



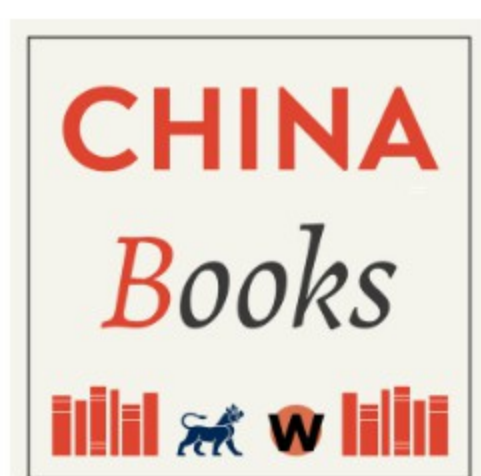
PODCAST

Ep. 8: Uyghur Women Speak Out

The authors of two recent memoirs talk to the China Books podcast about ongoing cultural repression in Xinjiang, and their own lives in exile outside of their homeland.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD — MAY 7, 2024

XINJIANG



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Genocide is not a word thrown around lightly by the U.S. government, but the term is used in the State Department's latest human rights [report](#) to describe the Chinese government's ongoing assaults on Uyghurs' culture, identity, rights and freedom in China's far western region of Xinjiang: "The PRC (People's Republic of China) continues to carry out genocide, crimes against humanity, forced labor and other human rights violations against predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups."

China has long had an uneasy relationship with the Uyghurs' distinct Turkic Muslim identity. They have tried in various ways over time to control Uyghurs, to reduce and dilute their population, and to make them assimilate. But lately, it has gotten much worse. Within the past decade, about a million Uyghurs — almost one in 10 — were sent to reeducation [camps](#) for months or more. Under international pressure, China closed the camps, but transferred many of the Uyghurs in them to prison or forced labor, including by sending them to other provinces to reduce the dominance of Uyghurs in their own homeland. Those still in Xinjiang are under constant high-tech [surveillance](#), with some [forced](#) to let security

personnel live in their homes.

In the midst of all this, a few Uyghur women in exile have proven especially effective at speaking out on their people's plight. This episode of the China Books podcast is a conversation with two of them — Gulchehra Hoja, author of *A Stone is Most Precious Where It Belongs: A Memoir of Uyghur Exile, Hope and Survival* (2023) and Jewher Ilham, author of *Because I Have To: The Path to Survival, The Uyghur Struggle* (2022) and an earlier memoir — about their experiences growing up Uyghur in China, going into exile in the United States, and becoming international advocates for Uyghur rights:



Ep. 8: Uyghur Women Speaking Out
China Books

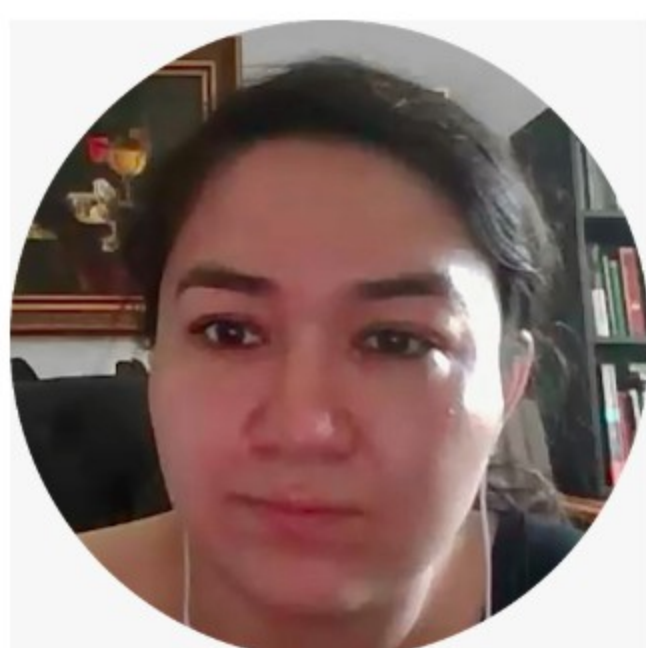
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Guests



Gulchehra Hoja is the author of *A Stone is Most Precious Where It Belongs*, named by *The New Yorker* as a best book of 2023. An award-winning Uyghur-American journalist, who has worked with Radio Free Asia since 2001, she grew up in Urumqi, studied Uyghur language and literature and, while working for state-run Xinjiang TV, created and hosted China's first Uyghur language children's television program.



Jewher Ilham is the daughter of economics professor and Uyghur rights advocate Ilham Tohti, who in 2014 was sentenced to life in prison in China. Her two memoirs, *Jewher Ilham* (2015) and *Because I Have To* (2022), tell the story of how a Uyghur teenager who grew up in Beijing went into exile in the U.S. and became an advocate for her father's release. She now also works with the [Worker Rights Consortium](#) in Washington, D.C., as forced labor project coordinator and spokesperson for the Coalition to End Uyghur Forced Labor.

“ We believe, as long as we're alive, we're never going to lose our hope. ”

— *Gulchehra Hoja*

Transcript

In the far west of China is a region where the ancient Silk Road came alive for more than a thousand years. It brought travelers and traders, goods and ideas, from places like India, Persia, Turkey and Europe.

In Chinese, the region is now called “Xinjiang” – which means “New Frontier.” That’s because for much of the Silk Road era, most of this region was not under Chinese control. And the majority group that lived here – the Uyghurs – didn’t consider themselves to be part of China. Some still don’t. Their language is Turkic. Their religion, for most, is Islam. Genetically, more have more European or West Asian ancestry than East Asian, like Han Chinese. And Uyghurs have been in the region for at least many centuries – some historians say, for thousands of years.

When China’s Communist Party came to power in 1949, it made conquering Xinjiang a priority. So it sent in the army. It sent in a paramilitary group called the Production and Construction Corps, to tame the wild west and exploit its rich resources. And, over time, it sent in millions of Han Chinese migrants, even while calling Xinjiang a Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Fast forward to today, and Xinjiang’s roughly 12 million Uyghurs are now actually a minority in their own ancestral land. They’re under constant, pervasive high-tech surveillance, treated with suspicion and contempt by Han Chinese who control the local economy, and by a Chinese government that has tried in different ways over time to make Uyghurs assimilate as loyal – or at least docile – Chinese citizens.

Uyghurs haven’t always accepted all of this quietly. There have been protests, sometimes violent, and usually met by fierce crackdowns – such as in the mid-’80s, in ’97, in 2009. The Chinese government has argued it’s Uyghur violence and separatism that’s led to the need for such crackdowns. Some Uyghurs still call the region East Turkestan – a name coined by Russians in the 19th century, and used during brief periods of independence from China in the 1930s and ’40s. It’s hard to know how many Uyghurs now support full independence. But in recent decades, and especially over the past decade of President Xi Jinping’s rule, the Chinese government has ratcheted up repression of Uyghur language, culture and Islamic practice, culminating in roughly a million Uyghurs being sent to reeducation camps. Some Uyghur women say they were sterilized there. Other reports indicate the government has increased efforts in Xinjiang to reduce an already low Uyghur fertility rate. China’s 2020 census showed that the population of Uyghur kids aged 0 to 4 that year, was just over one-third the size of Uyghurs aged 5 to 9.

The Chinese government says the reeducation camps – it calls them vocational training centers – are closed. And foreign journalists visiting the region have seen that at least some are. But many of those who have been in the camps have been transferred to prisons – half a million Uyghurs have been sentenced since 2017. Others have been sent to forced labor, often in other provinces, as part of a deliberate government effort to reduce the concentration of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Making goods that enter the global supply chain – in car parts, solar panels, clothing, foods and more. The U.S. government has imposed restrictions on some such goods coming from China, estimating that at least 100,000 Uyghurs are currently in forced labor – other reports say many times more.

Add to that the destruction of about two-thirds of mosques in the Uyghur region, the shipping off of Uyghur children to Han Chinese schools in other provinces, and other methods of coerced assimilation, and the U.S. government has designated what China’s government is doing to Uyghurs as genocide.

In part because of this repression, more than half a million Uyghurs now live outside China. And a few of those in exile are making sure the rest of the world understands what’s happening to Uyghurs. This episode features two of them – two women, both authors, from different generations – with a shared goal.

(Music up)

(04:40): This is the China Books podcast, a companion of the China Books Review. I’m Mary Kay Magistad.

(Music under)

And I remember, when I was a correspondent in China, being told by a Han Chinese migrant to China’s far west – that China had a right to claim the land, exploit its resources and push the native population out of the way – just like the United States did with Native Americans. Great powers do these things, he said.

Native Americans didn't have a lot of eloquent English-speaking advocates to push back American expansion into their ancestral lands. And even if they had, it's not clear who would have listened. But a few compelling Uyghur voices *have* broken through, have drawn attention to what's happening in Xinjiang, and have urged action to stop the Chinese government's repression of Uyghurs. Among them are my two guests. Each of them spoke little English when they came to the United States. But each learned quickly how to communicate. Their books are memoirs – of growing up Uyghur, going into exile in the United States, and learning how to draw attention to their people's plight.

Gulchehra Hoja is the author of *A Stone is Most Precious Where it Belongs: A Memoir of Uyghur Loss, Exile and Hope*. She grew up in Urumqi. She studied Uyghur language and literature, created and hosted China's first Uyghur language children's television program, moved to the United States and has, since 2001, been with Radio Free Asia. She was given the Magnitsky Human Rights Award in 2019, the Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation in 2020, and has been listed as one of the world's 500 most influential Muslims by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Amman, Jordan.

Jewher Ilham grew up in Beijing, and came to the United States in her late teens. The reason why is the subject of her first book: *Jewher Ilham: A Uyghur's Fight to Free Her Father*. Jewher's father is Ilham Tohti, who has been imprisoned in China for 10 years. He had been a respected economics professor at China's Minzu University, and had focused especially on economics as they affect Uyghurs. He'd also advocated for Uyghur rights to autonomy within China. And he was known for being a moderate voice – seeking dialogue and mutual understanding between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. After a two-day trial in 2014, he was convicted on the charge of separatism and given a life sentence. Amnesty International called the charge and the sentence “an affront to justice.” Jewher's second book, *Because I Have To: The Path to Survival, The Uyghur Struggle*, continues that story while also focuses on Jewher's work to draw attention to the Chinese government's repression of Uyghurs, including through her work with the Worker Rights Consortium, as a forced labor project coordinator, and a spokesperson for the Coalition to End Uyghur Forced Labor.

Both Jewher and Gulchehra write in their memoirs about what Uyghur culture means to them, and meant to them when they were growing up – including Uyghur dance, which each of them did for years. Here's Gulchehra, kicking off our conversation:

(08:00): **GULCHEHRA HOJA:** Yeah, we have a saying, “when the Uyghur children start talking, they can sing. When the Uyghur children start walking, they also can dance.” So I think both of us, because of the blood, DNA, we are Uyghurs. We celebrate life. Whenever we have the opportunity, music is a huge part of our life, especially in Uyghur culture. So our culture is thousands of years old, of course, mixing with so many related culture(s), because our location geographically borders, you know, eight, nine different countries. Our country was the center of (the) ancient Silk Road, that's why it's like very mixed culture, very rich culture. So, when I was very young, anywhere I listen (to) any music, I just want to dance.

That's my nature, I think.

[00:09:02] **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And then you became a pretty serious dancer. You were in competitions and you even won sometimes.

GULCHEHRA HOJA: Especially, I was so lucky to grow up in the family with so many talented people, especially my grandpa is the person who created the Uyghur Culture Center, music center, Muqam Center. Of course, our home was the celebration home for all Uyghur artists to come together, enjoying a great meal, music, every weekend, every month. So it also taught me so much about who are the Uyghurs, who I am. Also, my father can play music, dutar, and my mother also can play music and can sing.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And your grandfather was also a composer, wasn't he?

GULCHEHRA HOJA: Composer, Muqam composer and musician. He is very famous. He has so many music. We still listen. Yeah.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And Jewher, so you grew up in Beijing, I think you said that in your high school, which was connected to Minzu University. Minzu means like ethnicities. It's the university where you would expect to find Uyghurs and Tibetans and others.

But you said there were three Uyghurs in your class, you and a couple of guys. Where did your interest in Uyghur dance come from?

(10:30): **JEWHER ILHAM:** I started dancing since I was three years old. As Gulche had mentioned that Uyghur kids, when they start walking, they start dancing. However, because I was born and raised in Beijing, I didn't really have the environment where I could really connect with my culture or my roots. I didn't speak my mother tongue growing up. I mean, there was some Uyghur language spoken at home, but very simple. Like let's eat, let's sleep. My Uyghur language skill was like a five-year-old. And I always had the identity crisis growing up in Beijing, because I wasn't Chinese enough for all my peers, and there were no other peers around me who shared the same struggle. And dancing, whenever I danced, I look and felt the most Uyghur and that brought me comfort in me. I don't want to brag, but I always loved dancing, but whenever I danced Uyghur dance, that's when I shined the most on the stage. And when I tried dancing different kinds of dances – I also attended competitions as well – but all my awards happen only when I dance Uyghur dances. Also, when I danced, it wasn't just a performance. It was also like a battle for me, battle of fighting to keep the Uyghurness in me, even though I grew up with no Uyghurs surrounding me and no Uyghur language, and very minimum Uyghur influence in my life. Growing up in Beijing, the environment didn't really allow us to practice our culture or our religion freely.

But one thing was allowed, which was the dancing part and singing part, and I would dance almost every single day growing up. And I started at three years old, and I continued even after I came to the U. S. I only stopped in 2019. But I'd love to get back to it one day.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: So, did you feel under pressure when you were a kid in Beijing to assimilate?

(12:27): **JEWHER ILHAM:** The pressure was in a very silent way. There was discrimination and racism played out in a very silent way in China, when I was growing up in Beijing. Because the word racism and discrimination wasn't – it's not even a term used regularly in the Chinese society. It's not taught in your classroom. So when you are discriminated against, you don't even know how to put, you say, there's something wrong, but I don't know how to point fingers. So how do I describe what I am feeling or experiencing right now? It wasn't until I came to the U.S., receiving education here, why I actually – we had words put into those experiences. Then I, I had the aha moment. And it took years and years for me to even unlearn lots of things myself. I had prejudice against many other ethnic groups as well, including the Tibetans, including the Huis, because of the education, educational background that I was in. And I had prejudice against my own people as well, because of what the professors, what the teachers, what everyone around me was telling me, and what all the news were saying so it took me many years for me to unlearn those labels that were put on me or on my people. For instance I grew up having bugging devices in my household in our living room and I thought that was normal. I normalized it in my head, because of the discrimination, because of the racism. I even was racist against myself and my own people.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: How so?

JEWHER ILHAM: I normalized it for the Chinese government, thinking that's how we supposed to be deserved because we are one of those dangerous groups who are uneducated, who are backwards. Took me years to unlearn those, that those were the propagandas that the Chinese government implemented in my head – many peoples' heads.

(14:15): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And this was in the late '90s, early 2000s, which was ostensibly one of the more open periods in terms of Chinese politics. But that was still your experience. Gulchehira, you grew up a generation earlier, in the Uyghur region, in Urumqi, so we're talking 1970s and '80s. What was that like then for you in terms of the extent to which you had interaction with Han Chinese, what those interactions were like? Did you have friends? This is when you were a kid.

GULCHEHRA HOJA: So we don't (have) interaction with Han Chinese. Even that time is not much Han Chinese migrants. After the '90s began, we see more and more Chinese people coming to Xinjiang, the Uyghur region, we call East Turkestan, of course. Me and Jewhar is totally different. She was growing (up) in Beijing. I was growing (up) in Urumqi. The politics toward mainland China, Chinese people and Uyghurs is totally different because this is the colonized region, just like Tibet and us and Mongolia, they use the assimilation politics long term. The human rights treatment issues, you know, the Chinese government toward the Uyghurs is way long. We feel that pressure from decades ago. My aha moment, in 1987 there was December 15, Uyghur students (were) peacefully protesting about (the) Chinese government's politics toward Uyghurs. When that day we saw in the street, thousands of Uyghur students (were) marching. And I was questioning, "what happened? What happened?" And then we heard, from our parents, our neighbors. So I

was thinking, “oh, the Chinese government is bad to Uyghur people.” And then in 1989, of course, the June 4th movement started in Beijing. We, saw Örkesh (Örkesh Dölet, also known as Wu-er Kaixi, an ethnic Uyghur student leader in the 1989 Tiananmen protests) was leading. We were so proud. From that time he become my hero, you know? We look up to him. And then the democracy, first time I heard democracy, you know? So we need democracy. And then, in 1990, we heard about the massacre in Kashgar, Artush, so many places. And 1997, when I was in Xinjiang TV work(ing) as a journalist, as a TV anchor, we saw some footage from the Ili (Yining)massacre. And those, all those moments actually building up inside, you know, we are very different from the Han Chinese, to Chinese government, you know. We are just like (an) enemy. Because they using (the) army to crack down all those peaceful protests. And I was so wondering. But nobody answered my questions, because at home, even my father says, “don’t ask those questions. This is too sensitive.” Seems more scared for me, you know? And then when I start working in Xinjiang TV, I saw what (the) Chinese government wants from us. And even they used me as a propaganda to my own people, about the Chinese education (being) better than Uyghur education. And then I understand the situation of Uyghur people and other minorities in my country.

And when I was in the university, I had the opportunity to participate (in) the World Dance Festival. Even I got the gold medal. That time, the Chinese government sent one official with us, a delegation. His job is watching us, and educate us to not answer sensitive political stuff. And one month before our trip, they gather all the dancers and the musicians to learn about what we should say when somebody asks who you are, you know, those kind of stuff.

And I was feeling so uncomfortable, because I grew up the family who’s very proud to be Uyghur – their culture, their identity. And I was so in love with my Uyghur history and my culture, but I cannot proudly say I am Uyghur, and I love my culture and my Uyghur people. And that’s really irritate(d) me, that moment. So that (was) leading me to today, I think, because the pressure, you know, makes you think differently.

(19:31): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** But in the midst of all that, you were able to do this rather remarkable thing and create a Uyghur language children’s television program that ran for, how long?

(19:39): **GULCHEHRA HOJA:** For five years, almost five years. We ha(d) maybe a decade of time for Uyghur people to regenerate, rebuild our stability as a minority group in China.

So that moment, Chinese government even not – they were establishing after the Cultural Revolution. They give people a little bit freedom, opportunity to develop. It is limited, but still, we had that moment to regroup. So I did my part too. When I start working in Xinjiang TV, I saw so many Chinese program in TV, but we don’t have Uyghur language program.

So I graduated (with a) major of Uyghur language and literature. So I think, “why we cannot create program for Uyghur children?” I proposed to Xinjiang TV says, I can do it. If you give me opportunity, we can do it. And they trust me and we begin the Uyghur language program, immediately loved by people, especially Uyghur kids, ages between three, four to teenager.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Jewher. Did you ever see it?

JEWHER ILHAM: No. It wasn’t available in Beijing.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Not even when you visited (Xinjiang)?

GULCHEHRA HOJA: It was 1997 to 2001.

JEWHER ILHAM: But I knew many of my friends, we were friends who grew up watching Gulche’s TV program. They were telling me how amazing it was.

(21:24): **GULCHEHRA HOJA:** Thank you. It also gives so many kids hope for achieve their dream, you know, even today. So many Uyghurs around the world contact me says, Oh, I was interviewed by you. I was performing in your program. You gave me so much, you know, influence, you give me so much hope, and so it make(s) me so happy.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Yeah, and one of the things you mention in the book is that you were out in the countryside at one point and you struck up a conversation with a young girl. It made you realize that you weren’t reaching kids who had a lot of potential but were in villages and maybe weren’t getting the education

they otherwise might get. And so you made a point of saying, “we’re going to go around to different villages and do the program there.” And your boss said, okay.

(21:13): **GULCHEHRA HOJA:** That moment, even our bosses are Uyghurs. That’s why they understand, they give us the opportunity. But today, no Uyghur elites left in the whole society, including Mr. Ilham, you know? He’s sentenced for life, just because he was saying “this is Uyghur’s right”, you know? They have the right to practice their culture, their language. So today all those who build structure of the Uyghur society, all vanished. So it’s, it’s very sad. Even I can’t find my old boss, where he is right now, or my co-workers, previous co-workers. I never heard from them. About 20 something years. Especially from 2016, Chinese government arbitrarily arrested so many people just because of their identity. So I lost so many friends, so many relatives also.

(23:27): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What shifted? Was it the 2009 protests? I mean, was that where you think there was like this break where things started getting much worse much more quickly? Was it Xi Jinping coming to power?

(23:40): **GULCHEHRA HOJA:** Actually, I believe pressure shift when the Soviet Union collapsed.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: In ’91.

GULCHEHRA HOJA: Yeah. Central Asia countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, all our neighbors had the opportunity to, you know, have the freedom, independence. The Chinese government (was) very worried about it. Will give us independence influence, you know, give us the hope? That’s why (at) that moment, (the) Chinese government (was) using migration to the Xinjiang, thousands of thousands of Han Chinese migrants coming to Uyghur region from that moment. (And then) from 2001 (during the U.S. War on Terror), they used terms of ‘terrorists’ against Uyghurs, because all Uyghurs and the other minority in the Uyghur region are Muslims. Even we cannot practice our religion at that time, but inside us, nobody could kill our beliefs. That’s why Chinese government (is) afraid of our beliefs. When, when you believe in other power than Chinese government, they feel fear.

(24:59): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah. I want to talk about your dad, Jewher. He of course was a respected economics professor at Minzu University and also was known as being a moderate in how he talked about Uyghur rights. And he advocated for what is actually called the Uyghur Autonomous Region to have some autonomy. You talked about having bugs in your chandeliers and growing up thinking that was kind of normal. You were supposed to go with him to the United States when he had a fellowship at Indiana University. And I know you’ve told this story many times, including in your books, but just briefly, what happened?

(25:42): **JEWHER ILHAM:** In 2013, my father was invited as a visiting scholar to Indiana University, and it was supposed to be a one year, maximum two years position. And it was my winter break. My father asked me if I wanted to accompany him just to help him settle down, and so I can do some sightseeing and go home and brag about my U.S. trip. I rejected his offer in the beginning. But he kind of begged me, said, “oh, you might not see me for a year or two. Don’t you want to hold on to this chance?” So I agreed. And the two weeks trip turned into, now it’s been over 11 years of being separated from my family.

On February 2nd, 2013, when my father and I head(ed) to the Beijing International Airport. We left home in the middle of the night at 3, 4 a.m., even though our flight was not until 10 or 11, because we, we were used to being tailed, being followed by police, and we did not want to be followed. And we got to the airport. Everything was so smooth. We got our boarding passes. We checked our bags. But my father was stopped at the border. And because I was a teenager, I appeared to be not so threatening. So I was allowed to leave. And my father was prevented from leaving the country. And he was put under house arrest for over 11 months, until 2014, January 15th, (when) he was taken away from our home. And he disappeared for a few months. Later, after I testified (to) the Congressional Executive Commission on China at a hearing, requesting the Chinese government to show the proof of life of my father and, you know, tell us about his whereabouts, then we learned he was actually transferred all the way from Beijing to Urumqi, which is against the law, by the way. Not that the Chinese government likes following its own laws. They have the denial of Uyghur people’s fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of religious practices.

(27:41): But the systemic repression, I believe, only started after Xi Jinping was in charge.

He really had a vision, and had a plan. And he had his comrades to help him execute those plans, whether it's about economic growth, or assimilation, or about so-called poverty alleviation. Actually, my father wrote about it in his books, in his articles as well. He wrote about real poverty alleviation. He wrote about the labor transfers. And he really had the best interest for the Uyghur people, but also for the Han Chinese as well. He believed people are equal, and had believed people can peacefully coexist. He traveled to many places internationally just to find out how different countries, when they have different ethnic groups, different cultural background, religious background, how do people coexist? He did extensive and intensive research and reporting on his findings. And he really proposed solutions for the Chinese government. My father, in his nature, he's a fixer. When he sees a problem, he needs to fix it. I kind of inherited that as well.

(28:45): My father saw the problem, and seeing Uyghurs are increasingly becoming unhappy

because of the repressive policies that have been implemented in the region. And the Uyghur people are only becoming poorer and poorer, even though the Uyghur region is one of the richest in natural resources, whether we're talking about gold, uranium, natural gas, and so many raw materials, including cotton, silk – which really helps China, contributes to China's economic growth. And well, the Uyghur region is a natural powerhouse for China. It contributes to 20 percent of China's energy reserves. And 85 percent of the cotton from China is also produced in the Uyghur region. And nowadays, if you look at polysilicon, which is a key material for solar panels, 95 percent of the solar panels rely on the Polysilicon, which I mean, now it had reduced to 35, but previously it was 45 percent of the global polysilicon was sourced from the Uyghur region.

(29:40): That means like, not only China was heavily relying on the Uyghur region, the natural resources in the Uyghur region, but also the world. But (the) Uyghur region has always been portrayed as this remote area. And the people in this land has always been portrayed as uneducated, as I mentioned earlier, undeserving of any of the rights. And they are backwards, terrorists, extremists and violent people. And my father really tried really hard to, whether it's through reporting his findings, papers or through his website that uyghurbiz.com It really provided a platform where people could learn about the Uyghur region and about who Uyghurs are. And the platform was not only available for Uyghurs only, it was available for Chinese. It was written in different languages. And it was free, so everybody could have access to it. My father always believed you will always think the other side is the evil other side when you don't understand about them.

(30:37): Just think, even with the Islamophobia, how many people have even read or learned anything about Islam before they formed the idea of 'Islam is bad'? And my father wanted to provide a platform where people can know, oh, this is what Uyghur people think, and that's why Uyghur people are not happy. And then Uyghur people also know what Chinese people have been fed into. For instance, when I grew up in Beijing, I've had Chinese peers ask me, "is it real that Uyghur people can kill up to four people without going to prison?" I said, "where do you even get that from?" And people really believed it was true. And it wasn't until they talked to me, which they had the human interactions, but what about those people who didn't happen to have a Uyghur student in their classroom or in their school, or who were not even curious enough to be asking those questions? When I got, you know, highest grade for my English or for whatever subject it was, people were shocked. They said, "I thought we was, we're supposed to be dumb. How come you got good grades?" So many times my teacher would be like, "look at Jewher, even Jewher got good grades. How come you can perform well? And even her being an Uyghur can accomplish this and this, how come you guys, you should do better." And if I did not perform well, (she said) "it's okay, you guys are Uyghurs, that's normal." And my father really wanted to, pointing out to Han Chinese, that what you've been receiving, those kind of ideologies are wrong. And if you really want to know about who Uyghurs are, not through your textbook, not through your CCTV news channel that's 20 minutes about how great China is, the last 10 minutes is how the entire world is in a war or it's about to collapse. And what you need to get information is through firsthand. You need to learn from people from that community. And he was targeted for that.

(32:28): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** But he also was recognized for that with awards from PEN, the PEN Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, the Martin Ennells Award, the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, and the Sakharov Prize. You know, a lot of people are paying attention to your dad's case. Have you heard anything?

(32:48): **JEWHER ILHAM:** Not since 2017. According to Chinese constitutional law, political prisoners have the right to be visited every, at least every month. He was only allowed to be visited after his sentencing, by his family. And he was rejected for his second appeal.

But because of everybody's effort, my father has been nominated for Nobel Peace Prize for the past seven years, And he was actually predicted to be one of the finalists the past three years in a row. And this year, we launched a global campaign, mostly focused on EU side to, you know, collect signatures, to nominate my father for Nobel Peace Prize. And we have collected more than 200 EU lawmakers, professors from different fields, different sectors. And that really triggered a change, I believe, because the, not the police, usually it's the police that harass my family, but it was the first time that the National State Security in Beijing, which is like the highest, the decisionmakers, they reached out to my family, panicking, saying that "you should let Jewher shut up and stop advocating for her father's release or the visiting rights. We will grant back the visiting rights." I just heard that news actually. So we're going to find out this summer if he's actually going to be visited. I hope that's true. Because it could be a tactic that they're just trying to stall me, stall my advocacy work. But even the restoring the visiting rights is not going to be enough to shut me up. It is our fundamental rights, right? The Chinese government will have to do much, much, much, much, much more to let me silence teeny little bit.

(34:30): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Of course, the Chinese government is into group punishment when it feels that someone has done something against the state. And families get punished. Gulchehra, you went to the United States. You decided that you wanted to work with Radio Free Asia and to shine more of a light on what was happening in the Uyghur region. And at one point, something like two dozen of your family members were detained.

GULCHEHRA HOJA: Yeah.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Where does that stand?

(35:00): **GULCHEHRA HOJA:** When I was first time arrived in the United States in 2001, they already labeled me as a separatist and they target my family, visited my family and forced them to talk to me on the phone to get me to quit my job, you know, pressure. They (were) pressuring so many years like that. And my parents (were) under their control, also the relatives, they never given a passport to them. And (they had) many, many problems because of my work.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Although your mom came once.

GULCHEHRA HOJA: And her visit also – the Chinese government wants me to (go) back, also send me some warning. So 2018, we actually, RFA, really start(ed) reporting about what's happening in the Uyghur region. And my main focus (was) on, of course, the concentration camps. So I talked to one of the first, actually – the camp survivors, half-Kazakh, half-Uyghur, in Kazakhstan, Omer Bekali. When I published that conversation, after one day, I heard all my family members, including my father, mother, my aunt, a couple of cousins, all together, arrested in the same night. So at that moment, actually, I feel like I don't have any fear anymore, because I feel I have nothing left in my back home, so nothing to (be) afraid (of). So I begin to conversation with U S. State Department and other lawmakers, and I wrote the letter to 20-something countries' Chinese embassies, to ask about my parents wellbeing. And from that moment, actually, I've become very outspoken, because I'm in a free country, and this is my right.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Are any of your family members still detained?

(37:15): **GULCHEHRA HOJA:** No. After two months, my mother, almost two months, my mother (was) released because several lawmakers wrote the letter to the Chinese government and demand. There to release my family members. My dad is also free after my mother (was) released. My brother (was) released after three years experiencing the horrible jail, concentration camp, and labor camp. And my aunt (was) released two and a half years later with some condition. And I didn't hear about my cousins. I don't know.

I cannot even ask my mom. I can talk with them once or twice a month. Of course, (the) Chinese government is 24/7 listening to our conversation, or even (if)we contact anybody in Uyghur region, it could be dangerous. That's why I don't ask anymore about my relatives.

(38:20): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Have you ever been directly threatened by anyone in the Chinese government?

GULCHEHRA HOJA: Yes, many times, but I don't want to...

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: While you were in the U. S.?

GULCHEHRA HOJA: You know, we, I think my belief is helping me. So I don't afraid of Chinese government operation. So, what they want is just silence you.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Yeah. How about you, Jewher?

(38:45): **JEWHER ILHAM:** They never directly threatened me, only monitoring, monitoring my phone, my laptop, in person monitoring. When I was in Indiana, they sent agents to go to my class and, but they were polite to me. So, not physical threat, threatening, but to let you know they're watching you and...

GULCHEHRA HOJA: Same, same. Not physical threat, of course. It's sending any kind of messages from social media, from other person, you know, not directly, but yeah.

(39:16): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So you're both obviously still quite actively speaking out.

GULCHEHRA HOJA: This is our duty. As a human being, not as a journalist, as a Uyghur, as a human being. Yeah.

(39:29): **JEWHER ILHAM:** Yeah, Actually, their action just encouraged me to even do more. The more they attack on us, threaten my family, my people, the more I want to advocate, the more, the louder. So, the Chinese government (is) oftentimes victim blaming, saying that what's happening to the Uyghur people were resulted by the Uyghur advocates. for that. You know, overseas and I say that your reputation is resulted by yourself and me being as loud as possible was because you have intensified your actions. So like, if you victim-blame me, I victim-blame you too and, you know, reverse.

GULCHEHRA HOJA: I believe me and Jewher are the same, you know, more determined today.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And it was striking to me that both of you had embedded within your book titles, some hope. I just want to ask each of you, Gulchehra, let me start with you. You've been working as a journalist, as an advocate for Radio Free Asia for more than 20 years now. What impact do you think your work is having?

(40:27): **GULCHEHRA HOJA:** You know, the U.S. Department of State Human Rights Annual Report specifically emphasized that the Uyghur genocide is ongoing. In the report, the Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, he's saying the Chinese government continues to commit genocide, crimes against humanity, and forced labor in Xinjiang, and committing human rights abuses against members of Uyghur and other Muslim minorities. All those words, I believe, most of them because of the closely documented situation of Uyghurs. So it makes us (feel), yes, we're doing good, you know, we're doing the right (thing). And people start hearing us, hearing Uyghurs. That gives us, you know, hope and encouragement. Why (do) we have those resources? Because of people have hope and believing us, believing Western world, free world, can do something to change their situation. If they give up the hope, they never give us any information of what happened to them, to the Uyghur region, to the Uyghur people and others, right? So, because of hope, we are continuing our work. Because of their hope, because of hope of humanity, that's why United States also pushed the Chinese government to end the genocide. So, we believe, (as long as) we're alive, we're never going to lose our hope. You know, my mother after release (from a) concentration camp, she says, "Be safe. Be alive. When you're alive, everything is possible," she says.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And Jewher, you have very specific recommendations for those who would like to do something to have an impact on what's happening in the Uyghur region, in terms of what people buy, what brands people look to when they're out shopping.

(42:50): **JEWHER ILHAM:** We oftentimes call on the Chinese government to say, "oh, please close the camp. Please release detainees." Yes, we can call on that as much as we can, but it's up to the Chinese government to really, whether they come to their senses all of a sudden and say, 'hey, I decided to release all Uyghurs today and be a better person.' Hmm. Most likely it's not going to happen easily, right? So hit them where it hurts. What does the Chinese government care about the most? Money, their economy, right? So how do we prevent the Chinese government from continuing to carry out such repressive policies from putting people into forced labor detention camps by them no longer be able to profit off it? We don't need that many new things and we don't need that many new things that are produced by labor force labor. I love shopping. I have to admit, it makes me happy, but when I look at our shirt that is only four dollars, there's something wrong there that people need to realize. If we are not paying it through money in our wallet, somebody is paying for it.

(43:50): So that's why in 2019, with the efforts of several labor rights organizations, human rights groups, and faith-based groups, we've seen the influence impact on the U. S. Customs and Border Protection. There was WRO, Withhold Release Order, introduced on various products, like high-risk products, like tomatoes and cotton and some electronic companies. And then, in 2021, we saw the passage of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, and it really had triggered an impact. And in (the) EU, they passed the forced labor resolution. And there's also the due diligence law, that's really contributing to the decrease of demand. But we can't stop there, because we cannot just rely on the U.S. law or EU laws, because those laws are not existing in other countries, especially those massive garment producing countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Turkey.

(44:44) **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And cotton can be exported from China, from Xinjiang, to those places.

JEWHER ILHAM: And not only cotton. There about over 40 industries.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: So then technically it's not coming from the region or it's hard to trace.

(44:57) **JEWHER ILHAM:** Yes. For something to be labeled as made in that country, only a little bit over 40 percent of the production, manufacturing needs to happen in that country. The raw materials, whether, where is it coming from, as long as 40 percent of its manufacturing is happening in let's say, say Bangladesh, then it will be labeled as Bangladesh, even though the raw materials could be picked by Uyghur labor, forced labor workers, or forced transferred workers. The seafood that are produced in mainland China, doesn't even have to be in the Uyghur region, but also mainland China, because people could be in Shandong, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing. In fact, I've talked to someone whose brother worked in (a) Nike factory, making shoe insoles and shoelaces. And after this was exposed, he was transferred to a date packaging factory – you know, the red dates that are very yummy from the Uyghur region. He wasn't forced to pick the dates, but forced to package them. And if you go to any Asian markets, you will still see lots of red dates that are from China. And there are actually products from the Uyghur region or packaged by Uyghur workers as well.

(46:00): So, it's not cotton only, but in any industry, we should be mindful of where we're spending our money, and that we should push for more companies to pass legislations that work, like the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act that was passed in the U. S. that prohibits the use of any products from the Uyghur region from being imported into the U.S. soil unless the suppliers can provide clear and convincing evidence. However, there's something called the de minimis, which, it's – any shipment values of under \$800 can be waived from the scrutiny. They can just come in. So Shein, Amazon, those third party shipping methods, buyers, it will just come in, and although both Amazon and Shein have proven they have not only violated other labor violations in other countries, but also they have been traced back to Uyghur region made products.

So, we can do several things. First, you could learn where are you shopping from? And if the companies that you're shopping from cannot provide you with where they're sourcing from, then that's problematic. And that means the companies are first, either they're not doing their due diligence, they failed their due diligence, or they don't care enough to want to do their due diligence. And maybe that's a pretty red, red flag for you, to maybe stop shopping from them. And there are some local businesses, you know, you could support them to grow your local economy, right? And also support Uyghur businesses as well. There are Uyghur restaurants, Uyghur clothing businesses as well. They're also, Uyghur educational programs in universities that you could select, or encourage the universities or the communities that are involved in to add that into their syllabus, add the Uyghur studies in their programs. And also push for your lawmakers to pass legislation, including expediting, Uyghur refugees' asylum case, or expediting their work permits. And also with other countries, no matter who are listening to this, if you are based in Japan or Korea, you're so close to China, and you're known for your garment-producing manufacturing factories as well. So maybe this is the time you should pass legislation that prevents your countries, prevent your markets, prevent your consumers, from having to purchase goods that are made by forced labor.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Gulchara, would you like to add anything?

(48:26): **GULCHEHRA HOJA:** Yeah. Today, (reports about) Uyghur genocide (are) being heard in any part of the world, I think. So, it's about what we'll do, what you do. Are we going to let it happen? Or are we going to stop it, do something? I want to see some real action against Chinese government's genocide against Uyghurs.

(Music)

(48:58): **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** There *has* been real action taken by governments in reaction to the Chinese government's repression of Uyghurs. And as both Gulchera and Jewher have said, it has made some difference on the ground. In the end, though, the Chinese government appears to still see Uyghur's distinct cultural identity – and the desire of many to gain more autonomy within China – as a threat. At least some of China's leaders seem to think the reeducation camps, mass incarceration, mass surveillance, forced labor and forced assimilation policies for Uyghurs – are doing what was intended, and are worth the hit China's image is taking on the international stage. When President Xi Jinping visited Xinjiang in August 2023, he said it was enjoying “hard won social stability” and is moving toward “unity, harmony, and prosperity.” Few, if any, Uyghurs within China are able to contest that without consequences. Uyghurs outside China, like Gulchehra Hoja and Jewher Ilham, are speaking out for them. Thanks to both for being guests on this episode. You'll find a transcript at chinabooksreview.com.

(Music)

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