



# China's Brutality Can't Destroy Uighur Culture

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Daily headlines tell the story of China's mass internment of Uighurs in its Xinjiang province, along with the closing and destruction of Uighur mosques and the demolition of their neighborhoods. But the press largely ignores other aspects of their identity, notably their significant cultural and intellectual achievements. These details matter, because Uighurs' resilient culture may ultimately frustrate China's efforts to stamp them out.

Uighurs are one of the oldest Turkic peoples and were the first to become urbanized. When the ancestors of modern Turks were still nomadic, Uighurs were settling into sophisticated cities. One of their branches, known today as the Karakhanids, had a capital at Kashgar, near China's modern border with Kyrgyzstan. When Karakhanids conquered the great Silk Road city of Samarkand, they established a major hospital and endowed not only the doctors' salaries but the cost of heating, lighting and food. That was 1,000 years ago, before the Normans conquered England.

Uighurs were active experimenters in religion. Besides their traditional animism, they embraced Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity and finally Islam. They were also among the first Turkic peoples to develop a written language. And with writing came literature and science.

Yusuf of Balasagun (c. 1020-70) was chancellor of the Karakhanid state. His "Wisdom of Royal Glory" celebrates the active and civic life. Rejecting mystic Sufism, Yusuf embraced the here and now, proclaiming that "the next world is won through this world." The widely read text helped popularize a literary version of the Turkic language, the equivalent of the works of Chaucer in English or Dante in Italian. His rhymed couplets bemoaning the disenchantments that come with the passage of time reach across the centuries.

A contemporary of Yusuf was Mahmud of Kashgar, a pioneer linguist, ethnographer and geographer. Mahmud spent much of his career in Baghdad, capital of the Abbasid Caliphate. He knew that the Arab Caliph was totally dependent on Turkic soldiers and civil servants, but saw how the Arab rulers scorned and segregated them as second-class citizens. Mahmud's mission was to promote Turkic peoples and to encourage Arabic and Persian speakers to learn Turkic languages.

Both Yusuf and Mahmud have been considered saints in Uighur culture, and they remain part of the public consciousness. The Chinese government doesn't dare touch their grand mausoleums near Kashgar, so instead it seeks to strip the two Uighur heroes of their religion and ethnicity, regarding their monuments as undifferentiated landmarks in a Chinese world.

Meanwhile, Kashgar itself, which was 99% Turkic when Mao Zedong conquered it in 1949, is rapidly being transformed into a Han Chinese city. The government has bulldozed much of the old city and entire districts of traditional Uighur homes, replacing them with generic Chinese high rises. In Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang, the Han are now an overwhelming majority, and Kashgar is fast following suit.

Beijing hopes its ruthless "Strike Hard" campaign will stamp out the Uighurs as a distinct group. But sheer numbers will make that effort near impossible. Official data put the Turkic population of Xinjiang at 8.6 million, but it is likely well over 10 million. To exterminate them would require a double Holocaust.

Beijing's alternative to genocide is to destroy the language and culture, but a culture's identity cannot be so easily destroyed. Memories of Yusuf, Mahmud, scores of other poets and saints, the language, folklore, cuisine and way of life are simply too deeply rooted. The Uighurs also have developed coping mechanisms. While the government demands that boys be sent to Chinese schools, girls are continuing the study of their native language. Efforts to suppress the Uighurs' culture will further radicalize them and drive their lives deeper underground.

The Uighur tragedy now holds the world's attention. Beijing has managed to bribe Saudi Arabia, Turkey and several other Muslim countries into silence, but the gag order cannot be sustained for long. Meanwhile, multiple countries near and far now host large, well-educated and active communities of Uighur expatriates. They report on developments in Xinjiang that might otherwise pass unnoticed and provide Uighurs at home a channel to communicate with the world. They also translate books and articles into Uighur, which helps their co-nationals in Xinjiang overcome their isolation.

Even Mao recognized the distinctness and resilience of the Uighur people. Faced with the vast territory of Xinjiang that was overwhelmingly Turkic and Muslim, he named it the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. He thus acknowledged the Uighurs' identity and proposed to grant them a degree of self-government.

Three-quarters of a century later, the only workable solution is still for Beijing to give Uighurs and the other Turkic peoples of Xinjiang more political and cultural autonomy. If China's other provinces demand the same treatment, President Xi Jinping can remind them that he is simply following Mao's lead on the issue and not advancing a new model for Chinese governance as a whole. It might seem unlikely that Beijing would back down in such a way. But its alternative is to continue a costly conflict that brings shame at home and abroad and is unlikely ever to subdue the proud and ancient Uighur people.

*Dr. Starr is editor of "Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland" and author of "Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age," which is being translated into Uighur.*