

Exile

The Journey of the Uyghur Diaspora

By

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For the liberation of the Uyghur people

Some names have been changed.

The young woman at the centre of this book decides to use Nazugum as her name – to represent all Uyghur women.

Nazugum is a heroine in Uyghur history and a symbol of the courage and honour of women.

Born in 1800 in Kashgar, she participated in the revolt against the invasion of the Manchu Empire in 1826, and was arrested with her brother by the Manchus who forced her to marry a Manchu leader of Ili. Nazugum refused this “offer” and managed to escape. In 1829, she took refuge in the reedbeds (in the modern-day Almaty in Kazakhstan) of the Semirechye (Yettisu) region not far from the town of Chapchal.

Nazugum hid in caves for several months with an old Uyghur peasant from Ketmen. Sadly, in the end, with the help of informers, the Manchus found her. Unable to draw her out of the small caves, they set fire to them. It is said that shadow of the fire can still be seen after almost two centuries. Nazugum came out of the caves to save herself from the fire, but fell into the hand of the Manchus. She died in 1830, beheaded after several months in prison.

Nazugum is also known as a popular poet. She left many *qoshaq* (folk poems) on her fight against the invaders.

In this book, Nazugum’s mother is Mihriban and her father is Bilge. These are not their real names. Mihriban means kind, gentle, merciful, and compassionate. The name describes Nazugum’s mother well – the “keeper of love” and “protector of affection.” Nazugum said:

I see my mother to be the most mihriban person. The kindest person. She is loving, caring and a brave woman who sacrificed for her family's better life. I am the person I am because of her. It is because of her bravery that my father is living the life he is living today.

Her father's name Bilge means "wise" and "sage". Nazugum said:

My father is a wise person. Someone who stands by the truth, someone who fights for justice. If he were not wise, he wouldn't teach us to tell the truth, to stand by what is right and be the voice of the voiceless.

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1.

It was midday on an early summer weekday. Finchley Road was silent, like the unfamiliar suburbs to the north of London that always seemed a long way from the bustling East End where I lived. I walked up the empty street and soon found the dining place I was asked to come to. As I pushed the door open, I was instantly welcome by the sight of the Uyghur café décor, with several pieces of multi-colour Atlas (or Etles) silky cloths¹ and numerous *doppas*² on the wall. There was a soothing smell of home cooking that brought me back to the days when I used to wander the streets of Urumqi, capital of East Turkistan,³ and stumble across stalls selling home-made pastries.

A young woman came out and greeted me, with a sweet, sincere smile. “Nazugum,” she introduced herself and said I could call her by her first name. There was a calm confidence and a natural openness about her that came across within the first minute. As I sat down by the window, Nazugum followed me with a pot of Uyghur green tea and a plate of *samsa*, pastries with lamb mince inside. She said we could nibble these as we talked. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that I’ve quit red meat for a long time now. How can you refuse this hospitality? She told me she has been working here part-time on top of her studies at college. She knew the owners of the place well:

¹ Etles, or Etles silk, is a type of silk traditionally made by the Uyghur, Uzbek and Tajik people. It is made from the silk produced by the Atlas moth; thus it’s also called Atlas silk. The largest sites where this silk is produced are Khotan and the surrounding towns in the south of East Turkistan.

² Round-shape Uyghur hat.

³ Since the fifth century, much of Central Asia, including East Turkistan, was referred to as “Turkistan.” With the Russian occupation of “West Turkistan” in the early 19th century, the term “East Turkistan” was coined to distinguish the two.

Mukaddes Yadikar and her husband Ablikim Rahman who had left Ghulja⁴ in the northwest of East Turkistan in late 1990s.

I came to see Nazugum to listen to her about Uyghur people in exile and about East Turkistan. I wanted to find out about how they came to be in exile and how they resettle and cope with life as one of the least known-about asylum seekers in the world, despite the widely-reported atrocities in East Turkistan since 2016 and 2017. I had expected some level of cautiousness because it is natural to be cautious when you or your family have been through decades of repression and persecution. And then also experiencing the extreme hardship of fleeing persecution and settling in a strange land. After all this, I felt fortunate to be trusted by Nazugum.

As soon as I started talking to her, I realised that she wasn't carrying the caution and deep fear that would be the stamp mark of decades of Chinese rule. Being among the younger Uyghur generation born in Europe, she seemed fearless. "I am not scared of the Chinese government," she said, with strength and innocent courage in her voice. However, young Uyghurs in Europe are by no means a carefree generation. They do not feel that they have the choice to simply "move on" from their parents' past and get on with the personal advancement in their lives. The history behind them, carried over by their forebears, is so painfully heavy that it will always weigh on them like unresolved debts. For many young Uyghurs, fighting the battles that their parents and grandparents were fighting will forever be their lifelong mission. Like Nazugum, many of them want to be part of the

⁴ Ghulja, known as Yining in Chinese, is a county-level city located along Ili River. It had an estimated population of 542,507 in 2015. It is the most populous city in the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture.

struggle to bring liberation for Uyghur people. In Nazugum's words, it is her duty to be part of that struggle.

In our first meeting, Nazugum shared the memories of her past – and she did so without any reserve. This innocent-looking, nineteen-year-old woman and her family have lived through huge upheavals. And yet she spoke with such clarity and conviction. I felt an instant closeness with her.

During our break, she went into the kitchen and brought out a plate of Laghman (or *läghmän*), hand-pulled noodles that she made herself, mixed with peppers and chicken. She had learned to make these from the chef. “The best Laghman should be as thin, or thick, as your hair,” she said, again with a smile.

After that meeting, I sometimes met Nazugum here. She was completely at ease at this place. She didn't see it so much as a place of work but a community space. I know the importance of such a space. I myself had looked for it for a long time.

Let's rewind. Before Nazugum and her family moved to London and settled here in 2016, they were in Norway. Or precisely, Bergen, a city of nearly 272,000 people on the Arctic country's southwestern coast, which Nazugum's parents did not know existed until the UN arranged for them to settle there. It was surrounded by mountains and fjords, and the most tranquil place they could have wished for.

Since Nazugum was born in 2003 in Bergen, living in safe and peaceful surroundings was all she knew – and of course, the endless rain, too. Raised in this conflict-free fjord city, she loved nature and activities like fishing by the sea. Her childhood was so utterly carefree, in sharp

contrast with her father Bilge. Bilge was born in 1968 and came originally from Shayar county, Aksu, a prefecture at the northern edge of the Tarim Basin in East Turkistan. Her mother, Mihriban, was from Almaty in Kazakhstan.

When she was little, Nazugum had no visual image of Aksu in her mind. It wasn't on her father's lips much. She later knew that Aksu meant "white water" in Uyghur, and is a place known for its agricultural production, mainly of long-staple cotton. It also grew grain, fruits, oils and beets. In Nazugum's young mind, she saw her parents as ordinary people who have migrated to Norway at their own will. Bilge never told her why and how he left his homeland. Her mother Mihriban never explained why and how she left her home country. As a child and then an adolescent, Nazugum had never had any idea what events and circumstances brought her parents to Bergen.

Before Nazugum was born, Bilge arrived in Bergen in 2002 from Almaty, Kazakhstan, the first place he had escaped to from China. Mihriban joined her husband the following month, with their three-month-old son. Bergen wasn't Bilge and Mihriban's choice of destination. As it was organised for them, they were pleased to go wherever was considered safe. They had few expectations about this north-European provincial town. They didn't know whether it was to be a temporary stop, or a place to settle as a permanent home. They simply arrived, and were taking it as it came.

At the time when they became new residents of Bergen, there were only five or six Uyghur families in town. Although it was a huge change from Almaty where tens of thousands of Uyghur people lived, Bilge and Mihriban were pleased to find the closely-knit Uyghur community in Bergen where people were connected with one another. Everyone brought with them a story of trauma and their often

unspeakably painful journey from East Turkistan glued them strongly and tightly together. The families' recognition of each other's pain was mostly silent as they rarely talked about their personal past publicly. In mutual understanding and consolation, they were like one big family, constantly being there for each other.

The number of Uyghur people in Bergen grew over time – there were around 300 Uyghurs in the town, by the time Nazugum and her family left in 2016. As Nazugum recalled, you could easily bump into other Uyghur residents in the streets of Bergen. There were another 300 Uyghurs living in Oslo back then. The number of Uyghur people in the whole of Norway grew steadily over the years. Since the “5th of July Incident”⁵ in 2009, known by Uyghurs as the Urumqi Massacre, more Uyghurs had fled China and came to Norway. Then in 2017, another wave of Uyghurs escaped persecution and arrived. More recently, a growing number of Uyghurs arrived in Norway from Turkey⁶. This reached thousands in 2022, and a second generation of Uyghurs growing up here. Currently, in 2025, around 5,000 Uyghurs are living in Norway, mostly in the southern part of the country.

On arrival, Bilge and Mihriban and their baby son were given a two-bedroom apartment in a quiet residential neighbourhood, with a beautiful view of the surrounding hills. The flat was sufficiently spacious for the family and living conditions were good.

⁵ It started when Uyghur demonstrations against racist murder of two Uyghur workers were brutally suppressed, resulting in further casualties in the following days. This is discussed in sections throughout the book. From now I will refer to the “5th of July Incident” as Urumqi Massacre, as this is how Uyghur people call it.

⁶ Officially known as the Republic of Türkiye since 2022. I will use “Turkey” as this is how most people refer to it in the book.

Conveniently, it was located near Gyldenpris Kindergarten which Nazugum attended later on.

At the beginning, like most new arrivals, Bilge and Mihriban felt uncertain about their situation and their future. They didn't speak the language, and apart from their interaction with the tiny local Uyghur community, they felt quite culturally isolated. At the same time, despite finding it hard to cope with the differences, they were taken aback by the hospitality that they received. They were provided with food, baby products, and everything that they ever needed. They were given basic weekly financial support and didn't have to worry about paying the rent. "The authorities never made my parents feel under any pressure, even though living costs were high," Nazugum recalled. "The state provision of services was very efficient, unlike in the UK."

It was unlike anywhere else, in fact. Bilge and Mihriban were surprised because they would never have had any of these provisions from the authorities in Kazakhstan. In Bergen, they were also offered Norwegian language lessons at a school and were given vocational courses to help them find work. They never expected any of the support they received. It left them in shock, not knowing how to respond at times. The gratitude that they felt always stayed with them. "Norway helped us in our difficult times," Bilge said in retrospect.

During the early days of their time in Bergen, they were living in the shadow of the past. Bilge's life in China as well as those experiences and memories of living in a police state in Kazakhstan made it difficult for them to trust people at first. In Norway, things seemed so different, they thought. The police were not only polite but actually friendly. They spoke with people and sometimes even made jokes with them. How could this be? Their demeanours puzzled Bilge and Mihriban.

The couple found local people in Bergen welcoming. They felt accepted by the local community. No matter what people's individual attitudes towards different religions might be, it was at least free for them to practice religion. They saw the basic respect people seemed to have for each other and were surprised. However, it took time for them to build trust in fellow humans. Especially for Bilge. After all, he grew up in an occupied homeland and had seen Uyghur people being held under a chokehold throughout the occupation. It took him years to know that "walls don't have ears" in Norway.

Like Bilge, many Uyghur people who sought refuge in Norway or other Scandinavian countries took time to adjust themselves to a completely different society from the one in which they were permanently under surveillance. The poem 'An Ear on the Wall' was written in these circumstances, by Abdushukur Muhammet Qumtur who lives in Sweden. Uyghurs in Sweden also experienced similar confusion and adjustment.

*As soon as we arrived
Our parents convinced us the walls had ears
It was only later that we realised everything else did, too.*

*The story was, as the elders said, mouths pressed to ears,
The youths we had grown up playing with
Had vanished one night as if abducted by jinn
They had been standing under a wall with ears.*

*Until the day we arrived in Sweden
We lived a thousand years per day surrounded by them.*

*There were no eared walls here
In fact, the people had none either
You may try to tell them something*

*On the streets and squares with loudspeakers
Yet no one listens*

*They did not believe that walls could have ears,
That there were ears around us.
But in the homes of Swedish Uyghurs
Every wall is covered with them
Carrying ears inside themselves, they had smuggled them in
From where they came from*

*Where they were from
If a person laughed they looked angry
If a person smiled they looked sarcastic
They believed the tea they drank and the food they ate had ears.
They were too anxious to dream, to think
Because they had ears on themselves, too
They could not live without them
They did not believe the Swedish walls had none*

*Unable to imagine an earless life,
Scared to death of standing below an earless wall*

*They lived. Eventually,
Part of them became an ear on the wall.⁷*

Eventually, Bilge and Mihriban adapted to the different mindsets and way of life in Norway. They also gladly adapted themselves to the new physical space in Bergen. There was a lot of green outdoor space for the children. People freely enjoyed their right to access these public

⁷ 'An Ear on the Wall,' by Abdushukur Muhammet Qumtur.

spaces while committing to the responsibility of respecting and maintaining these spaces well, like an unsaid rule. They saw a lot of kindness in the way people treated their natural environment. The parks, the woods, the seaside, were there for everyone. A polite distance was well kept between people and nature, as well as between people. It was a completely different way of seeing and living. The oppressive crowds and the in-your-face closeness of Almaty was no more. They started to embrace life in Bergen.

They started looking outwards and looking for work. Bilge found a job in a warehouse at first, and then later worked as a taxi driver. He got to know the town so well. Apart from looking after their children, Mihriban also started working part-time in a post-office.

A couple of years passed, and they became fluent in Norwegian. They had gradually adjusted to life in Norway and felt much more at ease. They started trusting people around them more. They became socially active in the local Uyghur community, and felt more part of society. Their life became busy. They often organised events in town, to bring people together. Every Sunday, Uyghur residents in Bergen got together. When shops were all closed outside, Uyghur families organised their own gatherings, such as visiting each other's homes and cooking, dining and spending time together.

Bilge became central to the Uyghur community in Bergen. In 2003, he and a friend of his set up Norwegian Uyghur Committee⁸ together. Bilge served as the first president of the organisation for four years. He became occupied with teaching Uyghur history, language and the Quran to Uyghur children. He saw the importance of passing on the cultural heritage that was suppressed and lost in China. He and his colleagues took it on themselves to aim to fill the gap and build

⁸ See <https://uigurene.no/about/>

collective memories for the next generation. He had studied Islam for two decades and wanted to use his scholarly knowledge on Islam to educate Uyghurs worldwide. In Norway, where practicing and teaching religion is a basic right, he set out to write his first book in the Uyghur language, titled *Qaza ve Qeder (Judgement and Standards)*. It covered general knowledge about Islam. He also set up a Uyghur-language YouTube channel where he talked about topics related to Islam. He continued with his writing and completed his second book *Eqide ve Ehkam (Faith and Rule)*, an extended version of his first book.

Bilge and Mihriban saw education as a priority for their children. Like all Uyghur parents in exile, education included teaching their children to be proficient in the Uyghur language. As Nazugum and her siblings spent most of their time at school, they spoke better Norwegian than Uyghur. But at home, their parents made sure that they spoke Uyghur. At first, Nazugum was a little reluctant to learn, as youngsters would, and she often spoke with her siblings in Norwegian. When she went to the weekend Uyghur school and spoke Norwegian, her parents often corrected her and encouraged her to speak Uyghur. She gradually understood the importance of learning Uyghur – this was reaffirmed by her experiences in her adult life later.

The Uyghur community in Bergen had set up language classes in the Turkish mosque they attended in town. The mosque was in a rented flat, funded by the Uyghur community, above a garage. Inside, local Uyghurs were given two rooms, one for teaching Uyghur language, the other for teaching Quran to Uyghur children. The children would learn their mother tongue for a couple of hours and then join the Quran class. Nazugum's parents helped out with some of the teaching.

Nazugum spent a lot of time being taught how to read and write in Uyghur by her father. Apart from learning the Norwegian alphabet at

school, she always had lessons at home. She was also taught to read the Quran by her father. She was able to read and write and was ahead of her class at the Uyghur weekend school. At the age of ten, Nazugum became an assistant teacher to the Uyghur language classes and helped the younger ones. In the Quran lessons, too, she was asked to help those who couldn't read. They organised reading competitions for children, which made it fun.

Although Nazugum's parents continued to remain silent about their past, the past stuck out as the elephant in the room. The past was what kept many Uyghurs feeling separate from the society of Bergen – even the younger generation of Uyghurs who were born here. When I asked the simple question whether Nazugum generally enjoyed her life in Norway, there was a long pause and much pondering. Then she said, "There were times when I went to school and other students were talking about visiting their relatives over the weekend. I felt lonely then. I felt different. And I thought to myself how unfair it was that I couldn't visit my grandma and my relatives." The absence of a normal family life was impossible for Nazugum to ignore and made her deeply aware of her roots. This absence – of a history and an explanation for that history – drew her closer to her parents' past and led her to search for answers.

As a child and then an adolescent Nazugum embraced the society and culture in which she was born and growing up. She found Norwegian culture "beautiful", in retrospect, as she put it, and was glad to have grown up in a relatively free country like Norway. But she has always recognised the differences between Norwegian and her father's culture. She identified herself firmly and confidently as Uyghur.

Nazugum knew her father was trying to find a sense of belonging in Bergen as well as holding onto everything that reminded him of home. Along with other Uyghurs in town, her parents organised festivals, poetry, dance and all kinds of cultural activities. Back in those days, it was still possible to receive things from home that helped calm their nostalgia. They used to ask their relatives in Urumqi to send parcels of goods to them. Sometimes Nazugum's grandmother would send them beautiful boots and dresses which cheered them up a great deal.

Nazugum's grandmother was the centre of Bilge's remembrance of home. In Norway, his conversations with his mother on WeChat was his only link with the distant memories of the place where he grew up. He told Nazugum about the funny little things that happened in his village when he was a child – and what a naughty boy he was. One of his fondest memories was about one of the first times he fasted during Ramadan. His friend invited him to go together and sneak into neighbours' gardens. They sat in the gardens and ate fruit. They forgot that they were supposed to be fasting. They kept eating all the peaches around them until they were full. And of course, when they were found by the adults, they were given a good scolding. Bilge told these stories to his children, and they all laughed about it.

At the time Nazugum had never met her grandmother, but knew her from phone conversations and had seen her on the family video calls. Grandma had long black hair, all braided. She usually had half of her braids covered. She was always jolly on the phone when she chatted with her grandchildren. "We are all good," she always said to them. Never once did she talk about the hardship of life or revealed anything that worried her. Bilge always had long conversations with her and the family in Aksu. Nazugum once saw him cry when talking with his sister on a video call. He had always loved his sister dearly. Nazugum

said her younger sister seemed to take after this aunt, which made her “dad’s favourite”. With such deep affections for his family in Aksu, it broke Bilge’s heart not to have been able to visit them ever since he left home. Nazugum had asked him why he left and why he couldn’t visit. He didn’t ever give an answer, but simply said he just couldn’t visit. Nazugum was only a child in his eyes, and he didn’t want her to see his pain. He did not want to confuse or burden her.

Nazugum had always known of East Turkistan as her homeland, as her parents and everyone around her called it. They had a flag and a map of East Turkistan hung on the wall in one of their rooms at home. Her parents had pointed to the map and showed her where Aksu was, where Bilge came from. They also always had flags of East Turkistan hung in venues when they had events with other Uyghur residents in Bergen. The flag wasn’t only an expression of nostalgia, but conveyed so much more for those in exile – it represented the rebellion that has been long suppressed and about a future vision for self-rule in their homeland.

East Turkistan, the largest administrative area in China officially known by its Chinese name Xinjiang (literally meaning “New Frontier”, a name from Qing dynasty), or Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) as its full name under the People’s Republic of China (PRC), has a population of 25.85 million today, among which 12 million people are Uyghur. Uyghur people are historically Muslim: Sufi Islam had become the dominant religion by the 11th century. The Sufi rulers were overthrown in 1759 by Qing as the imperial empire expanded into Central Asia. The PRC government has always claimed that the region is “an inalienable part” of the country. But it was only in November 1884, during the Qing dynasty, that the region was annexed and became a province under General Zuo Zongtang's policy of frontier defense. And only

then, the region became gradually integrated into a larger Chinese territorial polity.⁹ According to the author Mamtimin Ala and Salih Hudayar, founder of the East Turkistan National Awakening Movement:

China falsely claims East Turkistan has been part of China “since ancient times.” But despite almost 2,000 years of contact, China never really established hegemony over the region until the late 19th century. Various dynasties briefly occupied parts of the region, brought parts of it into tributary relations, and manipulated local politics, but it was never successfully integrated into the Chinese empire.¹⁰

Since then in the late nineteenth century, the Sinicisation (or Han-isation) policy began, where the state brought in Han Chinese population¹¹ to help assimilate the local population and bring the region into the control of China proper. This policy was the primary means through which colonisation of Uyghurs people was carried out. I will discuss Sinicisation throughout the book and explain how, despite being the majority population in East Turkistan, Uyghur people have never been the master of their destiny.

Since Qing’s rule, rebellions never ceased among Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims.¹² Following Qing’s collapse in 1911, revolts continued during the period of Chinese warlord governors, and grew into the anti-colonial movement that led to the declaration of

⁹ See p.27, *The War on the Uyghurs: China’s Campaign Against Xinjiang’s Muslims*, by Sean Roberts, Manchester University Press, 2020.

¹⁰ See <http://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/11/independence-east-turkistan-china-uyghurs-xinjiang/>

¹¹ Han Chinese people are the largest ethnic group in China, comprising approximately 92% of the population.

¹² The most successful rebellions were led by Yakub Beg (1820-1877), who established an independent government in Kashgar in 1867. His temporary rule was overthrown by Qing forces under General Zuo Zongtang in 1878.

independence by Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in 1933 as the Islamic Republic of East Turkistan in Kashgar. It was overthrown in 1934 by a combination of Hui and Chinese forces under the Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang government (during the Republic of China era) and Soviet-backed warlord Sheng Shicai. Sheng began to adopt and implement Sun Yet Sen's blueprint for the colonisation of East Turkistan by 1937, by Han-ising the region with Chinese colonists. This was followed by mass purge¹³ of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples, coinciding with and adopting the language of Stalin's own purges.¹⁴ It resulted in the imprisonment and deaths of around 100,000 people. In 1944, this led to a renewed anti-colonial movement, in which Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tartars joined forces, backed by the Soviet Union, to declare independence again as the Islamic Republic of East Turkistan. The Soviet Union soon turned against the rebels and helped the PRC regain the region in 1949.¹⁵

The PRC invaded East Turkistan on the 13th of October, 1949, and the East Turkistan Republic was overthrown on the 22nd of December that year. Tens of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims lost their lives in the years that followed.

Back in the early days of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), specifically from 1921 to 1938, in order to win the support of the Soviet Union and ethnic minority elites, the CCP strategically endorsed an ethnic minority policy predicated on self-determination.¹⁶ It promised ethnic minority communities the right to unite or secede from the to-be-formed PRC. However, in 1938, when the

¹³ See p.38, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Campaign Against Xinjiang's Muslims*.

¹⁴ See above.

¹⁵ See p.42, as above.

¹⁶ See p.32-33, 'Resisting Chinese Linguistic Imperialism: Abduweli Ayup and the Movement for Uyghur Mother Tongue-Based Education,' Uyghur Human Rights Project, May 2019.

CCP no longer needed this support, it replaced the provision for self-determination with the idea of ethnic “regional autonomy”,¹⁷ granting limited autonomy in areas where the ethnic minorities are the majority. In 1949, when the CCP took power and established the PRC, the system of “ethnic regional autonomy” was formulated (legally based on the Chinese constitution and Law on Ethnic Regional Autonomy). In 1954, the Chinese Constitution formally made secession illegal. This system of regional autonomy was different from the Soviet model¹⁸, where ethnic autonomous entities had actually practiced ethnic autonomy. In China, regional autonomy has been mocked as “paper autonomy” by academics.¹⁹

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) was set up by the Chinese state in 1955. As Uyghur economist Ilham Tohti²⁰ pointed out, the policies of autonomy of the region have never been implemented²¹. What “regional autonomy” really means on the ground in East Turkistan is that, first of all, Han Chinese migration has been imposed on the region and has never stopped since 1949. A

¹⁷ The Chinese state recognises 56 minority nationalities. The minorities number more than 106 million, comprising 8.4% of the total population but occupy 60% of the territory. They are often the majority communities in their home areas where the “autonomy regions” are, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Ningxia, Guangxi and Inner Mongolia. See p.217, *China in the Age of Xi Jinping*, by Michael Dillon, Routledge, 2021, Oxon & New York.

¹⁸ See p.22, *We Uyghurs Have No Say: An Imprisoned Writer Speaks*, by Ilham Tohti, translated by Yaxue Cao, Cindy Carter, Matthew Robertson, Verso, London, 2022.

¹⁹ See ‘Conceptualising Uyghur Separatism in Chinese Nationalism,’ *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA*, Volume XXVII No.3, July-September 2003. Binh G. Phan called China’s regional autonomy “paper autonomy.”

²⁰ Ilham Tohti is a Uyghur economist serving a life sentence in China for “separatism” charges. He is a vocal advocate for the implementation of regional autonomy laws in China, and was the host of *Uyghur Online*, a website founded in 2006 that discusses Uyghur issues.

²¹ See p.25-26, *We Uyghurs Have No Say: An Imprisoned Writer Speaks*.

year prior to the establishment of XUAR, the Chinese state implanted an institution specifically for the region: the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), also known as *Bingtuan* (which literally means military corps). Following the tradition of *Bingtuan* as an institution of military development practiced during the Qing dynasty, *Bingtuan* in East Turkistan had been responsible for developing the region and defending the frontier. It built military agricultural settlements and introduced waves of Han Chinese people from China's interior to settle in the rural villages. The migration of military and military-related population to the region since 1949 stood at around 300,000. These ex-military and military people found themselves in the highest positions in the region. They may be compared with “the pied-noirs who were the most intransigent opponents of independence and de-colonisation in Algeria.”²²

In the mid-1950s, a campaign was launched to “assist the border regions and protect the Motherland”. In August 1958, at the height of the Great Leap Forward, young people were encouraged to migrate to “Xinjiang”, to reduce population density in China proper. Hundreds of thousands of people, including students, poor farmers and the unemployed from urban centres, migrated to the region in the 1950s and early 1960s. Consequently, the percentage of Han Chinese population has risen from 6.7% in 1949 to 10% in 1954, and 28% in 1960, and 40% in 1970. At the very same time, the state has created segregated areas for all ethnic groups by setting-up of autonomous prefectures, which also separated ethnic groups from each other and minimised their opportunity to govern.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the paranoid CCP set out to revise ethnic minority policies. Since the 1990s, *Bingtuan* has

²² See p.82, *Xinjiang in the Twenty-First Century: Islam, Ethnicity and Resistance*, by Michael Dillon, Routledge, 2019.

been operating in parallel to the regional government and has been granted the same status. Its dual purpose became even more prominent: it ran the regional economy and served as an arm of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in putting down civil unrest. Therefore, in the eyes of Uyghur people, *Bingtuan* is a colonial institution that stands above local societies in East Turkistan.

Since the 1990s, for the Chinese rulers, economic development has become the primary means by which political control, assimilation and economic expropriation could be achieved at the same time. "The withering away of *minzu* (meaning ethnicity and nationality) groups is a long-term historical process," as Jiang Zemin said, and to achieve that, he wanted the region to be incorporated economically. As Deng Xiaoping had said in 1979, developing the economy of ethnic regions is the key to effectively solving the *minzu* question. Jiang Zemin and his "third generation" leadership, particularly Zhu Rongji, the inheritor of Deng's economic ideas, turned this idea into a substantial strategy. In 1999, Jiang launched the Great Western Development (*Xibu dakaifa*). It was legitimised as the logical extrapolation of Deng's analysis of the "two overall situations" (*liang ge daju*) which envisaged the economic development of the coastal regions as the top priority, followed by the inland territories of China's western hinterlands, largely impoverished regions located far from the centre of power.²³ By then, "the development programme" had been tied in with the strategic plan to open up the economy of the entire western China for the benefit of China proper. Great Western Development was part and parcel of the nation-building project of the CCP. Since then, investments have been poured into selected parts of East Turkistan to develop trade and agricultural production (such as cotton) and the energy industries, to serve only the national economy.

²³ See p.75, as above.

In late 1998, *Bingtuan* was transformed into a commercial corporation, Xinjiang Construction Corporation (XCC), tasked with expanding Han Chinese influence into the Uyghur-dominated southern East Turkistan by way of infrastructure projects. The aim was to firmly integrate the region into China. After 2002, Hu Jintao and the “fourth generation” attempted to refine the economic development policy. Wen Jiabao stated: “The large-scale development of the western region constitutes an important guarantee for the lasting political stability of the whole country.” The inflow of cash and the expropriation of East Turkistan’s resources brought with it high level of transfer of personnel and labour from China proper, which further Sinicised the region. As James Millward has pointed out, this resulted in an influx of educated Han Chinese professionals. While further Sincinisation meant further stability for the state, the Uyghurs found themselves reduced to a minority in the most developed areas and professional sectors of the region.

Along with Sinicisation, East Turkistan remains the one place in the country that is mostly a mystery to Han Chinese people – one of the few things they knew being the region’s extremely rich natural resources. Its oil accounts for a third of China’s oil production and is a major pipeline route into Central Asia. It also accounts for 34% of the country’s natural gas and nearly 48% of its coal. It also occupies a significant strategic position bordering Russia and all the Central Asian states. But this is also the one place that often brings a worried frown on a Han Chinese citizen’s face. The name of the region seems to entail so much contested meaning. Going there often invites nosy questioning, warnings, and sometimes, a stream of racially-charged commentary about the region and its people. Talking about East Turkistan is like opening a long book of secrets and lies. East Turkistan is indeed China’s Pandora's box.

I remember well my last evening before setting off to Urumqi in the summer of 2011. I met a man who worked for the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. He was known to have secretly held critical views of the regime, and I thought he might be able to introduce me to some useful contacts. In an over-priced café decorated in a colonial English style, he talked cautiously with me while his girlfriend, a TV reporter in her twenties, sat sipping coffee next to him. “You should be very, very careful in Xinjiang...It’s chaotic,” he warned sternly, pushing up his glasses. Then his partner added: “It can be very barbaric and dangerous over there... It’s better you don’t go.” Neither of them has ever set foot in the region in their lives. This portrait of East Turkistan and its people had been repeated to me by many Han Chinese citizens on my journey ever since.

The racialisation that works to the benefit of a unified Chinese nation draws on cultural concepts of Chinese civilisation and “an imaginary boundary of the Chinese state” as Dr Abanti Bhattacharya put it. Within this conceptualisation, *Han-ren*, synonym of the Chinese people, are set opposed to the culturally “under-developed” *yi*, literally meaning “barbarian,” and had historically assimilated *yi* and incorporates them into the sphere of Chinese civilisation by “leading them to a higher stage of development.” The Chinese Nationalists since the beginning of the twentieth century – and later the CCP – had both adopted this cultural notion of the “Chinese” and the “Chinese nation”.²⁴

²⁴ “Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu*) was a modern neologism invented by Liang Qichao (梁启超) in the late Qing as a formulation aimed at bridging the space between the Han people and all the other ethnic groups living within the borders of the empire. It has since come to be used widely wherever a comprehensive term is needed to refer to people who identify culturally as Chinese. Liang’s idea was adopted by the Chinese Nationalist thought at the beginning of the twentieth century. The idea of ethnicity and nationality (*minzu*)

In East Turkistan itself, racial oppression has dominated the lives of Uyghur people and other Turkic Muslims for as long as they have been ruled. During my time there, I came to observe that this is practiced in three fundamental ways: marginalisation, segregation and assimilation. The populations are divided socially and physically; the division is constantly visible. As Ilham Tohti said, the vast majority of the region's Han Chinese population is concentrated in three areas, all of which are effectively off-limits to Uyghurs: the *Bingtuan* areas, the capital city Urumqi and cities such as Shihezi and Kuitun that are located in the Tianshan North Slope Economic Zone.²⁵ Urumqi itself is heavily balkanised, divided into distinct ethnic enclaves²⁶. Han Chinese and Uyghur neighbourhoods are clearly separated from each other. I myself often heard derogatory comments made by Han Chinese residents about Uyghur neighbourhoods. The division and segregation is as much about ethnicity as it is about class.

Nearly all Han Chinese in Xinjiang live in urban areas or "within the system" [of government entities or government-controlled entities], while the vast majority of Uyghurs live in rural areas or "outside the system". The two-tiered system that manifests itself in other areas of China as a

in the post-1949 China had, in effect, followed the tradition established in the Chinese Nationalist past. Assimilationism is at the centre of the conceptualisation of nation and nationality. The founder of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or the KMT), Sun Yet Sen, theorised the assimilation policy towards ethnic minorities in his idea of "five-group co-existence" (*wu zu gonghe*), which encompasses Han, Man (Manchurian), Meng (Mongolian), Hui, Zang (Tibetan). His ethnic identification and recognition, which at the same time rules out the possibility of self-determination of ethnic groups, was inherited by the CCP in its theory and practice towards the minorities. The CCP developed it into the classification of 56 ethnic groups in China and ensured the predominance of the Han majority by adopting the Chinese Nationalist conceptualisation of the all-encompassing "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*).

²⁵ See p.77, *We Uyghurs Have No Say: An Imprisoned Writer Speaks*.

²⁶ See above.

divide between rural and urban manifests itself in Xinjiang as a divide between Han Chinese and Uyghur...²⁷

This forms the essence of the oppression against which Uyghur people have rebelled.

...ethnic segregation has a profound impact on the Uyghur sense of ethnic and national identity. In fact, it calls into mind similar systems of segregation in Palestine and South Africa. Uyghurs in China are "noncitizens" or "second-class citizens", and XPCC outposts are widely regarded as the equivalent of Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip.²⁸

When Nazugum was a child growing up in Norway, what did East Turkistan actually mean to her? She revealed to me that she used to think of East Turkistan as an ordinary country like every other, and that her family was just another family who happened to have chosen to come to Europe. Listening to her father Bilge's earlier memories, she had imagined East Turkistan to be a beautiful place like Norway. "Why did you leave?" she kept asking her father. It puzzled her as family and relatives were still living there. Each time, his reply was the same: "I had to." Nazugum's mother Mihriban would then say to her, "Don't ask, leave him alone." Her grandmother also never told Nazugum about her father's past, and how her parents ended up migrating to the edge of the world.

When she became a teenager, Nazugum always felt that there were secrets about her father that had been withheld. Secrets about what happened to him. The only thing that Nazugum's parents ever told her and her siblings was that they had wanted to return to Kazakhstan

²⁷ See above.

²⁸ See p.78, as above.

– a host country for Bilge (before coming to Norway) and home for Mihriban. They wanted to return there because Mihriban’s family was still living there and there is a large Uyghur community in Kazakhstan. What they hadn’t revealed to their children was that it would never be possible for Bilge to return to Kazakhstan and for them to live there as a whole family again.²⁹

Ever since they settled in Bergen, Mihriban visited her mother and family in Almaty from time to time, without her husband Bilge. It wasn’t explained to Nazugum why her father couldn’t visit Almaty with her mother. Nazugum grew up with the mystery of the past, like some of the other young Uyghurs in Bergen – and some of the younger generation of Uyghurs in Europe. But as they grow up, they will begin to understand the painful journey of their parents and the older generations of Uyghur exiles. Their stories encapsulate the very history of the colonisation of East Turkistan. Nazugum was to understand this history through her father’s untold past.

²⁹ This will be explained in chapter two.

2.

Bilge wanted to tell his children about his past. When Nazugum grew into adolescence, he wanted her to visit and see East Turkistan, his homeland which he left at the age of 26. He would have remained there had he had any choice. He would not have wanted to leave his loving mother and family behind.

East Turkistan only caught the attention of the public in the West since the “re-education” camps became known in recent years. But Bilge knew, with painful memories, that the camps didn’t only start to exist in 2016 or 2017. The state started building the camp system a long way back – as well as the subjugation of Uyghur people. Bilge told me:

One thing that stood out in my memory about my father from when I was five or six, was watching my father being paraded, humiliated and punished. They [police authorities] made him wear an animal hat moza [of triangular shape] in public and show him as if he were a criminal. They made him run around the streets. They put a placard on his neck, with writing on it, and although I didn’t know what it meant, I knew it was about the kind of crime he was supposed to have committed... In 1933, the independent Uyghur state was formed, and one of my dad’s relatives was involved in this organisation. Because of this involvement, the whole family, including cousins, were treated as criminals. Not only my father but my grandfather and relatives were taken to be paraded in this way. Whether they themselves were involved or not. This happened to many Uyghurs.

Ever since then, as Bilge was growing up, he started to ask his father, “why did they make you put on that hat? Why did they make you run?” His dad explained that Uyghurs like him were called *eksil inqilapchi* (descendants of the dissenters), which referred to