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REVIEW

The Erasure of the Uyghurs

Oppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang has slipped from headlines — but two recent memoirs by Uyghurs abroad attempt to portray the minority as more than just victims.

NICK HOLDSTOCK — JULY 18, 2024

XINJIANG



The last decade has been the darkest period in Uyghur history since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Over 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslims have been interned in “reeducation” camps in the Xinjiang region of China since 2017. Mosques have been demolished, artists and intellectuals detained, and Arabic writing removed from many shops and signs. There have been forced sterilizations of Uyghur women, and forced marriages between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. The Chinese government views every aspect of Uyghur identity and culture as a threat to its vision of ethnic unity, and its mechanisms of repression have become both more entrenched and more insidious. Although authorities [announced](#) at the end of 2019 that the “reeducation” centers were closing because those inside had “graduated,” evidence suggests that the region’s carceral system has diversified rather than diminished. Many former internees have been shifted to prisons or factories where they work long shifts under close scrutiny for minimal wages. Whether formally detained or not, Turkic and Muslim people in Xinjiang remain trapped within a mesh of surveillance and threat.

The Uyghur diaspora has been both traumatized and galvanized by these events. Uyghur activism has contributed to the introduction of [U.S. sanctions](#) against Chinese officials and companies, as well as the easing of some countries’ restrictions on immigration and asylum requirements for Uyghurs. Grassroots projects, including the [Xinjiang Documentation Project](#) (which collects sources about China’s policies in Xinjiang) and the [Xinjiang Victims Database](#) (which records the identities of



A Uyghur woman protests in front of policemen in Ürümqi, capital of Xinjiang, on July 7, 2009, as part of broader riots against state repression (*Guang Niu/Getty*)

incarcerated or missing members of ethnic minorities in the region), attempt to raise awareness of the ongoing repression. High-profile figures such as Jewher Ilham, the daughter of an imprisoned Uyghur scholar, continue to exert pressure on legislators and organizations. Such initiatives constitute a form of resistance that Milan Kundera called “the struggle against forgetting.”

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Critiquing a regime that has already imprisoned a member of one’s family, or may do so in the future, requires great courage. Two recent memoirs shed light on the choices and costs involved in such acts of resistance. Both recount life in Ürümqi, Xinjiang’s capital, during different periods. Gulchehra Hoja’s *A Stone Is Most Precious Where It Belongs* (February 2023, Hachette) covers the two decades preceding her decision to leave China in 2001, when she was 28. Tahir Hamut Izgil’s *Waiting To be Arrested at Night* (August 2023, Penguin Press) focuses on the period from 2009 to 2017. Both authors worked in Xinjiang’s cultural sector: Gulchehra as a dancer, singer and TV presenter; Tahir as a poet and filmmaker. Both authors now live in the U.S. and have no prospect of returning to their homeland. Like many memoirs written by exiles, the main purpose of Gulchehra’s and Tahir’s books is to highlight the crimes of the regime from which they have fled. As with any act of protest, one might ask how much such narratives of victimhood can really affect the regimes they critique. But Gulchehra’s and Tahir’s narratives also raise questions particular to their genre: How can a writer fashion their individual story, and the larger story of their people, in a way that generates interest and sympathy? What kinds of thoughts and feelings does such fashioning facilitate — and what might it suppress?



A Uyghur man in Kashgar, western Xinjiang, outside a commemoration to the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. (Kyodo/AP)

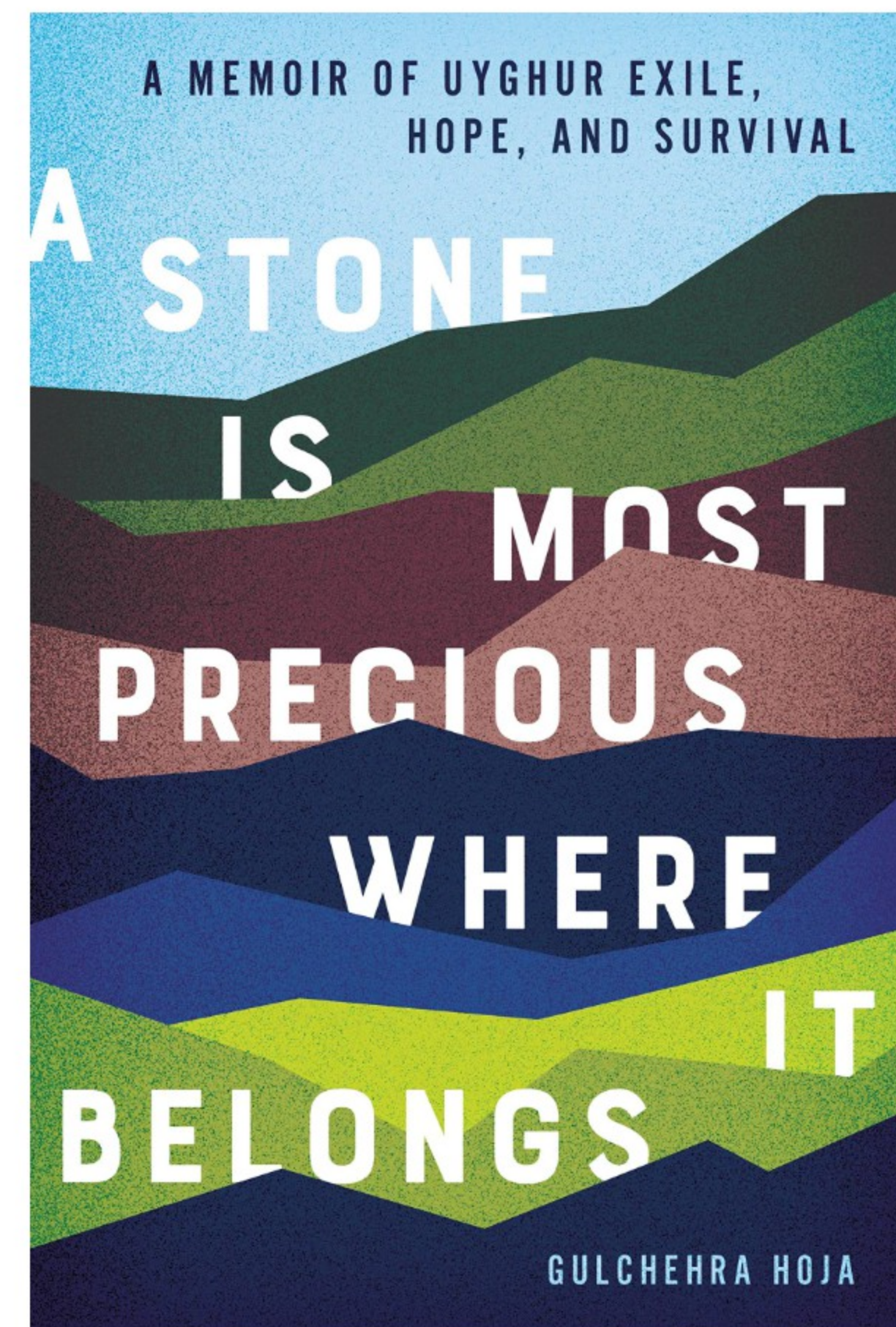
When Gulchehra Hoja left China, she started working at Radio Free Asia, a U.S. government-funded news organization based in Washington, D.C., where she continues to work. In January 2018, she broadcast the first testimony from a Uyghur who

had been in one of the Chinese “reeducation” camps. Gulchehra’s memoir opens a few days later, when 24 members of her extended family were detained in a single night as a punishment for that broadcast. Her mother was held for 40 days before being released, followed by the rest of her family, who Gulchehra says are now under house arrest. “The Chinese government took my family away for one reason: me,” she writes. Her mother reassures her that none of what happened was her fault — with the implication that it is ultimately the Chinese state that is to blame for her family’s situation. Gulchehra further justifies her choices by subsuming the welfare of her family into that of her nation, arguing that her journalism could “make the situation better for all of our people, one story at a time.”

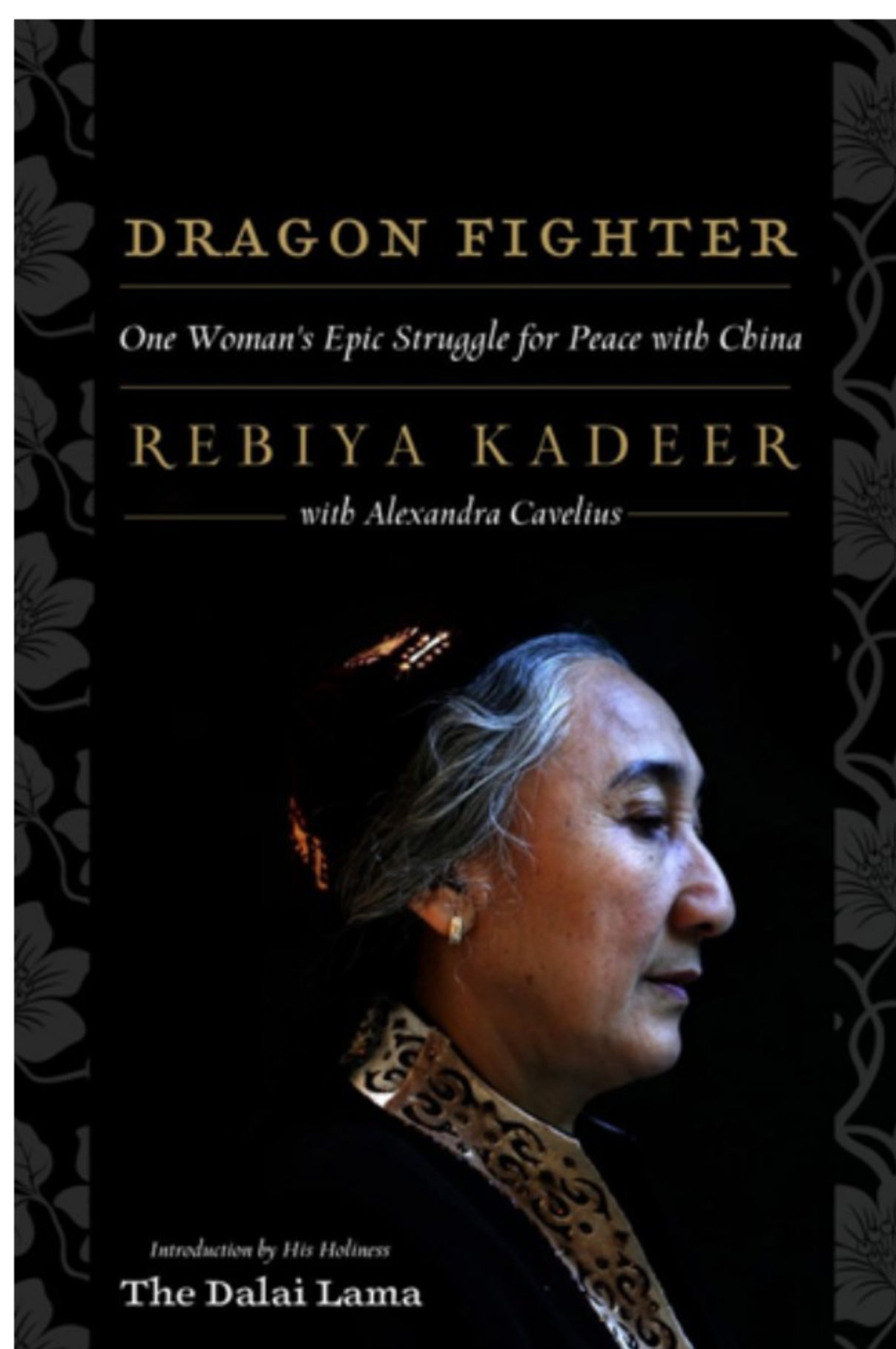
Gulchehra offers other justifications in her memoir, most notably for her involvement with many aspects of state power while she lived in China. She was born into a wealthy family in 1973. For most Uyghurs, the 1980s were a relative halcyon age in which the political instability and cultural restrictions of the 1960s and 1970s gave way to an “opening up” throughout the country, both socially and economically. The Chinese government allowed a diversity of Uyghur literature and music, much of it previously banned, to be published and performed. It was also an era of comparative religious tolerance. Thousands of mosques were built or reopened, sometimes with official funding; Muslims were allowed to study abroad or go on the Hajj.

It’s not surprising, then, that Gulchehra’s account of her early life offers few signs of dissatisfaction with the status quo. At her Uyghur-majority middle school and then at an ethnically mixed university, Gulchehra was a top student who participated in state-run dance competitions, usually performing traditional Uyghur dances. She loved the attention she received and was eager to build a career within the system. While at university, she worked for Xinjiang’s Public Security Bureau — a police-like force — as a student guide at an exhibition about the dangers of drugs. The connections she made at university helped her to get a job on a children’s TV program after graduation. She worked as a writer and producer for the show before becoming its host in 1995, making her a household name across Xinjiang.

One year into her new role, however, authorities made her reduce the Uyghur-language content of the show and present contrived scenes of Han and Uyghur children playing together, an imposition that made her feel she was only “a cog in the enormous wheel of the official media.” But she continued as a presenter for the next four years, a period about which her memoir has little to say. In one episode, she endorsed Uyghur children being sent to boarding schools in inner China, despite knowing that parents were often coerced into sending their children away. She indirectly justifies continuing to work for the television program by quoting a speech from her father about the “victory” of presenting one minute of truth about Uyghur history or identity within a 30-minute show.



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As someone who prospered within a system she now denounces, Gulchehra faces the same problem Rebiya Kadeer, the former head of the World Uyghur Congress, had to tackle in her 2009 memoir *Dragon Fighter*: How does one present oneself as a highly principled opponent — and perhaps also a victim — of a regime when some of the facts of one's life are at odds with this narrative? Rebiya was a highly successful businessperson in Xinjiang in the more permissive 1980s and 1990s, before she was arrested in 2001 for “disclosing state secrets.” (She says she simply sent some newspapers to her husband, who was living abroad at the time.) She was released on medical grounds in 2005 and now lives in the U.S. In *Dragon Fighter*, Rebiya — somewhat unconvincingly — claims that her motive for getting rich was always to help her people. (She remembers bribing a Red Guard in 1971 and feeling that she “held the power to make a difference with my money.”) As an adult, she tells the reader, she planned to use this power for good; she recalls telling

her children, “What I need is to earn more money for our people.” Though Rebiya certainly did perform some philanthropic activities, one wonders whether this can truly have been her sole motivation for building such a large business empire.

Like Rebiya, Gulchehra suggests that her cooperation with the state developed partly from a desire to promote Uyghur culture. Her memoir re-creates scenes that include lengthy conversations with friends, family and colleagues from more than 20 years ago. These scenes invariably provide an ideologically sound reason for her actions, such as when she explains her participation, during high school, in a state-run dance exhibition in Beijing: “I thought that by performing and showing ordinary Han citizens the beauty and power of our music and dance, it might help them understand the value of our own ancient culture.”

““ The messy complexities of most people’s lives are perhaps less inspiring than the story of a life lived according to unwavering principles. ””

Gulchehra was on vacation in Austria when she decided not to return to China. She relates the moment of decision as a kind of Damascene conversion in which the blinding light and voice come from the internet. Logging on in Austria, she was astonished to find activist websites, reports from dissidents and alternative histories of Xinjiang. Having learned the true horrors perpetrated against Uyghurs by the Chinese Communist Party, she tells the reader, she knew she could no longer live in China. She had apparently been unaware, despite having worked in Chinese media for five years, that “the Chinese Web was not an open and unbiased source of information.”

I do not doubt Gulchehra’s commitment to her cause or the suffering of her and her relatives. If anything, her strenuous reframing of her life choices is indicative of the high cost of her struggle to fashion herself as a credible, effective opponent of the Chinese government. Early in her account, Gulchehra describes her first visit to Beijing as a teenager and recalls her wish to be “a model minority.” I felt the presence of this desire in her memoir, too. The result is a somewhat contradictory account in which there is a tension between the more plausible descriptions of her thoughts and feelings (such as her ambition to be famous and have a good career) and how she thinks she should have been.



The Artux City Vocational Skills Education Training Service Center, believed to be a re-education camp for Uyghurs, north of Kashgar, in June 2019. (Greg Baker/AFP/Getty)

The messy complexities of most people's lives, with all the mistakes and ethical slips, are perhaps less inspiring than the story of a life lived according to unwavering principles. And inspiration is one of the purposes of Gulchehra's memoir, evident in her exhortations to be true to oneself, stand up to power and fight for what one believes in, no matter the cost. She is undoubtedly in a difficult position: Victims are often held to an impossible standard, and if she had admitted to any shortcomings, her

opponents probably would have used them to discredit both her and her message. At the end of her memoir, Gulchehra proudly proclaims that she will "never stop using my voice to speak up for the voiceless," but some readers may be left wondering how much room her role as a perfect spokesperson allows for her own voice.

Gulchehra's self-mythologizing is more forgivable than the factual distortions in her account of Xinjiang's history. She says that in Ürümqi in the 1980s, Uyghurs were "rapidly becoming a minority in their own city." But Ürümqi has always been a multiethnic city — of Hui, Manchu, Han, Uyghurs and others — in which Uyghurs have rarely accounted for little more than a quarter of the population, even if they have at times been the largest ethnic group in the region. Speaking about Xinjiang as a whole, Gulchehra claims that "Uyghurs have always been here, for thousands of years," but the historical record tells a much messier story of shifting populations and identities. She also describes the Loulan mummy (a preserved corpse from 1800 B.C.E. found in the Tarim Basin in southern Xinjiang) as a Uyghur ancestor, when neither its facial features nor its DNA point to a Turkic origin.

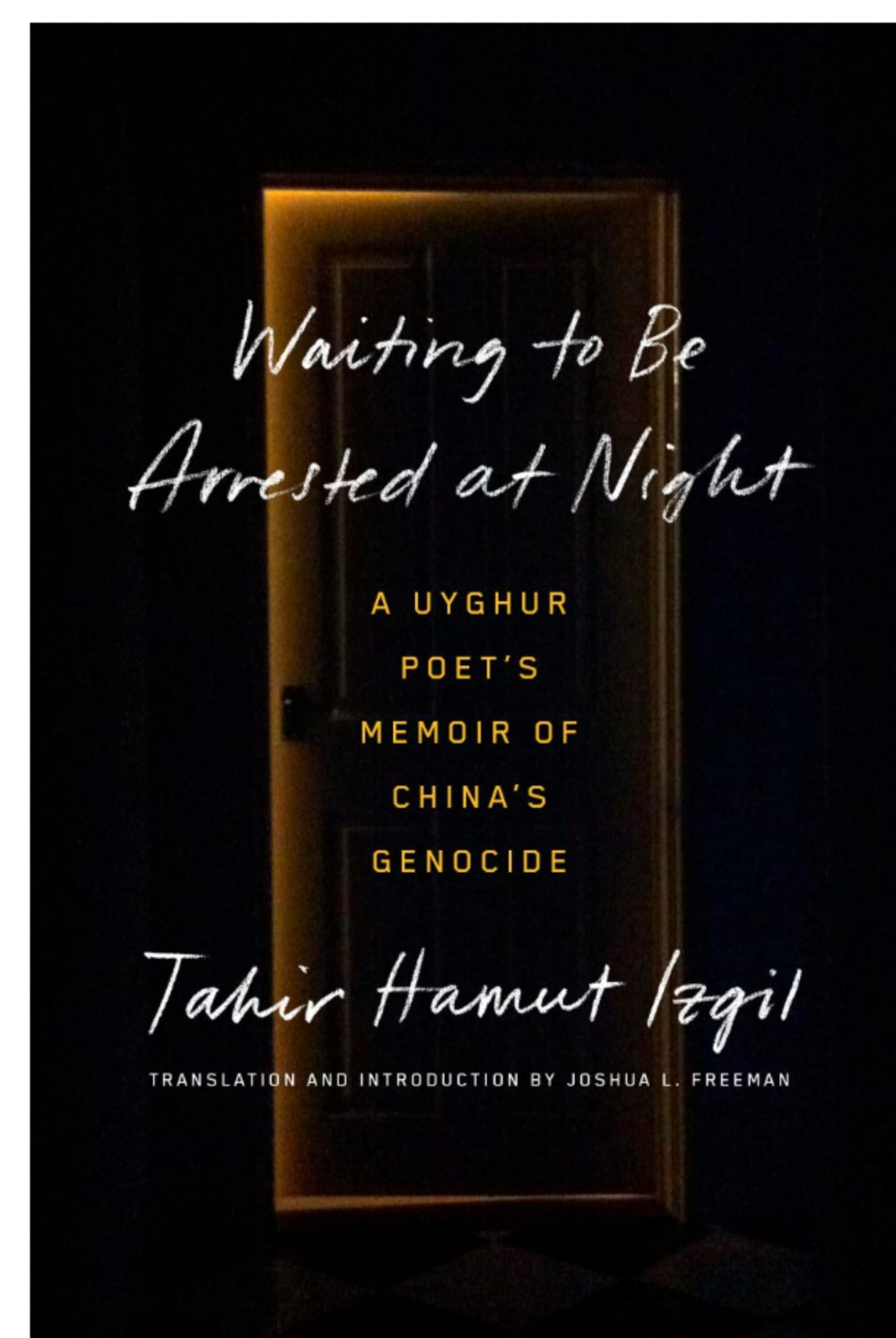
These might sound like small errors, but their effect is to promote an oversimplified narrative in which Xinjiang is an eternal Uyghur homeland. Such distortions have been a staple of Uyghur activist organizations for the last 30 years. When faced with the Chinese government's onslaught of misinformation about Xinjiang, about both its past and its present, it's perhaps unsurprising that many opponents of the government have ended up producing their own myths. Arguments from the Chinese state that Xinjiang is an inseparable part of China, and that any dissent is the result of "religious extremism" rather than a response to social or economic problems, have been countered by activists with claims that Uyghurs "have always ruled themselves" and that every problem in the region is the result of a deliberate attempt to target minorities (some problems certainly stem from national policies). Such simplifications are no doubt useful for campaigning purposes, but they undermine the credibility of those who use them. The double bind of any claim to victimhood, whether personal or collective, is that one's message must be simple, and yet such simplification produces a narrative that traps an individual or organization in an unstable position.



A 2015 signboard in Ürümqi, Xinjiang, reads “Let us love our great home country and build a beautiful hometown.” (Kyodo/AP)

In contrast to Gulchehra’s determinedly inspirational account of her motivations and actions, Tahir Hamut Izgil’s *Waiting To be Arrested at Night* offers a more persuasive account of the conflicts and dilemmas of leaving one’s homeland. He intersperses the narrative with a few of his own poems, sensitively rendered in translation — like the rest of the book — by Joshua L. Freeman.

Tahir grew up on a dairy farm outside the southern city of Kashgar. His early life, like Gulchehra’s, took place against the background of the more liberal 1980s. But in 1996, he was imprisoned for three years for trying to leave the country to study abroad. Rather than try to tell his whole life story, he sensibly focuses on the Draconian phase of recent Chinese history that began in 2014. The Chinese flag starts being raised at the mosque; imams are forced to take part in dancing competitions to humiliate them; historical novels by Uyghur authors are banned. Tahir and his friends try to convince themselves that “this is just another gust of wind. ... After a while it will pass.” Recalling this time, he sees in his and his friends’ attitude “a battered community’s daydream of better treatment by its colonial rulers.” He is candid about the denial and hubris that made him think he could escape the net tightening around his community. In spring 2017, while living in Ürümqi, he hears about the mass arrests in the south of Xinjiang and thinks: *Not here*. Two months later, he sees 100 people being put into vans in the city.



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Since Tahir left China only in 2017, he is better equipped than Gulchehra is to describe how the events of the last two decades have affected his community — for example, how a new prohibition on Islamic names for children under 16 has led many adult writers to change the names under which they publish. Tahir’s book gives a sense of Uyghur cultural life on a quotidian level: not just poets giving readings but also people having conversations in bookstores and restaurants (his re-creations of these have a naturalness that makes them far more persuasive than those in Gulchehra’s book). He emphasizes both the suffering *and* the resilience of Uyghur communities — and as a result avoids portraying the situation of

Uyghurs (including himself) solely as one of victimhood.

During one disturbing scene from May 2017, Tahir and his wife are led to the basement of a police station to have their blood and fingerprints taken. On the way, the couple pass cells with iron rings on the walls and bloodstains on the floor. Tahir remembers that when he visited the station three years previously, looking for a police officer to sign a form, he heard screams from a man being interrogated in the same basement in which he and his wife now sit. The contrast between these signs of torture and the insouciance with which the police officers go about taking the couple's biometric information creates an atmosphere at once chilling and absurd, as if at any moment the officers might, with the same casualness, decide to detain Tahir and his wife. After this experience, he and his wife decide to leave the country.

“ Personal accounts like Gulchehra's and Tahir's are often praised for “raising awareness,” but it's debatable exactly what increased awareness does. ”

The police officers featured in the book — many of whom are themselves Uyghur — are often terrifying, but they are also so pathetically corrupt that they invite those they are questioning to dinner and make them pay for the meal. Whereas such figures in Gulchehra's account are generally depicted as faceless minions of an evil regime, in Tahir's book they have a complex humanity. They offer opinions on poetry and admit the pointlessness of certain regulations. When Tahir describes meeting the police officer who had been conducting the interrogation in the basement, he recalls that the officer was “agitated and weary,” his hands shaking.

Tahir's book conveys the range of strategies many Uyghurs employ to live under oppression. They use coded language with one another: Having a “guest” means a police visit; being “in the hospital” or “sent to study” means being detained. Just as people did during the Soviet purges, Tahir starts to keep warm clothing by the bed so that he can put it on if arrested at night. He doesn't shy away from showing the bleak despair many Uyghurs feel. One of his friends remarks that he wishes the Chinese would conquer the whole world so “we wouldn't be alone in our suffering.”

If knowing when to escape from an impossible situation is one of the main questions of the book, the other is how. Connections, money and luck are crucial to Tahir's success in getting himself and his family out of China. Uyghur friends in Sweden provide a letter of invitation to support his passport application; a doctor acquaintance invents an ailment for his daughter to justify her need to travel; his family's passports, confiscated by the Chinese state, are abruptly and without explanation returned. Since arriving in the U.S., Tahir has continued to write poetry; he started writing his memoir in 2020. There is little sense that he sees himself as a spokesperson. His memoir is free of “voice for the voiceless”-style statements.

Tahir's memoir is powerful precisely because of its measured tone: He lets the facts speak for themselves. But even the most powerful examples of the genre do not often translate to significant political action. The Uyghur issue is low in the news hierarchy, and there seems to be virtually no prospect of China softening its policies in Xinjiang. Personal accounts like Gulchehra's and Tahir's are often praised for “raising awareness,” but it's debatable exactly what increased awareness does: There are many issues of which the wider public is very aware without it making much difference to corporations or policymakers. While Gulchehra writes enthusiastically about her association with influential figures in U.S. politics, the support of

such people tends to be contingent on more than just the perceived justice of a cause. With the signing of a trade agreement, the utility of a victim's (or a people's) suffering can quickly diminish.

For the foreseeable future, no state or transnational organizations are likely to do anything that will significantly interfere with the Chinese state's ability to control the lives of Uyghurs within its territory, mainly for fear of jeopardizing their economic (and in some cases strategic) relationships with the regime. There is a desperate need for long-term counterstrategies that preserve and transmit the features of Uyghur life and culture that remain under threat. To some degree, this is already happening in Uyghur communities around the world. Uyghur exiles have set up Uyghur-language libraries, schools and bookshops in places like Istanbul and Fairfax, Virginia. In many North American and European cities, there are Uyghur lecture series, concerts, restaurants and cooking classes. Each of these is a small victory; each is a statement that there is more to Uyghur identity than victimhood. But these efforts will require both financial and institutional support to sustain them. It is going to be a very long fight. ■

Header: A demonstrator in front of the Chinese consulate in Istanbul, wearing a mask painted with the colours of the flag of East Turkestan, and a hand bearing the colours of the Chinese flag, on July 5, 2018. (Ozan Kose/AFP/Getty)

This article was first published in "Issue 17: Land" of [The Dial](#), and is re-produced with permission.

Also listen to Gulchebra Hoja and Jewber Ilham talk about their memoirs in the [China Books](#) podcast.



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