you can share a sense of belonging together with others, and where your own identity can melt into the mould of shared experiences. Abdulghafur concurs in this view of the physical community as indispensable for maintaining one’s cultural identity amidst severe suppression: “The physical place is vitally important when the cultural identity is under threat, allowing room for experiences to be shared and bemoaned, she tells Swedish PEN.”¹⁴² Needless to say, this physical space is gradually being ripped away.

“Our language, the thread that connects you to the people around you, is slowly being ripped away.”¹⁴³

Having spent several years in exile in the United States, realizing his four-year-old daughter had completely forgotten the Uyghur language, Ayup was faced with the same threat: the eradication of his mother language. In 2011, he and his family decided to go back home to Xinjiang and their hometown Ürümqi. Shortly after his return, Ayup started a foreign language centre in order to promote the Uyghur language among children. He initiated English classes taught in Uyghur – Uyghur still being allowed in foreign language courses at this time – thus circumventing the ban on Uyghur language education imposed by the Chinese government.

“We found a loophole in the Chinese legislation, teaching English in Uyghur. In that way we could teach our mother tongue without catching attention from the Chinese government.”¹⁴⁴

Particularly passionate about children’s linguistic rights, and acutely aware of the absence of space for children to develop their native language in their hometown – by this time in Ürümqi there were no Uyghur speaking kindergartens – Ayup later formulated the idea of starting a Uyghur kindergarten where Uyghur children could develop their language skills: “I asked myself, from a linguistic point of view, how we could keep our language alive. With inspiration from other minority communities, I realized that a Uyghur kindergarten was the answer.”¹⁴⁵ Spreading the word through a series of articles promoting the idea, the initiative rapidly became a social movement, engaging enthusiastic parents throughout the region. Starting in 2011, the kindergarten became highly popular and attracted close attention from the media as well as from Chinese authorities, eventually leading to Ayup being subjected to strict scrutiny.

In August 2011, having faced several interrogations, Ayup was later arrested. Accused of separatism, he was imprisoned in Kashgar and later transferred to Ürümqi where he was detained for fifteen months, his only crime being involvement in language education and linguistic diversity. Chinese authorities were not slow to ensure his educational initiative was short-lived: the day after his arrest, Ayup learned that his kindergarten and language training centre had been shut down, no more than a year after their opening.¹⁴⁶

*“The Chinese government is treating minority language support as though it was support of nationalist separatism and hence a threat to the Chinese nation. Needless to say, I am not a separatist. I am a teacher and a writer.”*¹⁴⁷

Teacher in Uyghur literature, language, and history in a bilingual college in Ürümqi during the 1990s, Muhemmet was similarly subjected to arbitrary treatment, including censorship and repeated interrogation on the part of the Chinese state. In 1992, closed-circuit television cameras were installed in all the classrooms, facing the teachers. He describes how the police could show up in the middle of a lecture, without any charges having been made, to carry out interrogation coupled with threats. The final step of a long-term harassment occurred when his pupils were subjected to interrogation, some of them sentenced and sent to prison on arbitrary grounds. Realizing the system was hurtling towards a tipping-point, in 2001 Muhemmet decided to leave the country with his wife and children and has not been back since.¹⁴⁸ Physically disconnected from his family since then, due to circumspection he has not been in contact with them for over three years. His sister, who has been harassed by the police since 2015, asked Muhemmet the last time they spoke to stop calling her, since she is afraid of the consequences that will follow, he tells Swedish PEN.

*“The fact that I promoted Uyghur language and history education has made it impossible for me to stay in contact with my family.”*¹⁴⁹

The intensified systematic efforts to erase the Uyghur language have clearly led to a severely limited autonomy for Uyghur writers and poets – their possibilities to write and publish literary materials in Uyghur being markedly limited. As pointed out by Saydulla, these restrictions might very well spell the death of Uyghur literature; allowing a situation where writers are increasingly deprived of their freedom of expression and where the mechanisms to circumscribe the use of Uyghur language are continually provided, the viability of Uyghur language literature would be seriously

endangered and would eventually drift towards complete elimination.¹⁵⁰ Fortunately, Uyghur writers and poets in the diaspora, including those featured in this text, are relentless in their promotion of the Uyghur language and literature, providing us with materials that manifest the upholding of the rich Uyghur literary tradition as well as the freedom of expression of the Uyghur community.

WRITING AGAINST OBLIVION

*“No matter the subject, my writing is deemed dangerous and subversive due merely to my cultural and ethnic identity.”*¹⁵¹

According to Hamut, beginning in 2014 the freedom to write among Uyghur writers and poets was severely circumscribed, becoming manifest in overt intensified restrictions and censorship: “Since then, no Uyghur writer or poet can say with absolute confidence that the government will not find some kind of problem with their work,” he tells Swedish PEN.¹⁵² Amongst other things, starting in 2017 these worsened conditions have been manifested in the overt widespread elimination of books written by Uyghur writers, in the arrest of several publishers and editors working at the well-known Uyghur-run Kashgar Publishing House, and not least in the ever-present praising of the Communist Party in materials written in Uyghur, including literary magazines: “Opening the famous and much-loved Uyghur literary journal *Tarim*, you will directly be greeted by tributes to Xi Jinping and his allegedly important political achievements,” Hamut says.¹⁵³

*“A number of Uyghur writers have had their work printed since 2017, however, their work is characterized by praise of the Communist Party, emphasizing how the state has lifted minorities, including Uyghurs, out of poverty, bringing them into modern living standards.”*¹⁵⁴

Since 2019, the Beijing government has initiated a more covert policy, creating the impression of keeping the Uyghur culture alive by allowing for Uyghur literary materials to remain on the store shelves – an approach that is merely tokenistic, Muhemmet tells Swedish PEN.¹⁵⁵ Since Uyghur writers are prohibited to write or publish any literary material, all “Uyghur” literary books displayed in the bookstores are in reality Chinese texts translated to Uyghur, implying that there is no Uyghur literature to be found throughout the Xinjiang region.¹⁵⁶ “Writing in Uyghur today is entirely conditioned upon how you meet the requirements from the Chinese government,” Muhemmet continues. “Provided that you write according to the directions of the Chinese authorities, your work may be published, but texts other than those praising the Communist Party are far from accepted, and the lives of the authors of these works are seriously endangered.”¹⁵⁷

“The Chinese state has desolated decades of Uyghur literary practice – a desolation that is irrevocable.”¹⁵⁸

The writers featured in this PEN report give a coherent picture of how these difficult circumstances have had a profound impact on their literary work. Rooted in a culture and language subjected to a threat of extinction, they describe how their writing – partly involuntarily – is increasingly concerned with political issues, reflecting the collective suffering, as well as the resilience of their people. Abdulghafur describes for Swedish PEN how her prose and poetry grapple extensively with the crisis in her homeland: “The situation in Xinjiang has reshaped my whole writing,” she says. “When I look back, all of my work from the past four years is about human suffering, about resilience, and about how to overcome this collective trauma that we are experiencing.”¹⁵⁹ Hamut joins Abdulghafur in her description of the literary work as extensively influenced by the alarming situation in Xinjiang. For Swedish PEN he mentions how he always kept literature and politics apart, but how political issues are becoming ever more present in his literary work.¹⁶⁰ The experience of being a diasporic writer amidst an ongoing cultural genocide seems to come with a great sense of responsibility to give expression to the pain shared by those not only deprived of their cultural identity, but also of the possibility to voice this deprivation.

“As a poet I have always supported the separation of politics and literature. But living in a political climate like this, it is indeed inevitable that politics would find some expression in one’s creative work.”¹⁶¹

Besides giving voice to those who have fallen victim to the oppression, the diasporic writing is also described as a tool for connecting with the Uyghur community and its associated cultural identity. Living in exile since 2010, Abdulghafur expresses how writing poems in her mother language has helped her to reconnect to her culture: “Writing in Uyghur has become a way of connecting to the Uyghur community and has helped me find that missing part of myself.”¹⁶² What is more, writing is cast in terms of remembering: the practice of writing, by releasing the feeling that the memories of one’s own past are the memories of the group’s past, seems to strengthen the sense of belonging and support. Disconnected from his family in 2017 due to increased political pressure, Muhemmet relatedly describes how the writing has helped him stay connected with his memories from his homeland: “Writing poems keeps me connected to my roots and prevents me from forgetting where I come from. Altogether, writing has become my way of remembering.”¹⁶³

“Writing is the antidote to forgetfulness. Writing is remembering.”¹⁶⁴

Taken together, writing is described as a way of remembering collectively, as a means of strengthening a sense of belonging in times of immediate threat against one’s cultural and ethnic identity. Writing concerned with experiences of isolation and pain, but also of strength and resilience, shared with hundred thousand of Uyghurs, seems to facilitate the creating of a strongly bonded group, allowing for a Uyghur collective identity to be maintained. Phrased differently, the practice of writing is cast in terms of maintenance and survival, demonstrating that the Uyghur community will not simply be erased.

CONCLUSION

As pointed out in this PEN report, Sinification, a long-established phenomenon in the history of the Communist Party, has stretched into Twenty-First Century China and left a deep mark in non-Han Chinese communities. After a period of relative relaxation during the 1980s, this process has been aggressively re-implemented in a more advanced, exacerbated manner under the self-named “New Era” of Xi Jinping, which exceeds all limits of humanity. The aim is to stimulate a Chinese national unity among Xinjiang’s minorities; the Xi leadership is not only ruling out the possibility that Uyghur and other non-Han national minorities might have any political meaning, but is also erasing the very identity of Uyghurs and other nationalities throughout the region. Obliterating minority identity in favour of the Han Chinese ditto, we are witnessing how the Chinese government is unleashing every action imaginable to hamper religious, cultural, and ethnic distinctiveness. The main objective seems to be, in the words of Muhemmet, to “circumscribe the right to define who we are as human beings,” and as expressed by Saydulla, to “deconstruct our identity.” These accounts reflect how China’s Muslim population, devoid of their cultural, religious, and political rights, and subjected to identity transformation on the part of the Chinese government, is falling prey to one of the most severe human rights violations of our time.

Even for Uyghurs who are physically safe in the diaspora, the affliction of the past years has been unrelenting. Through the lens of five diasporic writers and poets, this PEN report has shed light on the violent cultural and ethnic crackdown threatening the Muslim community of Xinjiang, hereby emphasizing the circumscribed freedom for non-Han Chinese writers, poets, and other cultural figures. The unfolding stories cannot simply be overlooked. Adding the testimonies of Fatimah Abdulghafur, Abdus-hukur Muhemmet, Tahir Hamut, Mutallip Saydulla, and Abduweli Ayup to the growing assembly of testimonies from the Xinjiang region, Swedish PEN sees no occasion for any continuing inertia or disregard on the part of the international community – we can simply no longer blame our inaction on the lack of information or awareness. As expressed by Hamut, “grave violations of human rights of this nature is a problem of conscience and ethics for the international community and in order to maintain support for shared and universal values it is necessary to take a position to do more.” Determined that the response to the crisis must be globally addressed, Swedish PEN joins Hamut and the legion of witnesses in their call for joint and decisive international action.

One important aspect to draw from this report is the indispensable role of literature. The fact that those who are

on the frontline of promoting Uyghur culture and language, including the writers and poets featured in this report, are being subjected to curtailment is evidence of the explosive power of language and writing, which represent a double-edged sword that can be used for opposing purposes: while diasporic writers use their culture and language as a means of resilience, writing for their identity not to be eradicated, the Chinese government simultaneously targets cultural and linguistic expressions to pursue their neo-nationalist approach. Judging by this inherent power in cultural activity, manifested not least in the Chinese government’s violent response to non-Han Chinese ethno-cultural expressions, the work of Uyghur writers and poets in the diaspora is of the utmost importance, reflecting vital resilience and a determination that the Muslim identity of Xinjiang will not be consigned to oblivion.

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