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Between Utopia and Dystopia: Uyghur Intellectuals (1949-2000)

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Traditionally, religious figures and poets were considered by the Uyghurs to be intellectuals who explained the meaning of life, whether religious or mundane, to ordinary people. The spread of the Jadidism movement in East Turkestan at the beginning of the 20th century created a new group of intellectuals made up of modernizers and enlighteners. The re-appropriation of the ethnonym “Uyghur” in a Soviet conference in Tashkent in 1921 and its subsequent widespread use was a turning point in the social, cultural, and political awareness of Uyghur intellectuals. Ever since, Uyghur intellectuals have consciously participated in nation-building activities with a focus on urgent need to shape the collective self-consciousness of the Uyghurs as a prerequisite to the realization of a unified national identity. For this purpose, Uyghur intellectuals have turned to a variety of ideologies—Islam, Pan-Turkism, and Communism—to pursue their religious, cultural, and political aspirations.

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However, these aspirations were by no means immune to contradiction. Uyghur intellectuals, in a desperate quest to find a unifying national ideology, unfortunately ended up advocating single ideologies, which, in turn, divided them more deeply and more radically than ever. At no time in Uyghur history has the collective consciousness of the Uyghurs been so full of tensions, ones defined by such ideologies as Pan-Turkism, Islamism, and Communism. The crucial point is that each of these three ideologies, as underlying aspects of the Second East Turkestan Republic, are, in essence, mutually exclusive. Added to historically conflicting localist tendencies in Uyghur society, these tensions have thrown Uyghur intellectuals further into irresolvable internal conflicts.

The spiritual, political, and intellectual landscape of the Uyghur people changed forever in 1949, when East Turkestan was annexed by the Chinese Liberation Army. After settling down in East Turkestan, the Chinese Communist government started to deal carefully but resolutely with these three ideologies and their followers. Instead of turning these ideologies against each other, it reduced them drastically to one dominant ideology—socialism. The objective of this reduction was quite obvious—to eliminate the influence of Pan-Turkism among intellectuals and to convert adherents to Islam to socialist ideology. For, Pan-Turkism, although idealistic in nature, had been a pivotal source of Uyghur nationalism, and quite popular among nationalist-minded Uyghur intellectuals. The Chinese Communist leaders took this ideology quite seriously as compared to Islam, which, as for it, was not treated with hostility, hatred, or violence. They indeed adopted cautionary measures and policies towards the Islamic practice of the Uyghurs for fear of a massive backlash.

Now I turn to a more detailed overview of the social position and political role of Uyghur intellectuals in East Turkestan during the period from 1949 to 2000, which has evolved in four stages.

The first stage lasted from 1949 to 1964. During this period, Uyghur intellectuals made demands for political self-determination for so-called Xinjiang. In 1956, a year after the establishment of the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, fifty-one renowned Uyghur intellectuals, including Anwar Hanbaba, Mamtimin Iminov, and Azizov Kasim, signed a petition letter expressing their strong concern that the Chinese government keep to the promise it made in 1949 to withdraw from East Turkestan within three to five years of the establishment of a Communist nation in Xinjiang. The letter was delivered in person by Anwar Hanbaba to Zhou Enlai, the-then Premier of the People's Republic of China. Contrary to the expected result, the letter sent a strong political signal to the Chinese political elites that Uyghur nationalism still had deep roots among some key Uyghur intellectuals, namely those who had taken part in the creation of the Second East Turkestan Republic. This incident prompted the Chinese government systematically to target Uyghur intellectuals who demanded greater political freedom, so that it could reinforce its colonial presence in East Turkestan.

The influential, and yet not well-supported nationalist movement, was tragically crushed by Chinese authorities in 1956, in the name of a fight against local nationalism. As a result, Uyghur intellectuals forfeited their historically prestigious position: they were neither trusted by the Maoist regime, which was notoriously suspicious of intellectuals, nor supported by the local peasants and workers, who were still under the illusion that socialism would be an ultimate answer to their problems. Worse still, no voice for freedom or, even, for greater freedom, was allowed, and everything was silenced to a level where the Uyghurs had no choice but to be content with what was given—a phantom autonomy under Chinese rule. Any renewed aspiration for independence was discounted not only as a futile but also as a dangerous idea. Distracted, disoriented, and disunited, Uyghur intellectuals ultimately resigned to their fate—that of being held captive by the state machinery.

At this time, most Uyghur poets, who have been historically regarded as influential intellectuals, praised the great power of socialist infrastructure and the magnificent deeds of Chairman Mao Zedong, the-then Chairman of the Communist Party of China, who was hailed as a liberator with a utopian vision. A collective delusion was expressed in their poems in such a way that reality lost its sense; rather, it was replaced

with a political simulacrum—invasion was eulogized as liberation, the suffering of Uyghur peasants and workers as a sacrifice for the nation, and, above all, dystopia as utopia.

It is noteworthy that the Chinese government left some room for the Uyghur intellectuals to make a residual compromise between their Islamic faith and their credence in socialism, which is, at its core, atheistic. Out of survival instincts, the Uyghur intellectuals synthesized the atheistic belief in communism and the theistic faith in Islam in a clandestine, albeit contradictory, way. However, the dialectical synthesis of the antitheses later proved to be short lived.

The second stage saw the onset of nationwide social paranoia, with mass movements sprouting up in the name of the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong, the-then Chairman of the Communist Party of China, thought that capitalist elements among intellectuals had crept surreptitiously into the very delicate fabric of socialism to corrupt its roots. Frenzied by spiraling suspicion and, accordingly, by a determination to re-impose Maoist orthodoxy within the party and beyond, the Cultural Revolution put intellectuals in a situation in which individuals' private space was seriously encroached upon.

In general, both Uyghur intellectuals and Chinese intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution endured a turbulent political process. Some of them participated in the so-called class struggle and the conflict of different factions, some were persecuted for having bourgeois elements, and some were sent out on missions to remote villages and towns to be re-educated. In particular, Uyghur artists loyal to the Chinese Communist Party were used by the Communist leaders, whose goals they were not fully aware of, as propagandists who made works of art for the cause of socialism. And those, who refused to be manipulated as "useful idiots," were severely persecuted and eliminated.

The third stage, from 1976 to 1990, began with the restoration of the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China, which tacitly shifted the blame for the dire consequences of the Cultural Revolution from the terrible leadership of Mao to the unforgivable mistakes of the "Gang of Four." In 1980, the Communist Party of China officially stated that the Cultural Revolution "brought serious disaster and turmoil to the Communist Party and the Chinese people." Along with this declaration, Chinese intellectuals reflected critically on the terrible experience of the Cultural Revolution. This approach was expressed in the scar literature written by educated youths such as Liu Xinhua, Zhang Xianliang, and Liu Xinwu.

Unlike the Chinese intellectuals, the Uyghur intellectuals were too cautious to expose the collective psychological scar of the Uyghurs in a deeper and a more constructive way, let alone in a therapeutic way. No Uyghur writer has tried seriously to write anything about the traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution. In the absence of this reflection, however, the scar that the Cultural Revolution left on the Uyghurs remains as much a sign of collective trauma as before.

Uyghur intellectuals, by contrast, took a different approach to the experience of the Cultural Revolution. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, two Uyghur novelists, Keyum Turdi and Zordun Sabir, each published *The Bravos of Kiziltagh* and *The Wind of Awral*, respectively. These novels highlighted a socialist process, where the Uyghurs were delivered from ideological confusion and political revisionism to ultimate enlightenment through Mao's utopian vision. The utopian vision in these novels masked the systematic dehumanization that occurred in the Cultural Revolution. With different colors and with misplaced shades and reflections, they painted a picture, which concealed what was lost in utopia: the vital sense of truth, the irreducible value of humanity, the guiding force of rationality, and the profound feelings of guilt.

It was Abdurehim Otkur who changed the course of history in Uyghur intellectual life. Two historical novels by Otkur, *The Track*, published in 1985, and *The Awakened Land*, in 1988, paved the way for a reflection on the tumultuous period from the 1920s to the 1930s. Using a delicate narrative style and allegory, these two novels convey to the Uyghurs the message that they have created two independent republics in the 20th century, a fact that should never be forgotten. The novels, on the other hand, were a conscious

and, to a certain extent, timely response to the deep longing of the Uyghurs for reconstructing their identity as an indigenous people—the identity that was shattered during and after the Cultural Revolution. They reinvigorated the interest of the Uyghurs in their own history, a history in which they could take refuge to escape from the ugly realities of colonial life.

Turghun Almas was another important Uyghur intellectual, whose work in the field of Uyghur history made a contribution to the strengthening of Uyghur nationalism. In challenging the state-sponsored historical narrative about the Uyghurs, he adamantly claimed that the Chinese have never managed to tame the Uyghurs in the strict sense of the word. Over the course of the past 8000 years of their history, the Uyghurs enjoyed freedom and independence up until the end of the 19th century.

However, the glorification of the historical achievements of the Uyghurs was not always as positive as might be expected. It confronted the Uyghurs with another challenge: an irreconcilable tension between the glorious historical past and the painful present. I would call this phenomenon a great history complex, meaning by this a case where the obsession of a people or a group with their glorious history fails to help them to look to the future beyond their current unfavorable situation.

The Uyghur student protests in 1985, prior to the Tiananmen student movement in 1989, broke the silence of the disgruntled Uyghurs, who strongly demanded an end to the mass immigration of Han Chinese and the termination of nuclear tests in East Turkestan, among other things. The protests, though suppressed immediately, exposed the gross failures in the ethnic minority policies of the Chinese government. The protests, however, did not cause a ripple effect among Uyghur intellectuals and ordinary Uyghurs: the Uyghur students were a unique voice, but, sadly, remained a lonely one across East Turkestan.

The fourth stage raised the curtain with the Barin uprising in April 1990, which marked the end of a slightly liberal intellectual environment in the 1980s. The brutal suppression of the Barin uprising was a testament to the zero-tolerance attitude of the Chinese government to any form of Uyghur resistance against its rule. To achieve the aim of eliminating threats of “separatism,” the Chinese government utilized more sophisticated, and indeed restrictive, methods of political propaganda and of state-sponsored censorship. This was combined with the heavy-handed intervention of police and military forces throughout the 1990s. The crackdown of the Ghulja uprising in 1997, on the other hand, ushered in a dark era where the cultural expressions of the Uyghurs were beleaguered.

Faced with this critical situation, Uyghur intellectuals made more efforts to save their endangered culture through artistic expression and reflections on history. In his acclaimed epic novel *Motherland*, which, published in 2000, was a radical breakaway from his previous book, *The Bravos of Kiziltagh*, Zordun Sabir brought the historical moments of the Second East Turkestan Republic to life, demonstrating their continuing allure for the current situation of the Uyghurs. In its painstaking revelation, the book implies that the Uyghurs were both blessed and cursed in history. A future must be started anew without necessarily reverting back to the nightmares of history. He finally accomplished the task that Otkur left unfinished: to offer the Uyghurs a narrative history, albeit one that culminated in the tragic loss of autonomy in 1949.

One of the key features of this stage is that Uyghur intellectuals of the 1990s began to appeal to many and diverse resources in order to reconstruct a multi-dimensional and complex ethnic identity in the broader context of international geo-political relations, Islamic movements, and cultural changes. This attempt was no longer as homogeneous as before, as it went beyond the Great Wall of the Red Empire. For the first time in history, Uyghur intellectuals started to take a global perspective to look at their own condition through communicating with a wider world.

Ultimately, Uyghur intellectuals throughout the years 1949 to 2000 played a certain role in a grand political drama, a sort of character whose personality was controlled and voice altered. More importantly, they were mired within a complex power structure, and difficult socio-economic settings and cultural milieus.

Therefore, their position was always displaced, unstable, and volatile. When needed by the Chinese government, they were used as a convenient tool for governing the restless Uyghurs. When they forfeited their significance, they were simply abandoned.

Opposed to the interests of Chinese rule, ordinary Uyghurs had expected Uyghur intellectuals to defend their inalienable rights and to take ethical responsibility in order to find a solution for the life-and-death challenge that they all faced. If the Chinese government imposed its will on Uyghur intellectuals to be loyal, subservient, and inoffensive, ordinary Uyghurs put their hopes in them to be courageous, compassionate, and sacrificing. Situated in this binary opposition, Uyghur intellectuals represented a generation that was politically manipulated, culturally traumatized, ethically ambivalent, and geographically isolated.

In the midst of China's relentless and intensified assimilationist policies against the Uyghurs after 2000, Uyghur intellectuals faced a serious existential dilemma: either to remain in the imaginary past immortally or to enter into the real present with courage. Going forward, for Uyghur intellectuals the fundamental question is no longer whether they should be true either to the ruler or to the ruled but instead whether they should be true to themselves in a world that is constantly trying to make them into something else.

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