

Women in the Uyghur Advocacy Movement in Canada: The Making of a Political “Activist”¹

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Abstract: This study analyzes the life stories of three female Uyghur political activists. Born and raised in East Turkestan/Xinjiang, all three chose to emigrate to the West. Today they live in Canada, advocating for the rights of Turkic peoples in their “Homeland” and raising public awareness of the CCP’s campaign against the Uyghurs, a campaign which is currently recognized as genocidal by seven countries as well as a number of human rights organizations.² This study adopts a narrative analysis of these life stories, which were collected as a form of oral history. The narratives focus on the experiences of ethnic Uyghurs living, studying, and working in China in the 1980s–2000s during the ongoing crackdowns and “strike hard” campaigns in East Turkestan/Xinjiang. Through the techniques of narrative analysis, we investigate and analyze the tensions, turning points, and motivations which led to their personal transformations and decision to become publicly involved in creating social and political change for their community. While the political statements of Rukiye Turdush, Arzu Gul, and Raziya Mahmut have been widely circulated in Canadian government and media reports, this study focuses on their personal lives and the troubling, traumatic events in their youth which triggered their choice to leave China. We ultimately argue that a narrative analysis of their stories helps us perceive these narratives as a continuation of their activism.

Keywords: Uyghurs, Uyghur Advocacy, Oral History, Social Justice

This research was part of the Children in Sectarian Religions and State Control project at McGill University’s School of Religious Studies, supported by Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Our interest in the Uyghurs began in February 2020, when our team visited the Uyghur School in Châteauguay, Quebec. As a predominantly Muslim minority ethnic group heavily controlled by the Chinese state, the Uyghurs appeared to be relevant to our research project. The school was set up by a group of Uyghur parents for the purpose of teaching their children the basics of Uyghur language and culture – an especially urgent task given the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) recent and ongoing campaign of genocide against the Uyghurs, a campaign which, by many accounts, seeks to completely erase the Uyghur culture and identity by separating Uyghur children from their

1. We would like to extend a special thanks to the JCREOR editors Elyse MacLeod and Amanda Rosini for their considerable help in revising this paper.

2. As of writing, the seven nations that have recognized China’s treatment of the Uyghurs as conforming to the criteria of genocide are: the U.S., Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Lithuania, and more recently Belgium and the Czech Republic. See: Roseanne Gerin, “Belgium, Czech Republic Legislatures Pass Uyghur Genocide Declarations,” *Radio Free Asia*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/genocide-declarations-06152021171101.html>; Edward Wong and Chris Buckley, “U.S. Says China’s Repression of Uighurs Is ‘Genocide,’” *New York Times*, updated July 27th, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/us/politics/trump-china-xinjiang.html>; Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy in cooperation with the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, *The Uyghur Genocide: An Examination of China’s Breaches of the 1948 Genocide Convention* (Washington, DC: Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, March 2021), <https://newlinesinstitute.org/uyghurs/the-uyghur-genocide-an-examination-of-chinas-breaches-of-the-1948-genocide-convention/>.

parents, sending the latter to “re-education camps,” and denying Uyghur children access to their language, culture, religion and history.³

Our initial aim was thus to study Uyghurs in the diaspora with a focus on how they were raising their children in Canada. However, when we began speaking with the parents at the Uyghur School, we realized that their main interest was in sharing their experiences of discrimination in their Homeland and why they choose to leave – not their life in Canada. Given our interest in engaging with this community we followed their lead and broadened the scope of our research to include their personal narratives of discrimination and persecution in China. While some of the Uyghurs we approached declined to participate due to security concerns, through the contacts we made via our initial inquiries, we ultimately developed a relationship with three female Uyghur activists who – as fully engaged political activists and whistleblowers on a mission to alert the West to the ongoing atrocities occurring in China’s re-education camps – did not share these security concerns. Unlike the tens of thousands of Uyghurs in the diaspora who keep a low public profile for fear of reprisals against their relatives in the homeland, these women have gone public. In their common vocation to become the “Voice of the Uyghurs,” they were willing to be interviewed, named, and photographed.

Since the initiation of the CCP’s 2014 “Hard Strike” campaign against Uyghurs, it has become increasingly difficult – and now virtually impossible – for Uyghurs to emigrate from China.⁴ Accordingly, like most Uyghurs living in the diaspora in Canada, our subjects – Rukiye Turdush, Arzu Gul and Raziya Mahmut – arrived well before this campaign was initiated, and we became interested in finding out why they emigrated and how their personal histories informed their choice to become political activists. Our subjects’ personal trajectories towards activism provide an important window into the “everyday discrimination and low-level persecution” that was ongoing before the CCP’s campaign of genocide was fully implemented. These stories thus challenge the historical, socio-political, and cultural framing of the Uyghur’s being proffered by the CCP.⁵ Accordingly, we opted to adopt an interview method informed by oral history, as the oral history interview is both “a powerful technique” for qualitative researchers looking to capture the lived experience of a person or particular group of people, as well as a well-recognized resource for social justice insofar as “testimony as oral history becomes a way to move toward social justice.”⁶ In line with the contemporary acknowledgement that the oral history interview yields a narrative of lived experience rather than a strictly factual account of the past, we conclude with a narrative analysis.

Methodological Framework

Oral history should be understood as more than a subfield of history; As David King Dunaway describes it, oral history is “a *method* (oral data collection), a *subfield of history* (oral historiography), and

3. Newlines Institute, “The Uyghur Genocide.”

4. Newlines Institute, “The Uyghur Genocide,” 22.

5. For a sense of the CCP’s framing of the Uyghurs, see Timothy Grose, ““Once Their Mental State is Healthy, They Will Be Able to Live Happily in Society’: How China’s Government Conflates Uighur Identity with Mental Illness,” *China File*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/once-their-mental-state-healthy-they-will-be-able-live-happily-society>.

6. Valerie J. Janesick, “Oral History Interviewing: Issues and Possibilities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1 ed.), ed. Patricia Leavy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 300, 311.

a *resource* for teachers, communities, and researchers of all kinds (oral history).⁷ As these distinctions suggest, the method of oral history is trans-disciplinary, and what the oral history interview yields is not merely a resource for the historiographer. While earlier iterations of oral history were rather uncritical and presented oral history interviews as transparent transmissions of “the truth” of past events from eye-witness accounts, contemporary approaches to oral history are much more critically self-reflexive, and acknowledge “the profound role of memory, language, culture and interaction when recounting past events.”⁸ Accordingly, many contemporary researchers understand the oral history interview in narrative terms, as a speech exchange that unfolds in a specific “situational and interactional context,” and that aims “to elicit *storytelling*, often for an imagined audience.”⁹ While the story being told is intended to be “a comprehensible account of the past,”¹⁰ as noted above, not all researchers utilizing the method of oral history are interested in framing or analyzing the data they collect in historiographical terms – indeed, as Dunaway notes, researchers from a variety of fields in the social sciences and humanities view these “accounts of the past” as personal and/or cultural *stories*, which, accordingly, can be analyzed from the framework of narrative analysis.¹¹

This approach to oral history acknowledges that “individual memory is often fallible and [...] routinely influenced by [one’s] social environment,”¹² while simultaneously maintaining that the narratives provided are, nevertheless, valuable resources – by probing “the *construction* of the stories people tell when asked to talk about themselves and their communities,”¹³ we gain important insight into the lived experience of the narrator(s) as well as the wider historical, cultural and socio-political network of relations they find themselves embedded in. As Martin Cortazzi puts it, narrative analysis can therefore be understood as “opening a window into the mind, or, if we are analyzing narratives of a specific group of tellers, as opening a window on their culture.”¹⁴ As these comments on oral history interviews indicate, there are three broad considerations that must be accounted for when analyzing oral history interviews in narrative terms: 1) narrative construction; 2) narrative space and time, 3) imagined/intended audience.¹⁵

The first consideration, narrative construction, is wide-ranging, and seeks to answer questions such as: Is the narrative told in a linear or non-linear fashion? What terminology is employed by the teller – or tellers – when describing their experiences? Is their narrative structured to make or emphasize particular points? Is there a break between what the teller(s) believed and how things were? How do they describe their community and their relationship to this community? How do the narrative constructions of multiple tellers compare? Are there similarities, differences? The second consideration, narrative time and space, attempts to account for the specific temporal and spatial context in which the interview takes place, and

7. David King Dunaway, “The Development of Oral History in the United States: The Evolution Toward Interdisciplinary,” *Revista Tempo e Argumento* 10, no. 24 (2018): 115–135, 133, <https://doi.org/10.5965/2175180310242018115>.

8. Jakub Mlynář, “Analysing Oral Histories: Social Roles and Narrative Self-Regulation in Holocaust Survivors Testimonies,” in *SAGE Research Methods Datasets, Pt. 1*, ed. Jamie Lewis (SAGE Publications, 2017), <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473999152>.

9. Mlynář, “Analysing Oral Histories,” 2. Emphasis ours.

10. Mlynář, “Analysing Oral Histories,” 2.

11. Dunaway, “The Development of Oral History,” 125.

12. Mlynář, “Analysing Oral Histories,” 3.

13. Richard Cándida Smith, “Storytelling as Experience” (Review Essay), *The Oral History Review* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 87–90, 87. Emphasis ours.

14. Martin Cortazzi, *Narrative Analysis* (London: Falmer Press, 1993), 2.

15. See Mlynář, “Analysing Oral Histories,” and Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Maschiach, and Tammar Zilber, *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis and Interpretation* (Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage, 1998).

how this context influences the way the narrative takes shape. The final consideration, imagined/intended audience, acknowledges that every narrative is told with a purpose that informs how the teller(s) construct their narrative, which details they choose to include/omit, how they describe and characterize events, places, people, and so on. In concluding, we examine the growing body of oral history/narrative discourse which identifies storytelling as a resource for social justice,¹⁶ and ultimately argue that these women's narratives are best understood as a continuation of their activism.¹⁷

Method & Terminology

We conceptualized our interviews as – to use Valerie J. Janesick's language – “a type of guided conversation,”¹⁸ which is to say we gave our subjects the opportunity to recount their stories with minimal prompting or attempts to steer them in specific directions. We did compose an interview schedule, but were flexible in responding to our subjects' lead, and so strove to ask open-ended questions while “actively listening” and posing follow-up questions as needed to invite our subjects to deepen and expand upon the story being told.¹⁹ The interviews were conducted on Zoom or Skype, largely in English, but occasionally in the Uyghur language, interpreted by Dilmurat Mahmut and Abdulmuqtedir Udun. The interviews were recorded, but Palmer wrote notes by hand during the interviews. Afterwards, when we listened to the recording, some parts were transcribed, and the notes and transcriptions were re-read several times to identify patterns and themes in the narrative, which we then analyzed in light of the three considerations outlined above.

An important note on terminology relates to what we have decided to call the Uyghur homeland. What to call the Uyghur homeland is a highly politicized issue, and this will be necessary to briefly sketch out. While the “Turkic-speaking migrants from Mongolia from whom the present-day Uyghurs claim descent” have been present in the Tarim Basin region – now the southern part of Xinjiang – since the first millennium BCE, various Chinese dynasties have sought, with varying degrees of success, to control this region since the first century of the current era, when “the Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 221) military campaigns of Bao Chao [first] brought the Tarim Basin [...] under Chinese control.”²⁰ However, “genuine Chinese control over its northwestern frontiers, rather than political influence or a tributary relationship”

16. For a sampling of this literature, see: Janesick, “Oral History Interviewing;” Janesick, “Oral History as a Social Justice Project: Issues for the Qualitative Researcher,” *The Qualitative Report* 12, no. 1 (2007): 111–121, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2007.1648>; William A. Gamson, “Policy Discourse and the Language of the Life-World,” in *Eigenwilligkeit und Rationalität sozialer Prozesse*, ed. J. Gerhards and R. Hitzler, 127–144 (Opladen: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1999); Gamson, “How Storytelling Can Be Empowering,” in *Culture in Mind: Toward a Sociology of Culture and Cognition*, ed. Karen Cerulo (New York: Routledge, 2001), 187–199; Joseph E. Davis, “Narrative and Social Movements: The Power of Stories,” in *Stories of Change: Narratives and Social Movements*, ed. Joseph E. Davis (Albany: SUNY, 2002), 3–30; Gary Alan Fine, “The Storied Group: Social Movements as ‘Bundles of Narratives’,” in *Stories of Change: Narratives and Social Movements*, ed. Joseph E. Davis (Albany: SUNY, 2002), 229–246.

17. We have chosen to describe the women as “activists,” however, it should be noted that this term is problematic for them. They argue that what they are doing is supporting their brothers and sisters in the Homeland as a vital response to an existential crisis; as an urgent duty, not a “paid profession.” Thus, they wished to distance themselves from what they viewed as the glamorous, pretentious role of “activist.” However, we have found no word in the English or the Uyghur language that adequately expresses what they do. Therefore, although it might appear to trivialize their endeavours, we have chosen to describe them as political or human rights “activists.”

18. Janesick, “Oral History Interviewing,” 303.

19. Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 63–65.

20. Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Far Northwest* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 9.

was only achieved by the Qing dynasty in the eighteenth century, and the Xinjiang region (a name which translates to “New Frontier”) “was only formally incorporated into the Chinese empire as a province in 1884.”²¹ In the early twentieth century, Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples – who had never fully left the region despite ongoing Chinese expansionism – began to formally resist Chinese control.²² These efforts first bore fruit on November 12th, 1933, when the First East Turkestan Republic was established in Khotan. The Republic was short-lived, lasting only until February 6th, 1934, “when Kashghar was taken by the forces of Ma Zhongying.”²³ However, the end of the First Republic in 1934 did not end Uyghur opposition to Chinese control, and in 1937 another resistance effort was launched, resulting in the establishment of the Second East Turkestan Republic in 1944, which lasted until 1949.²⁴ Given the historical context of contention over this region, by calling it “East Turkestan” one is siding with the oppressed natives or Uyghur “nationalists,” and by calling it “Xinjiang” one is siding with the colonizing Han Chinese. Accordingly, we will proceed with the term East Turkestan/Xinjiang to acknowledge this politicized tension.

The Narratives

In what follows our participants narrate the series of events in their personal lives that informed their decision to emigrate and their path towards becoming public advocates for the Uyghur cause. Each woman was born in East Turkestan/Xinjiang in the early 1970s and immigrated to Canada in the late 1990s/early 2000s, so each narrative is describing experiences and events occurring in the same historical period. We have supplemented each narrative with footnotes, some of which simply provide resources for further reading on the issues/events being discussed, and others which offer factual corrections (names, exact dates of events, etc.) or supplementary commentary. It is important to note that, although these women have significant public profiles due to their activism, the narratives recounted here have never been told publicly.

Rukiye Turdush

Rukiye Turdush is perhaps the most prominent female Uyghur activist in Canada, and certainly the most prolific writer. Born in 1971 in Ghulja, East Turkestan/Xinjiang, she received her primary and secondary education in local Uyghur schools. In 1988, after graduating high school, she left her homeland to study Mandarin Chinese for two years at Beijing Minzu University. She obtained her bachelor’s degree in Chinese history from Shanghai Eastern Normal University in 1994.

Rukiye arrived in Canada in 1998 with her father, husband, and infant son, speaking only Uyghur and Chinese. She has since taught herself English, and in 2007 obtained a bachelor’s degree in Social Work from the University of Windsor. In 2020 she received a post-graduate degree in International Law and Multipolar Diplomacy from Catalonia University in Spain. From 2012 to 2016 she worked for the Riverdale Immigrant Women’s Centre, and from 2018 to the present, she has been working at various social service agencies. As a prominent human rights advocate and main contributor to the Uyghur Research Institute she is often invited to speak at Canadian Universities. She is a prolific writer and has published two books and numerous academic articles and newspaper op-eds.

21. Dillon, *China’s Muslim Far Northwest*, 17, 19.

22. Dillon, *China’s Muslim Far Northwest*, 20.

23. Dillon, *China’s Muslim Far Northwest*, 21.

24. Dillon, *China’s Muslim Far Northwest*, 22.

Tension in University Studies

During her childhood, Rukiye says she was unaware of ethnic discrimination against the Uyghurs, noting:

I grew up in a Uyghur neighborhood with a Uyghur school and Uyghur kids. I would see one or two Chinese [Han] persons on the streets, but I never felt that we were controlled by some other governments or other population. I did not know about social injustices as I was a child.

Her situation reflects an era when her hometown was still occupied by a predominantly Uyghur population. Chinese migration to East Turkestan/Xinjiang began in the early 1990s, a shift that she herself would bear witness to.²⁵

During her student years, however, she experienced an increasing tension which was motivated by Han Chinese prejudice against Uyghurs. In 1988, after graduating from high school at age 17, Rukiye was sent to Beijing Minzu University to study Mandarin Chinese for two years. During this time, she received excellent exam results. While in Beijing, she mostly interacted with other Uyghur and Turkic students. When her two-year language program was completed, she felt obliged to pursue a BA in Chinese History. This prompted her to ask herself some important questions:

Why am I going to study Chinese history? There is nothing related to me in it. It is not my history; it is not world history. I really was not interested in it.

At Shanghai Normal University, she shared a dormitory with Chinese female students. She notes that she was the only Uyghur student in her class:

In those four years I realized that they were so different, and they realized that I was so different as well. We are different people. When I was a kid, I never differentiated between nationalities or ethnicities.

This led her to recollect a fight. She describes the event as a “fistfight” with a Chinese student who showed her a classical Chinese poem and claimed the author was Uyghur. The Chinese student preceded to read the poem out loud to her:

“Han Chinese are your Masters since long ago!” The Chinese student then moved on to comment, “See? Still today you are coming to our universities to receive education from us.”

Rukiye retorted:

“I did not want to come here; if I had a country, I would never have come here!”

The Chinese student shouted:

“Oh! Your East Turkestan separatist idea is very strong!”

25. For more information see Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University, 2010).

Rukiye then retorted:

“You guys have controlled my country that is why I don’t have a country. And I don’t believe that the author of that poem was a Uyghur; a Uyghur does not have a name like Yuan. That is a fake history. Chinese history is all fake. That is why I don’t want to study it. I hate it!”

Rukiye recalls that a “big physical fight” ensued after the verbal exchange. As a result of that incident, Rukiye was transferred to a dormitory occupied by local Shanghai students. She found Shanghai people less overtly racist towards the Uyghurs – they were more apolitical and Westernized – but she nevertheless continued to experience other conflicts with her fellow students and describes having an “identity crisis” during her student years in Shanghai. She notes:

My hair is dark brown and a little bit curly, but I liked black hair and a white face, and when you put on red lipstick it looks nice.

So, she dyed her hair black and cut it in similar in style to that of Hong Kong film stars. Her Shanghai classmates loved it, but her mother scolded her:

You make me feel suffocated; Why do you cover your forehead like a Chinese? You look so ugly, just like a Chinese girl!

Rukiye felt confused, she notes:

My mother loved me to have long hair, she loved plaiting my long braids.²⁶

Finally, she understood why her mother had scolded her and came to the realization that she needed to accept her Uyghur identity and grow her hair long again. She then notes that:

They [Han Chinese] want us to be like them. They don’t like diversity. They consider themselves as the superior nation. That’s why we can only watch their movies, we cannot learn from other [social] systems. So, I thought if I looked like them, I was going to be a superior and beautiful girl – but my parents did not like that because they knew we had had a long conflict since the Chinese invasion.

The title of her final paper for her Chinese History major at Shanghai Normal University was “Xinjiang has not been an inseparable part of China.”²⁷ The paper challenged the Chinese government’s claim that the ancestors of the Uyghurs moved from Mongolia or Western Asia to Xinjiang, which had long

26. Uyghurs generally do not want to be recognized as Chinese. Joanne Smith Finley sees this phenomenon as “symbolic resistance” to Chinese oppression and discrimination. See Joanne Smith Finley, “‘Ethnic Anomaly’ or Modern Uyghur Survivor? A Case Study of the Minkaohan Hybrid Identity in Xinxiang,” in *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*, ed. Ildikó Bellér-Hann, Joanne Smith Finley, and M. Christina Cesàro (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 219–237.

27. The sentiment that “Xinjiang has always been inseparable part of China” has long been pushed by the CCP, who have produced a white paper on this. Alternative views are condemned as separatism which leads to serious legal prosecutions. See: “White Paper: Xinxiang Inseparable part of China,” *China Daily*, July 21, 2019, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/articles/228/219/155/1563683130475.html#:~:text=Xinjiang%20has%20long%20been%20an,part%20of%20the%20Chinese%20nation>, and “Xinxiang Has Long Been Inseparable Part of Chinese Territory: White Paper,” *Global Times*, July 21, 2019, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1158546.shtml>.

been controlled by and home to the Chinese since ancient times, long before the Uyghurs arrived. She notes that she had always doubted this version of history:

Uyghurs have a big population and a big land, so how come they never have had a country? How come we have become an inseparable part of China? How stupid were my ancestors? Why did they not do anything and just become part of somebody?

In her last semester, Rukiye decided to explore this question. After extensive searching, she discovered a book called *Kashgaria* (1882) written by Aleksey Kuropatkin, a history of the hero Yaqup Beg, who rebelled against the Qing government and established an independent Kashgarian state which lasted for ten years (1866–1877) in the Uyghur region.²⁸ Citing this book in her paper, she argued that Uyghurs had established an independent state in recent history. She recalls how she felt:

That was a great paper. I was proud of it.

But her professor, an elderly man who did his PhD in the U.S., summoned her to his home for a talk. He rebuked her:

You have studied here for four years and learned this garbage? You came here for nothing. What is this?

Rukiye tried to defend her paper, arguing:

But I have proof. Did you not read my paper? Xinjiang has not always been an inseparable part of China. You are an academic, why are you talking like this?

Her professor said that she was “poisoned,” contaminated by erroneous ideas. Because she was so young, he did not report her to the university – if he had, she would have been expelled or even sent to jail. He ordered her to destroy the paper and never mention this incident to anyone.

Tensions in the Workplace

When Rukiye returned to Urumqi she was struck by the differences between her region and Shanghai. She was turned away in her job search because of her Uyghur ethnicity, but after a few months was hired as a journalist through a family “connection” (which is to say, her father bribed someone). She worked at a newspaper agency amongst Chinese employees who were a great deal less educated than her, but who were her superiors. On her way to work she often witnessed Chinese police targeting Uyghur youth on the streets. Part of her work was visiting and reporting on local colleges. She noticed that Uyghur colleges lacked central heating systems and relied on coal that produced smoke – an unhealthy environment for young students – while the Chinese colleges had central heating and were fully equipped with modern

28. For more information, see Ian W. Campbell, “‘Our Friendly Rivals’: Rethinking the Great Game in Ya’qub Beg’s Kashgaria, 1867–77,” *Central Asian Survey* 33, no. 2 (2014): 199–214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2014.915613>.

appliances. Moreover, Uyghur colleges were using outdated 1970s textbooks while the Chinese colleges had updated textbooks sent directly from Beijing. Rukiye notes:

This is why these young Uyghurs could not be excellent and could not find jobs after finishing school. Most kids in these schools are from Uyghur farming families. Their parents sell their land, their sheep, to support their children's education, but it is useless.

She published an article on this problem in the agency's newspaper. The Communist Party Secretary of the agency asked her to stop distributing the newspapers. He argued:

This is going to harm the reputation of CCP if you say Uyghur kids are learning from outdated textbooks. This is going to create ethnic hatred and ruin the CCP's reputation.

Rukiye responded:

But this is the truth! You guys have to change.

He retorted:

You are very young, you don't understand.

He then ordered the distribution of the newspaper in which her article was published to be stopped immediately.

Later, Rukiye wrote a follow-up article comparing the conditions of Uyghur and Han schools, exposing the inferior heating systems, poorly equipped dormitories, and meagre facilities in the Uyghur schools. She tried to convince the Party Secretary into publishing her article. But he advised her:

If the CCP is right, we should say it is right. Even if the Communist Party is wrong, we still have to say it is right. Why are you so critical? Where did you learn this? We don't know what kind of education you got in Shanghai, but we think you will have to receive a political education here.

This was frustrating for Rukiye and led her to quit the newspaper and become a teacher. After much discussion she was transferred to a school where she was required to teach courses in Marxist Philosophy and Ethnic Problems. In the final exam she asked her students to answer the following question: "Should we oppose Uyghur nationalism or Chinese chauvinism? Should we be against Uyghur nationalism only?" Around 800 Uyghur students from three regions of Xinjiang wrote the exam and most of them answered that they should also oppose Chinese chauvinism. This created a scandal in the school. The school's Party Secretary announced that this situation would be reported to the Public Security Department of Xinjiang and that all students who gave the "wrong" answer would be instantly expelled from their schools. But Rukiye protested it was her responsibility that the students should not be blamed as she had taught them to think this way. The school authorities finally decided to "soften" the repercussions. Rukiye was dismissed from her teaching post and she and her students were required to attend political study sessions. Anyone who refused would be sent to jail.

Turning Point: The Death of Rukiye's Brother

In the early 1990s Chinese migration to Ghulja was on the rise. Rukiye recalls buses filled with Chinese migrants arriving in the city – poor, under-educated people desperate to improve their lives. She describes the scene as follows:

It used to take four days to travel by train from Beijing to our region, but then the fast train came in the early 1990s. I grew up seeing very few Chinese people, but my family lived near the big bus station, and we realized in 1992 that a lot of Chinese were starting to come to East Turkestan. They would get off the bus carrying only a backpack, a blanket, and some of them holding a child.

The government was giving 30,000 Yuan to any Chinese willing to migrate to Xinjiang, so migrant settlers were pouring into the Uyghur region. When they arrived in Ghulja, Rukiye remarks that they made a very bad impression on the local Uyghurs:

My brother was 18 and he was upset. He was thinking it was a pollution; too many people spitting everywhere, when they ate, they left garbage, and they were taking all the jobs. Before, Ghulja was a beautiful city, it didn't look like the rest of East Turkestan. Everybody had a garden in front of the door and painted houses, beautiful tree-lined streets and it was very clean. We had lot of water, so it is a green city, not like in the south. But then the settlers come, they make a mess, they throw garbage around and they eat everything. They would knock on your door and ask, "Can I eat this frog?" They think the frog has an owner! And each time it rains the snails come out, and they pick up all the snails and eat them. My grandmother was very upset because the snails break up the soil so that vegetables and flowers can grow. She said they were destroying the garden. The soil became very hard, and the plants could not flourish.

My brother lived with my grandmother, and they were talking, "Why do they eat everything?" they said. "They are killing all the birds and we can no longer hear them sing, and they eat all the frogs, so it is silent in the evening." They even ate my dog – that is another story. The government was sending all the criminals, all the poor people to East Turkestan. They had no culture, no education, so what they brought us was pollution. As a child I used to watch the worms when it rained, my grandmother told me, "Don't touch them they soften the soil, it helps our garden." They [the settlers] would knock on her door and ask my grandmother, "Can we pick your worms?" She said no and kicked them out. It was bad for her flowers. Because they eat frogs, so many mosquitos came that bring diseases.²⁹

Rukiye then describes how this situation led to her brother's rebellion and to his violent demise. She recalls that:

29. There is no way of verifying these comments, which may seem to feed into the racist trope that "Chinese people will eat anything." However, to frame these comments as a form of "reverse racism" (racism from a repressed minority towards the oppressing majority) would be misguided. As noted by literary critic and legal scholar Stanley Eugene Fish, although oppressed minorities and oppressing majorities may both possess "a ready store of dismissive epithets, ridiculing stories, self-serving folk-myths, and expressions of plain hatred, all directed at the other community [...] it would be bizarre to regard their respective racisms—if that is the word—as equivalent," as "there is certainly a distinction to be made between the ideological hostility of the oppressor and the experience-based hostility of those who have been oppressed." See Stanley Eugene Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, And It's a Good Thing, Too* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

My brother was so upset so he put a bracket [barrier] on the highway and stopped the bus with his three friends. He told the bus driver “you can’t enter the city, go back to where you come from.” So, for two days no buses could come. No police came, but on the third day 400 Chinese men came from the XPCC [Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps]³⁰ – they were civil soldiers – they all have big knives, and they attacked my brother and his friends. One friend was injured, the two friends ran away, but my brother didn’t run. On the other side of the street there was a bazaar where people were selling fabric and apples, but when they saw the mob coming, they all ran away. There was a man called Kamal and he called to my brother to run, but he refused. Kamal saw him fighting and he was killed by the mob. They were stabbing him with big knives, so my mother barely recognized his body. That was in 1992, he was only 18.

Second Turning Point: The Ghulja Incident³¹

In the following excerpt, Rukiye describes how she witnessed the aftermath of the 1997 Ghulja Incident:

China strictly controlled the information, so I didn’t have any idea what was happening. We heard on TV that a bad mob had descended on Ghulja, that they were separatists, but [the government] didn’t show anything, and they blocked the roads to Ghulja so people couldn’t travel. After 5 months when they opened the road, I went. There were checkpoints everywhere, the police were so rude, they get into the bus and look so scary. They say to everyone who looks Uyghur, “Get out, get out!” You are getting up, walking out and they hit you throw your luggage. I was so insulted, I was crying. The bus had 7 or 8 Uyghur men. At every checkpoint they held 2 or 3 of them there. I could speak Chinese, I could argue with them, so they don’t treat me so badly, but many of the Uyghur passengers didn’t speak Mandarin. None of the Uyghur men were left in the bus by the time we arrived in Ghulja. My cousin came to pick me up. The streets were full of army trucks, I was looking at them, and she said, “Don’t look!” We just walked looking at ground until we came to my mother’s home. I secretly visited my friends early in the morning, using the small back streets of Ghulja, the army trucks all stayed on the big streets. One of my girlfriends had 3 brothers who were all arrested, the youngest was 14 years old. Another friend also had brothers arrested. They were so scared they couldn’t speak to me. They were afraid of surveillance, or spies. All of our male classmates were gone, they told me, there were none left. They had all disappeared at the time of the Ghulja demonstration.

30. For further information on the Xinjiang’s Production and Construction Corps, see: James D. Seymour, “Xinjiang’s Production and Construction Corps, and the Sinification of Eastern Turkestan,” *Inner Asia* 2, no. 2 (2000): 171–93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23615556>.

31. On February 5th, 1997, hundreds of Uyghur youth took to the streets of Ghulja in protest of the government’s unjust policies regarding the Uyghurs. The peaceful demonstration was brutally suppressed by the government. The main reason behind the protest was the prohibition of the *māshrāp*, a social gathering which has been a part of Uyghur culture for many centuries. *Māshrāp* gatherings were traditionally attended by Uyghur men and would involve musical performances, teaching Islamic codes of conduct, and telling jokes. As it was Islamic in nature, no drinking would be allowed. In 1994 Uyghurs in Ghulja started to revive this tradition in order to combat alcoholism and drug abuse amongst Uyghur youth. Soon, a soccer tournament was added to the gatherings. However, in 1996 the Chinese government began to crack down on *māshrāp* gatherings. For more information, see James A. Millward, “Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment,” *Policy Studies* 6 (2004): 1–54, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/PS006.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=32006>.

Immigrating to Canada

The events at Ghulja in 1997 led Rukiye to make the difficult decision to leave China and emigrate to the United States. She describes how she and her father, through ignorance and error, ended up immigrating to Canada:

I asked my dad to get me a student visa at the U.S. Embassy, but we didn't know. He mistakenly went to the Canadian Embassy in Beijing where a man gave him a business immigrant form. This man, Colin, spoke the Uyghur language, and he explained to us that Canada was a free country, no different than the U.S. Colin encouraged him to apply. I was married at that time, so when Dad went to the Canadian embassy I went with him to translate. Colin told him, "You have a hotel in Xinjiang, so it is your right to apply as a businessman." But my father said, "I won't go!" And he just left. So, I told Colin, "I want to go to Canada! I grew up in this country in just one system, I want to see Western culture. I don't want to live and die like this." Colin said, "Call your father and let me talk with my boss." My mother was arguing with my father outside the embassy, saying, "They keep arresting my sons! They already killed one of them! Go back!" She [and] my father went back inside, and Colin said, "I would like to add your daughter to [your visa], in Vancouver your daughter can be a translator for you."

While her family was being screened for immigration to Canada, an officer asked Rukiye for her views on the Ghulja Incident. She replied that she would fully support those Uyghurs who engaged in peaceful protest; that their voices were legitimate. Hearing this, her family members were worried as the translator was Chinese. However, the officer said that Canada needed honest people like her and granted them immigrant visas. "Welcome to Canada!" he said.

While finalizing the immigration process, Rukiye found herself and her infant son repeatedly turned away from hotels in Beijing because of her ethnicity. The night before her flight, she found a hotel room, but was abruptly woken up in the early hours by soldiers in uniform, she recounts:

Chinese soldiers – not the police – burst into the hotel room and my baby started to scream. The soldiers held her at gunpoint while they searched the room and then evicted her.

Rukiye arrived in Vancouver with her father and ex-husband in 1998, but she did not like the city because it was full of Chinese people. She describes how:

I was 26 [and my husband] found two Uyghurs in Montreal so we moved there. I had to learn French, I had a little baby, did not speak the language, couldn't get a job. We had a very difficult time and did not get much help.

After her mother joined them in Montreal, Rukiye helped her father with his business affairs for five years and then decided to go to university. She told her father that she did not come to Canada just to make money; she wanted to speak out for Uyghurs. She notes:

I had to educate myself in order to help my people. I don't know what's happened to them. I have to do something.

Despite opposition from her parents who felt she should enroll in dental hygiene or nursing, she enrolled at the University of Windsor to study International Relations where, in 2007, she obtained a bachelor's degree in Social Work.

That same year she moved to Washington, D.C. to work for Rebiya Kadeer at the International Uyghur Human Rights and Democracy Foundation. A year later she returned to Canada, mainly because her mother had been diagnosed with cancer and shortly thereafter passed away. Rukiye then decided to move to Toronto where she became the President of the Canadian Uyghur Society for two terms – eight years in total. During this period, she organized numerous media events, conferences, seminars, protests, etc., collaborating with many other organizations. Her Twitter account has more than 13,000 followers.³²

Despite her impressive track record as a political activist, Rukiye made it clear in our interview that she dislikes being called an “activist.” She states that:

I hate it when people call me an “activist.” I don’t want to be an “activist,” I never chose that profession, and I don’t like the idea of being paid for my work. Millions of people are, in this moment, suffering in the camps, so how could we not do anything? It is impossible to tolerate it. This is me, this is my people, you don’t have to choose to speak up, it is a natural human response, it is everybody’s duty. I live in a free country. That is the most beautiful value and advantage of Canada and other Western countries. When I am using that advantage, people think I am an activist. We can have freedom to fight China here in Canada, but I can’t do anything, only with words not actions. Sometimes I feel useless, shame at being here when so many people have died. Every day I watch TikTok videos, read the news and I can’t do anything. I am still dressing up, eating, walking like a human, pretending nothing is happening. I feel shame, so much shame for being human!

Rukiye is an outspoken critic of Canada’s apathy regarding the plight of the Uyghurs and what she and other Uyghurs see as its passive acceptance of China’s bullying and “hostage diplomacy” during the “Two Michaels” hostage crisis.³³ She wrote a number of articles urging Canada to take a lead in recognizing China’s treatment of the Uyghurs as a genocide.³⁴ She urges Canada to play a more important role in the United Nations, and to put pressure on it to launch a serious, unbiased investigation of China’s treatment of Uyghurs. Rukiye has criticized the Trudeau government for its indecisive response to the 2020–2021 Meng Wanzhou extradition crisis and the arrest of Huseyin Celil, a Uyghur Canadian who is incarcerated with a life sentence in a Chinese prison.³⁵ She argues that Canada’s weak responses have encouraged Beijing to continue to pressure and manipulate Canada in many diplomatic exchanges.

On February 11th, 2019, while speaking at Ontario’s McMaster University, Rukiye was interrupted by a shouting Chinese student. She was addressing the plight of over a million Muslim Uyghurs. During

32. For more information on Rukiye’s Twitter account visit RukiyeTurdush@parlabest, https://twitter.com/parlabest?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor.

33. For more on this see: Amanda Coletta, “Canada’s ‘Two Michaels’ Back Home After More Than 1,000 Days Imprisoned in China as Huawei’s Meng Cuts Deal With U.S.,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/24/canada-two-michaels-china-huawei/>.

34. For example, see Rukiye Turdush and Magnus Fiskesjö, “Dossier: Uyghur Women in China’s Genocide,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 15, no. 1 (2021): 22–43, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.15.1.1834>; Rukiye Turdush, “Why Canada Should Take the Lead in Recognizing China’s Crimes against Uyghurs as Genocide,” *Medium*, September 23, 2020, <https://medium.com/@rukiyeturdush/why-canada-should-take-the-lead-in-recognizing-chinas-crimes-against-uyghurs-as-genocide-df11d386e5bd>.

35. Huseyin Celil is a Uyghur Canadian who has been living in a Chinese prison since 2006 on charges of teaching the language, faith, and culture of the Uyghurs. For more on this see Chris MacLeod, “Huseyin Celil Is The Forgotten Canadian Detained in China,” *Toronto Star*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2021/03/15/huseyin-celil-is-the-forgotten-canadian-detained-in-china.html>.

her talk, Rukiye said she spotted a Chinese audience member, who she believed to be a student, filming her and making faces. She said she did not object to being filmed as it was not a closed-door event, but the man had a “sarcastic smile” and “hateful expression” that made her uncomfortable. When it was time for the hour-long question-and-answer session, she asked the Chinese student if he had any questions, to which he replied “no.” Rukiye then asked the man what he thought about the presentation. She recalls:

He just [repeated] two words: ‘you, McMaster,’ which I took to mean that the man disapproved of me speaking at the university.

Footage of the incident shows the man speaking in broken English before leaving. Rukiye notes:

I said, ‘You see, this is the typical Chinese behaviour that is controlled or brainwashed by the government’ and then he said the F-word [and left].

After the man left, Rukiye resumed the talk.³⁶

Arzu Gul

Arzu Gul was born in a village near Korla city in East Turkestan/Xinjiang in the early 1970s into a family of farmers. She grew up with four brothers. She was the youngest in the family and describes her childhood as happy. She recounts:

We had many visitors who would bring us gifts. My parents were proud of me and gave me self-confidence. I felt I could do anything. I was a favourite of my teachers, and usually had the highest marks in the class. We grew vegetables, we had beautiful pear trees and an apricot orchard, and we planted corn and cotton.

Arzu attended a local Uyghur middle school, but she gained a high score in her university entrance exam and was awarded a scholarship to go to Nankai University, one of the top universities in China, to do a bachelor’s degree in economics.³⁷ In 1990, she arrived at Nankai University in Tianjin City and was struck by the economic disparity between her hometown and the eastern Chinese region with its tall buildings and shopping malls. The Nankai University she attended in 1990 was much better equipped than Xinjiang university. She recalls that:

We used computers that were not available in Xinjiang.

Tensions in University Studies

As a Uyghur student living in a majority Chinese area, Arzu encountered daily incidents of discrimination while walking on the streets of Tianjin. She recounts how:

36. For more on this incident see Adam Carter, “Activist Accuses Chinese Government of Meddling After McMaster Speech Disrupted,” *CBC News*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/mcmaster-university-china-1.5021406>.

37. Timothy Grose, *Negotiating Inseparability in China: The Xinjiang Class and the Dynamics of Uyghur Identity* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).

I was often mistaken as a foreigner by the Chinese, but when they realized I was Uyghur, they would say, ‘Oh, you are a Xinjiang girl’ in a derogatory tone. They held the stereotypical view that Uyghurs are backward, barbaric, and that many of them are petty criminals or thieves.³⁸

Arzu became close friends with a Chinese student, and notes how:

She would come shopping with me. She was my shield. She liked Uyghur people, she thought they were beautiful and kind.

Arzu rode a bicycle to avoid harassment while on buses and crowded streets, and states that:

Many Chinese men can’t find a girl to marry so when they see a young girl on the bus, they will touch her. In any public area that is crowded there would be men touching women. These men are not healthy mentally, and because we [Uyghur girls] look different they feel they can touch you. It would happen everywhere, even in the university library. I hated it! So, I bought a bicycle to avoid crowded streets and transport. One Uyghur girl in my dorm came to me in private crying because she had been sexually harassed by a man on a crowded bus, and worried about getting pregnant from the incident.

Arzu spoke of how Uyghur women are exploited to lure Chinese settlers to Xinjiang, noting that:

The government uses pictures of Uyghur girls to encourage Chinese men to move to Xinjiang. The ads would say how beautiful and kind they are, what hard-working wives they make.

On the Nankai campus, the Chinese security guards would be vigilant and on the lookout for religious activities in the dormitories of Uyghur students. Arzu recounts how:

A Uyghur male student from my university was disappeared by the government just because he was openly religious. Two more Uyghur students at a nearby textiles university were detained from their dormitories because they kept the Qur’an in their rooms. They disappeared as well. We Uyghur girls had our own separate dorm, but we shared the bathroom with Chinese students. There was no possibility to practice prayer. You could not perform ablutions in the public bathroom, and there was no room in our dorm to kneel and pray. Besides, we had to be careful. The Chinese are like the Russians, they make people spy on each other. After my colleague Yusuf was arrested, the police asked me if I had talked to him. I said no, because if you admit ‘yes,’ you will be arrested also.

As a student Arzu was bold in denouncing the oppression of her people. She told her professor she did not want to attend his history class, because it would remind her that the government freely gave Chinese immigrants land belonging to the local Uyghurs while the original owners were given very little monetary compensation. She told him her family’s story; of how the government had appropriated their farm and given it to Chinese settlers who built a greenhouse on it. She told her professor:

38. This story resonates with Louisa Schein’s notion of “internal orientalism.” This internal orientalism frames China’s minorities – but especially the Uyghurs – as “female, rural, and backward,” while the “Han urbanite” majority are portrayed as the paradigm of “progress.” See Louisa Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism in China,” in *Modern China* 23, no. 1 (1997): 69–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009770049702300103>.

The government gave us very little compensation in return. For 11 acres we received 10,000 yuen – almost nothing!

Her professor was shocked to hear how little money Arzu's family received when the government appropriated their land. He allowed her to skip his classes, only asking her to attend the final exam. Arzu notes:

I can't believe what I did, given the political situation. I feel so lucky that my professor did not tell the government on me!

Tensions in the Workplace

Arzu received her bachelor's degree in business administration from Nankai University in 1999. She returned to Korla having graduated with top marks from one of China's most prestigious universities. She tried to find a job in her home city, but the management of all the companies she approached told her they only hired Han-Chinese graduates. At that time the local government would assign recent graduates to "tough governmental jobs" if they could not secure jobs themselves, so after failing to find a job despite her excellent qualifications, Arzu was sent to a remote village for "training." She was paid a low salary to attend daily indoctrination classes on the People's Republic of China's (PRC) communist ideology and patriotism. She traveled for at least two hours every day by car to reach that village from her home.

The next year, in 2000, the local government assigned her to work as a translator. Political studies occupied more than 70% of her work time. She had to translate every word spoken by her Chinese supervisor to the Uyghur villagers who gathered at the factory for political study sessions. She states that:

The important message they would repeat all the time was, 'Xinjiang has always been part of China.' This is so stupid. Why wouldn't we say, 'Beijing has always been part of China?' The government was revealing the truth through their own propaganda.

While working for the government, Arzu was obliged to dance in a Uyghur folk dancing troupe that was training for government competitions and danced on the streets. She recalls that:

The purpose was to create a fake happy mood. Our instructor was not even Uyghur, she was Mongol. She introduced some Mongol dance moves, so our traditional way of dancing was distorted. The government didn't want us to keep our pure tradition of dance – or why choose her? They just wanted to show tourists and other people that we were "happy Uyghurs" singing and dancing in the street. So, part of my job was to be a forced dancer. I felt very uncomfortable because in Islam we have an ethical rule – to keep a distance between women and men who do not belong to the same family. And when I was forced to dance like this, to hold hands with men, it was hard! I grew up in a Muslim family with four brothers and I was taught what to wear, what to do, therefore it was very difficult for me to be forced to dance with male colleagues in an open public area in the hot sunlight. It was torture for me, especially when they told me to "smile"!

In the early 2000s Arzu managed to leave China with her husband, whom she had known since the sixth grade. After graduating from university in 1999, they wanted to get married, but Arzu's mother was ill, so they waited until July 2001. Her husband became a distinguished international scholar after receiving a scholarship for post-graduate studies at Gothenberg University in Sweden and then at the University of Glamorgan in Wales. This opportunity allowed Arzu to leave China and join her husband in Sweden in

2002. In 2008 Arzu and her husband arrived in Canada as skilled immigrants. Her husband initially worked at Carleton University in Ottawa, and today they live in British Columbia with their three children.

Turning Point: Mass Detention in Xinjiang

In August 2017 Arzu Gul read an article about the mass detention of more than one million Uyghurs in Xinjiang’s “re-education” camps, and recounts how:

This touched my heart. I could not enjoy my ordinary life anymore; I felt I should speak out.

She had long been feeling the oppression of her people in East Turkestan/Xinjiang. The last time she visited her family was in 2006. When she landed in the Beijing Airport her phone suddenly stopped working. After arriving in her hometown, friends warned her that police could listen to her, even in her own home, so she should not be speaking about politics, even with family members. She was followed in the streets as she walked with family members. She could not pray in her best friend’s house, fearing trouble. While on her way back to the U.K., she was waylaid and almost robbed by unknown individuals in the Beijing airport.

Arzu spoke of how her family members in Korla have been constantly harassed by police simply because she lives in the West. Although she has lost all contact with them since 2017, she is certain that the government’s harassment has escalated. Thus, when she found out about the re-education camps it was a major turning point for her:

I realized I must break my silence to become the voice of those Uyghurs who are deprived of their freedom.

Arzu started her advocacy work by attending conferences, participating in protests, distributing flyers and “talking to other people, especially Muslims.” Later, she began to organize events, collaborating with local Islamic organizations. In March 2018 she organized a major conference, “China’s Cultural and Physical Genocide of Uyghurs,” at the Anatolia Islamic Centre in Toronto. She recalls that:

At that time no one was talking about Uyghur Genocide; most people still did not know the Uyghurs.

She has approached Canadian politicians and the Canadian Council of Imams to raise awareness about the Uyghur issue at both the community and governmental level. In 2019 she began to send letters to MPs about the Uyghur’s plight, and eventually founded the Canadian Uyghur Learning Centre in Toronto, an organization which aims to educate Uyghur women and children in Uyghur language and culture. She also co-founded the Darman Foundation to raise awareness about the Uyghur refugee crisis.

Currently Arzu is part of a team of Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners who seek to raise awareness about human organ harvesting in China, which they claim is a lucrative business that predominantly targets Uyghur and Falun Gong prisoners and is supported by state-sponsored Chinese doctors and hospitals.³⁹ Arzu argues that:

39. This is still a controversial issue, sometimes dismissed as a conspiracy theory. See David Matas and David Kilgour, *Bloody Harvest: Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China* (Woodstock, ON: Seraphim Editions, 2009), and Ethan Guttman, *The Slaughter: Mass Killings, Organ Harvesting, and China's Secret Solution to Its Dissident Problem* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 2014).

It is a very difficult process as the Chinese government is strictly controlling the information about this issue.

She also highlights the correlation between the “Halal organ scandal” and the harvesting reports of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities. According to Arzu, many rich people in the Middle East are buying so-called “Halal” organs supplied by Chinese hospitals connected to the CCP.⁴⁰ She argues that:

It is likely these organs are harvested from Uyghur detainees.

She points to the hospitals near the detention camps and the new airports that are being built around East Turkestan.⁴¹ According to Arzu:

Muslim patients from the Middle East do not know that the Halal organs are being extracted from living persons. If they knew it, they would never want to have the transplant surgeries. In Islam, killing a person is equal to killing all of humanity.

Second Turning Point: Family Life

Arzu describes herself as “the luckiest woman in the world” in having a husband who supports her wholeheartedly in her advocacy work. When she started her activism in 2017 her children were quite young, so she had to take them wherever she went. As time went by her children became accustomed to her work, and it created an opportunity for them to learn about the Uyghurs’ plight in East Turkestan/Xinjiang. They began to help their mother distribute flyers. The sudden realization in 2017 that they could no longer speak to their grandparents on WeChat was a major factor in raising their awareness of the Uyghur plight. Some days when she is busy, her daughter and son help her with cooking. Even though her children want to participate and help, she notes that:

I don’t want the stress of my work to affect my family. I try not to shed tears in front of my children. I want my kids to know about the injustices we are facing, but I don’t want them to grow up with victimized feelings; I want them to be strong. I want them to be able to help our people and anyone else who is oppressed in the world!

Raziya Mahmut

Raziya Mahmut was born in 1971 into an intellectual family in the city of Ghulja during the Cultural Revolution. As a child, Raziya gradually became aware of the social inequalities Uyghurs faced. Her older

40. This is also highly controversial and has only been reported in media outlets. See Keoni Everington, “Saudis Allegedly Buy ‘Halal Organs’ from ‘Slaughtered’ Xinjiang Muslims,” *Taiwan News*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3862578>; Adam Withnall, “China is Killing Religious and Ethnic Minorities and Harvesting their Organs, UN Human Rights Council Told,” *Independent*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-religious-ethnic-minorities-uyghur-muslim-harvest-organs-un-human-rights-a9117911.html>.

41. This reminds us of a news report mentioning the existence of a priority lane labelled as “special passengers/human organs transport lane” at the Kashgar Airport in Xinjiang. See Maria Cheung, “Canada Must End Complicity in China’s Brutal Organ-Trafficking Regime,” *Vancouver Sun*, June 16, 2019, <https://vancouversun.com/opinion/op-ed/maria-cheung-canada-must-end-complicity-in-chinas-brutal-organ-trafficking-regime>.

sisters spoke Mandarin at home since they were *minkaohan*⁴² students attending Chinese schools. Raziya felt an emotional distance between them and her other family members (who spoke only Uyghur) and noticed frequent misunderstandings within her family due to this language barrier. Raziya quickly taught herself Mandarin so that she could communicate with her sisters but decided to go to a Uyghur school when she reached school age, hoping to avoid a similar alienation from her parents. But her father insisted she attend a Chinese school, arguing that she would not find a job otherwise. When she was in grade six, there was a “Strike Hard Campaign” during which many young Uyghur men were arrested and sent to prison.⁴³ According to her recollection, no Chinese were apprehended by the police. Raziya’s childhood years were filled with worry and anxiety over news that the police were actively targeting Uyghur people. She left China and arrived in Canada in 2007. Like Arzu Gul, Raziya was compelled to start her advocacy work in 2017 after reading about the “re-education” camps in Xinjiang. In 2020, Raziya co-founded International Support for Uyghurs, a non-profit Uyghur advocacy organization based in Montreal. As the Vice President, in July 2020, she gave a testimony at the Subcommittee on International Human Rights in the Canadian Parliament on the Uyghur genocide issue, along with other key witnesses.

Tensions in University Studies

On her first day in the biology program at Shanghai University, Raziya realized she was the only Uyghur student in the classroom. She recalls how one of her professors challenged her qualifications in front of her classmates. He asked:

How did you get into this degree? I did not know your school was good enough.

Raziya recounts her reaction to the event:

I could not believe such words were coming from a university professor. He made me feel [like] I did not deserve to be in a class at a famous university in Shanghai.⁴⁴

Raziya felt targeted on campus because she looked different and spoke a different language. When “bad things” happened in the dormitory, her Chinese roommates would always blame her. When she went to shop in the local mall, the security officers would spot her and warn the public through their loudspeakers saying:

Xinjiang people are present, so everybody should watch out for their purses and handbags and be extra careful!

42. Uyghur students who attended Chinese schools are called *minkaohan* in Chinese, which refers to minority students receiving Chinese medium education. For more information on the education in Xinjiang, see Smith Finley, “Ethnic Anomaly.”

43. For more information on such oppressive policies, see Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*; Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China’s Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

44. As noted above, in China – in academia as well as popular discourse – minority ethnic groups are often portrayed as backwards, under-civilized, and in need of Han Chinese guidance. For more, see Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism.”

She faced similar incidents in other shopping malls and on city buses.⁴⁵

Tensions in the Workplace

After graduating she found it impossible, as a Uyghur, to find a job in Shanghai. She returned to East Turkestan/Xinjiang, where the Minister of Education, who was Han, informed her that it would be very hard for her to find a job because of her ethnicity. She was unemployed for a whole year before she relied on her “connections” (bribes or other illicit approaches) to find a job in a medical college as an assistant lecturer. As she recounts:

It was a big blow to my self-confidence, after graduating with top marks from a top university in China.⁴⁶

Turning Point: The Ghulja Massacre

The first time she began to think about finding freedom in the West was in the 1990s, when Chinese immigrants began flooding into Ghulja. She recalls that the native Uyghurs were puzzled when they noticed that many of the tall oak trees that had lined the streets had been cut down in their neighborhoods. Raziya’s Western friend, an English professor at a university in Ghulja, asked her if she knew who had permitted such a large-scale cutting of oak trees. Raziya replied that no one had been told the reason. Then her friend observed that in the U.S. and in the U.K., nobody is permitted to cut down trees without the permission of the local residents. This surprised Raziya, who noted that:

I was filled with admiration towards the people of the Western countries, where democracy was guaranteed. My Western friends became my teachers on Western democracy and liberalism, so different from the authoritarianism I found in China.

In 1997 Raziya witnessed the Ghulja Incident (also known as the “Ghulja Massacre”). For three days her family could not leave the house because of curfew restrictions. According to her estimate, in the days following the demonstration, more than 60% of young Uyghur men in Ghulja were arrested and sent to prison. She recalls that, before the incident, many young Uyghur male university graduates, including her own classmates, operated small businesses. They were not able to find jobs, so that was their only means of livelihood, she recounts

45. Uyghurs are regarded by the CCP as thieves, potential criminals, or simply people with bad characters and/or behaviors. For more, see Nimrod Baranovitch, “From the Margins to the Centre: The Uyghur Challenge in Beijing,” *China Quarterly* 175 (2003): 726–750, and Raphael Israeli, “China’s Uyghur Problem,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2010): 89–101.

46. Although one of the main purposes of “bilingual” education is to better prepare Uyghur graduates for employment by improving their Chinese language skills, Uyghur graduates who have obtained full Chinese proficiency still become the victims of discrimination in the job market. For example, according to Xiaowei Zang’s 2011 study, Uyghurs earned around 30% less than Han Chinese in Ürümqi, the capital city of Xinjiang. See Xiaowei Zang, “Uyghur-Han earnings differentials in Ürümqi,” *The China Journal*, 65 (2011): 141–155. See also: Anthony Howell, “Chinese Minority Income Disparity in Urumqi: An Analysis of Han and Uyghur Labour Market Outcomes in the Formal and Informal Economy,” *China: An International Journal* 11, no. 3 (2013): 1–23, and Zuliyati Simayi, “The Practice of Ethnic Policy in Education: Xinjiang’s Bilingual Education System,” in *Minority Education in China: Balancing Unity and Diversity in an Era of Critical Pluralism*, ed. James Leibold and Yangbin Chen (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Scholarship Online, 2013), 131–160.

In a big mall, 95% of shop owners had been young Uyghur men. A few weeks after the incident, I went back to that shopping centre, and found that 90% of those men had disappeared. I was told they had been arrested because of the Ghulja Incident.

She estimates that between 10,000 and 20,000 people had “disappeared” during that year. According to Raziya this was called “collective punishment,” a common practice during this period. After that incident political pressure on Uyghurs increased dramatically in her home city, and she had to spend long hours in political study sessions at her college. Raziya recounts how this was the turning point for her:

The Ghulja Massacre made a big change in my life, so at that time I decided to leave the country.

Second Turning Point: Government Intimidation

In 2002 when Raziya was in Beijing traveling *en route* to Belgium, she was refused by all the hotels because she was from Xinjiang and an ethnic Uyghur.⁴⁷ She recounts that:

I was a homeless person in Beijing until I could find Uyghur people to host us.

While in Belgium she applied for Chinese passports for her husband and daughter, but her application was repeatedly refused by the Chinese authorities for four years. Every year when visiting her family in Ghulja, she was interrogated by the police. Once she was even dragged into a car with dark windows and brought to an unknown place and interrogated for two hours. She recollects that:

When I returned to East Turkestan to visit my father who was very ill, I was intimidated by the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa before leaving, and under police surveillance. While I was there, I was only allowed to stay for five days. What struck me was that the streets and markets were totally empty. The phrases, “everyone is gone,” “all have been arrested,” or “we are separated,” were too common. My whole country is under high police surveillance and has become a totalitarian state!⁴⁸

Immigration to Canada

Finally, in 2006, she was able to reunite with her husband and daughter in Belgium, and they immigrated to Canada in 2007. At the end of 2016, all her family members and friends back home in China blocked her on WeChat. The last message she heard was, “Sorry, we should block you.”⁴⁹ Three years later,

47. This has been a widespread practice in inner Chinese cities. Tibetans also face such discrimination and exclusion. See Gene A. Bunin, “‘We’re A People Destroyed’: Why Uighur Muslims across China are Living in Fear,” *The Guardian*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/07/why-uighur-muslims-across-china-are-living-in-fear>.

48. For a detailed description of the high level of surveillance in China, see Darren Byler, *In the Camps: Life in China’s High-Tech Penal Colony* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

49. When Chen Quanguo became the Chinese Communist Party Secretary of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 2016, communication between Uyghurs living in Xinjiang and those living abroad became strictly controlled. By the end of 2016, most Uyghurs had lost contact with their family members living in Xinjiang. For more information, see “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses’: China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims,” Human Rights Watch, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>.

in November 2019, she received a brief message from her sister informing her that their father had just passed away. She notes bitterly:

Death announcements are the only kind of communications that most Uyghurs receive from China these days; there is no normal, everyday means of contact.

Raziya summed up our interview as follows:

I have thousands of such examples of discrimination and oppression. I am just telling you some of them today.

Today Raziya lives with her family in Ottawa and works as a biologist for Health Canada while keeping up her advocacy work with International Support for Uyghurs.⁵⁰ She speaks Mandarin, French, English, and various Turkic languages. Raziya did not start her activist projects until 2017 because she was worried about the possible impact on family members back home. She notes:

But in my heart, I was always supporting the Uyghur activists who were fighting for the Uyghur cause.

When she read the reports on the “re-education” camps in Xinjiang she was galvanized into action. She states:

The re-education camps issue pushed my last limit! There is no free media that can cover what is really happening in East Turkestan, so the Uyghur situation might be worse than what happened to the Jewish people in the World War II. We are just seeing the surface.

In 2017 Raziya reached out to professors at Carleton University to help her organize events on Uyghur issues. She has given many presentations at universities in Montreal and Ottawa and has collaborated with other Uyghur activists in organizing events. She has attended almost all Uyghur-related protest demonstrations in Montreal and Ottawa over the last four years and has published stories and perspectives on the Uyghur issue.

In her public speeches Raziya highlights the trauma Uyghurs in the diaspora are facing as their family members and friends disappear into Xinjiang’s re-education camps. Raziya told us in her interview that she has recently been depressed, that even sad music can make her cry very easily and that she often sheds tears when she gives public presentations on the plight of the Uyghurs.⁵¹ She recounts:

People in Belgium and Canada are living their lives 100% differently than we are. Westerners are living in Paradise and [the Uyghurs] are living in Hell – they just don’t know it. If the Uyghurs knew this reality, their dissent would become much stronger. This why the Chinese government is trying very hard to prevent the free flow of information.

50. Raziya Mahmut has two master’s degrees, one from the University of Montreal, and one from Brussels. She also has a PhD from Carleton University in biology.

51. She also became emotional several times during our interview. She said that this has become “normal.”

Raziya warns the West that the “Uyghur issue” must be seen as a global issue, since Chinese imperialism has already affected the whole world. The CCP has expanded its dictatorship to Hong Kong,⁵² and is now trying to expand its control and authority internationally, through the Belt and Road Project.⁵³

But she has found many Canadian universities are reluctant to offer venues for events on Uyghur issues because they fear offending the CCP. Their Chinese students represent a major source of income for them, and she finds this situation is eroding freedom of speech in Canada. Raziya asserts that:

Nationalism and imperialism do not accept any diversity. Chinese chauvinistic nationalism has been deeply ingrained into the Chinese mindset. This nationalism makes Chinese [people] feel proud of themselves, while regarding others as backward, under-developed and barbaric. I have often heard Chinese, who are government scientists, saying that Canadians only have had two hundred years of history; therefore, Canadians are still “primitive people.”

Raziya’s daughter, Kewser, was born in East Turkestan/Xinxiang, but left her homeland at the age of eight. One day, Kewser came home from school crying. She was in grade three, and that day had been asked to give a short presentation about her country of origin, but she could not find East Turkestan/Xinxiang on the map. She felt humiliated. Her parents explained to her how their homeland was occupied by China, and that was why it was not on the map. In late 2019, CBC/ Radio Canada came to her family home to interview Raziya, who was becoming known to the Canadian public through her activism. Her daughter participated in the interview and became quite emotional while speaking to the reporters. Raziya recounts that:

For the first time I felt the heaviness of the burden I had put on my daughter’s shoulders.

Narrative Construction

As noted earlier, the questions guiding this component of our analysis center on whether the narratives were constructed in a linear or non-linear manner, what the structure of their narrative tells us about the points they wanted to emphasize, what terminology they employ, how they describe their community and their relationship to their community, and how their narrative constructions compare to one another. Regarding linear versus non-linear construction, the women appear to have all opted for the former – they all trace a similar trajectory, briefly recounting their early life before moving on to discuss their education, their struggle to find meaningful employment after their university studies despite their impressive scholastic record, and the events that precipitated their choice to emigrate.

One striking feature of these women’s educational experiences is that they all went to university in mainland China. This was not common, especially in the 1990s – most Uyghurs would have done their post-secondary education in East Turkestan/Xinjiang. In addition, they all describe themselves as high-ranking students who earned scholarships to enter prestigious universities in mainland China. To offer some context here, the scholarships awarded to students living in East Turkestan/Xinjiang were part of an academic initiative (later known at the High-School level as “Xinjiang Class”) that was ostensibly meant

52. See Hilton Yip, “China’s Surging Nationalism Has Claimed Hong Kong,” *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/28/hong-kong-nationalism-china-security-law-protests/>.

53. See Wade Shepard, “How China’s Belt and Road Became A ‘Global Trail of Trouble’,” *Forbes*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2020/01/29/how-chinas-belt-and-road-became-a-global-trail-of-trouble/?sh=58e54ac4443d>.

to offer ethnic-minority students' higher education and job training. However, as Timothy Grose points out in his book *Negotiating Inseparability in China* (2019), political goals were often emphasized over the mastery of any subject, as the CCP's real purpose was to train a cohort of ethnic minority intellectuals who are sympathetic to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its state-building projects in Xinjiang.⁵⁴ He moves on to note that "these programmes resemble boarding schools established in North America and Australia, which attempted [...] to assimilate indigenous peoples."⁵⁵ Similar to the experiences of the three Uyghur women interviewed in this article, Grose describes how the Uyghur graduate students he interviewed "[...] complained bitterly about the few job prospects available to them in their homeland, many of which—they insisted—would be subordinate to Han employers and managers."

Thus, the "Chinese" education the women received, which was ostensibly intended to offer them greater opportunity, was rendered obsolete by their Uyghur ethnic identity, and the frustrations they encountered in the job market created a sense of disillusionment and a greater awareness of their marginalization and subordination by the state. The sense of frustration, disillusionment, and discriminatory awareness each woman experienced is clearly depicted by their word choice when describing the tensions they encountered in their respective Chinese post-secondary institutions and later in the job market.

Each woman then moves on to describe how and why they left China. Here, their focus centers on describing their experiences of discrimination as they highlight how the CCP imposed its control over its minorities in the 1990s and early 2000s. In these narratives we access vivid glimpses of what it was like for Uyghurs in the 1990s studying, working, and living in East Turkestan/Xinjiang, Shanghai, or Beijing. The situations they describe resembles those of other "unfree" peoples; African Americans under the "Jim Crow" laws; Blacks during apartheid regime in South Africa; and the Palestinians in Zionist Israel.⁵⁶

Each woman further describes experiences of tension (psychological and social) they experienced during their careers as university students, and incidents of discrimination as job-seeking graduates and as employees assigned to low-ranking jobs, despite their impressive credentials. These tensions were the direct result of their ethnicity. Each of the women chose to recollect these moments of tension, which they describe as incidents of public humiliation motivated by their ethnicity. The aspect of "public" humiliation is an important one, because it demonstrates not only a direct attack on the Uyghur identity, but also the existing narrative in place in the Han Chinese community that Uyghurs are to be perceived in a derogatory manner and thus are to be shamed for being Uyghur. Raziye's narrative, for example, describes how she was "outed" as a potential pickpocket while shopping in the mall and turned away by hotels in Beijing. Likewise, Arzu's narrative recounts how she was forced to dance in public with a dance troupe and to "pose" as a "happy Uyghur."

These instances – which are described by the women as being imposed upon them – highlight the experiences of injustice and inequity that led them to question the authority of the People's Republic of China and the CCP's revisionist history. Both Rukiye and Arzu describe how they boldly challenged the notion that "Xinjiang has always been part of China." In fact, in Arzu's narrative she naively assumed that because she was in an academic setting, the evidence she found to support her claims would be sufficient to dispel any false notions about Xinjiang's autonomy. However, she and Rukiye quickly realized that the state fabrication was the only truth that mattered, and that challenging this truth could lead to potential harm. The awareness of this fabrication clearly created a sense of determination, as they both sought to rectify and present a more accurate portrayal of their history. Their attempts were quickly suffocated, and

54. Grose, *Negotiating Inseparability in China*, 113

55. Grose, *Negotiating Inseparability in China*, 7.

56. Byler, *In the Camps*.

they had to bear the repercussions of their acts – demonstrating that, even early on, they sought action in the face of injustice; that they struggled to right the inequities facing Uyghurs, and to act against the CCP’s discriminatory narratives against Uyghurs.

Each narrative also contains one or more turning points that led to their decision to leave China. Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, and Zilber describe turning points as “life events experienced as critical moments or crucial periods of transition,”⁵⁷ and Clausen notes that they often present opportunities for reorienting or reinterpreting one’s life.⁵⁸ Bruner observes that autobiographies typically have turning points so that the protagonist-hero completes his/her story “aroused by victory or defeat, by betrayal or trust.”⁵⁹

Turning points can be changes or movements in the storytelling which describe sequences or scenes transitioning from better or worse. McAdams and Bowman see life’s turning points as transitions that can move the storyline along a “redemption” sequence – i.e., from an “emotionally negative or bad scene to an emotionally positive or good outcome.”⁶⁰ In contrast, a turning point can also move the narrative in reverse, which is to say from good to bad; this movement is categorized as a “contamination” sequence.⁶¹ McAdam and Bowman explain that a contamination sequence is “an emotionally positive or good experience [that] is spoiled, ruined, sullied, or contaminated by a an emotionally negative or bad outcome.”⁶²

A similar model is also echoed in Kenneth and Mary Gergen’s typology of storytelling. The authors propose that story line structures can be analyzed in terms of three basic narrative forms. The first is described as a “stability” narrative, this is “a narrative that links events in such a way that the individual remains essentially unchanged.”⁶³ The second and third narrative forms are described as “progressive” and “regressive” respectively. In a progressive narrative sequence, “as one approaches the valued goal over time, the story line becomes more positive,” whereas in a regressive narrative sequence, “as one approaches failure, disillusionment, and so on, one moves in the negative direction.”⁶⁴

Our subjects’ turning points fit the contamination and regression narrative sequential models discussed above. In Arzu’s narrative she speaks of her family’s farmland appropriated by the government and awarded to Chinese settlers. In Rukiye’s narrative she describes losing her rebellious brother, who was killed by an XPCC mob. Both Rukiye and Raziya’s narratives recount their negative experience of the aftermath of the 1997 Ghulja Incident. Additionally, both Raziya and Arzu recount experiencing a turning point in 2017 when they read the very first media reports on the re-education camps in Xinjiang.

Narrative Time and Space

Given the current situation in East Turkestan/Xinjiang, these narratives could not have been constructed in the manner presented in this article if the women were still residing there. The fact that

57. Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Maschiach, and Tammar Zilber, *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis and Interpretation* (Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage, 1998).

58. John A. Clausen, “Life Reviews and Life Stories,” in *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, ed. Janet Z. Giele and Glen H. Elder Jr. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications), 190.

59. Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 21.

60. Dan P. McAdams and Philip J. Bowman, “Narrating Life’s Turning Points: Redemption and Contamination,” In *Turns in the Road: Narrative Studies of Lives in Transition*, ed. Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 5.

61. McAdams and Bowman, “Narrating Life’s Turning Points,” 5.

62. McAdams and Bowman, “Narrating Life’s Turning Points,” 5.

63. Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen, “Narrative and the Self as Relationship,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 21 (1988): 24, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60223-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60223-3).

64. Gergen and Gergen, “Narrative and the Self,” 24.

our interviews with these women were undertaken when they were living in Canada created a safe space for them to construct their narratives in a manner which emphasized their experiences of inequality and inequity. As Kim Collins notes, narratives which are not normative and/or not what we understand as socially accepted will be difficult not only to tell, but also to listen to.⁶⁵ In China, these women's narratives – which assert that every person has the same fundamental rights to freedom and equality, regardless of their ethnicity or religion – would be non-normative and therefore hard to tell (and be heard). By providing these women with a “safe space” to tell their narratives in a manner faithful to their own lived experience, their narratives become an act/tool which, as argued below, can lead to an effective form of activism.⁶⁶

Imagined/Intended Audience

Every narrative is told with a purpose, a purpose which aids in its construction – for example, which details are included, and which are omitted. This purpose also plays a role in how the teller describes and characterizes events, people, and places. The oral narrative recounted by each of these women is a purposeful construction directed towards an intended audience and told with a certain purpose in mind. As Frisk and Palmer note, a person's narrative cannot be regarded as simply fiction or fact, for it involves a process of selection from assorted memories and creative interpretations of remembered events.⁶⁷ Furthermore, narratives are constructed in social settings and often draw upon cultural building blocks or cultural stories.

Our participants autobiographical stories should therefore not be understood as a means of telling us about who these women are, as there is no “essential self” waiting to be discovered; rather, autobiographical stories “constantly construct and reconstruct [the self] to meet the needs of the situation [encountered], and [are done] with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future.”⁶⁸ Given our participants hopes and fears for the future, we felt that even as they reflected on their youth in China, they were simultaneously “doing their jobs” as political activists by emphasizing the discriminatory elements that they and their larger community faced in East Turkestan/Xinjiang. Their stories tell of the “everyday” systemic racism and discrimination that existed long before the contours of a genocide became visible, and it seems clear that their narratives – although perhaps not consciously or directly intended – can be meaningfully understood as a continuation of their advocacy and activism on behalf of their community. This argument is further supported by William Gamson, who explains that personal narratives “promote empathy across different social locations” by “reveal[ing] experiences based on social locations that cannot be shared fully by those who are differently situated.”⁶⁹ In other words, as personal narratives “promote deliberation and dialogue in a narrative mode [... which] lends itself more easily to the expression of moral complexity,”⁷⁰ we argue that these women's narratives should be viewed as both a contribution to public discourse on the CCP's oppression of the Uyghurs, as well as an invitation

65. Kim Collins, “Crippling Narrative: Story Telling as Activism,” *Knots: An Undergraduate Journal of Disability Studies* 15 (2015): 31.

66. Collins, “Crippling Narrative: Story Telling,” 31.

67. Liselotte Frisk and Susan Jean Palmer, “The Life Story of Helge Fossmo, Former Pastor of Knutby Filadelfia, As Told in Prison: A Narrative Analysis Approach,” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 6, no. 1 (2015): 51–52.

68. Bruner, “The Narrative Creation of Self,” 4.

69. William Gamson, “Policy Discourse and the Language of the Life-World,” 130.

70. Gamson, “How Storytelling Can Be Empowering,” 197.

for dialogue and policy development. The latter is of particular importance, for as Gamson notes, “narrative and experiential knowledge in a discourse does not translate into agency unless collective actors exist to tie the lessons of such stories to public policy.”⁷¹

Narrative Means to Transformative Ends

As just noted, Gamson argues that successfully mobilizing personal narratives towards political and social transformation is contingent upon collective actors demanding that public policy makers include these types of personal narratives in their deliberations. Survivors of the “re-education” camps – such as Mihrigul Tursun and Zumrat Dawut – have already successfully shared their stories to this end by testifying in front of various political bodies, media outlets, and human rights organizations,⁷² and we argue that our participants stories contribute to expanding the picture provided by these survivors; to deepening public awareness of how long-standing the CCP’s marginalization and oppression of the Uyghur’s is, even during periods of time when the relations between the two groups were widely understood as “normal.”

The narratives recounted by each of these women are personal; they are stories about their lives that they do not normally share – in fact, each woman emphasized that they are not normally accustomed to speaking about the details of their own lived experience, and they thanked us for the unexpected interest we showed in their parents, their childhood, and their early careers, marveling at how “journalists never asked me these questions.” They are accustomed to focusing on those who are currently being afflicted, oppressed, and marginalized, and thus their own personal, lived stories fade into the background as they focus on highlighting the discrimination and violent oppression faced by the Uyghur community currently living in East Turkestan/Xinjiang.

However, the stories they recounted provide an intimate perspective which adds new fragments to a larger, fast expanding mosaic. Their narratives offer vivid glimpses into the “everyday discrimination” that was “normal” for the Uyghurs who lived in what they knew as “East Turkestan” before 2017, when the contours of a genocide first became visible to the Western world. Their stories are less dramatic, less shocking than the stories of detainees coming out of the “re-education camps,” but they are of great value for they provide narrative continuity and consistency. They present a narrative of discrimination and marginalization that was clearly present prior to the strike hard campaign of 2014, and well before the Western world began to hear of the atrocities. In addition, they lend authority and legitimacy to the claims of those who survived the re-education camps.

These narratives also provide a glimpse into the developments that were affecting the Uyghur community in the 1990s and 2000s – developments which were intended to disfranchise, decimate, and assimilate the Uyghur people. Our interviewees describe experiences of increased checkpoints and surveillance, police harassment and violence, and involuntarily being led away for questioning. These stories tell us about how the CCP’s policies were applied in real life, often sporadically and inconsistently, so that sometimes they could be evaded or circumvented. Their stories track the slow tightening of the

71. Gamson, “Policy Discourse and the Language of the Life-World,” 130.

72. Tursun and Dawut are well-known survivors of the “re-education” camps. Once released from the camps, they both fled from China to the U.S., where they spoke before the United Nations, the U.S. Senate, and the media, describing experiences of torture, human rights violations, and other atrocities that they bore witness to, such as the murder and rape of their cellmates. Given how tightly the CCP tries to control information on what is occurring in East Turkestan/Xinjiang, such testimony has proven to be a crucial element in the effort to get various states and international organizations to acknowledge the situation there as genocide.

noose around the Uyghur population of East Turkestan/Xinjiang and provide insight into the pre-existing structural inequality that was in place before the contemporary genocide.

Unlike Zumrat Dawut and Mihrigul Tursun, our three subjects left China before the first re-education camps opened. They speak of their lived experience; what happened to them, to their friends, and to their relatives. At the time, they did not grasp the larger implications of the unpleasant obstacles in their careers, of the racism and discrimination they dealt with in China's top universities and in the job market/workplace. Their narratives are thus reflective of the experience of Uyghurs in "normal" times, i.e., before the current campaign of genocide was instigated. However, despite the "normalcy" of the incidents they describe, they all heeded certain warning signals and chose to emigrate. After leaving China, each woman gained a new political awareness; the direct result of access to the international mass media and to the internet beyond China's "Great Firewall." Exchanging information with fellow Uyghurs in the international diaspora, they enjoyed their new-found freedom to congregate in groups and advocate for themselves and for their community, rights that were stifled in China. While the personal life stories of these three women do not usually play a role in their advocacy, their lived experiences, recounted here for the first time, can be viewed and understood as an extension of their activism.

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