

Interviews

The Watchman of the Uyghur People

An interview conducted by Shohret Nijat¹ on November 29, 2008, at Ilham Tohti's home in Beijing.

Shohret Nijat (SN): A few friends of yours from Xinjiang came to Beijing last week—were you happy to see them?

Ilham: Yes, we had a gathering!

SN: Even though everyone hadn't met for so long, all the feelings were there.

Ilham: Of course—most of them were my friends from school and university. Whenever we're together we never run out of things to talk about.

SN: What did you talk about?

Ilham: Everything. We told stories from our youth—when- ever we recall those days, the blood really starts pump- ing. I feel that the kids of that generation have a strong sense of responsibility. We dare to be at the forefront and have a certain verve. The generation of Uyghur kids today, on the other hand, is not the same.

SN: Are you saying that the current generation of Uyghur young people doesn't have a sense of responsibility? That they lack the verve and vigor you speak of?

Ilham: Yes. The kids today are a bit selfish, and they don't have much self-confidence.

SN: Why do you think that is?

Ilham: What you lack today is the ability to think about things philosophically. It's a crucial ability. You've gradually become estranged from the culture and history of your own people. What parents teach their children at home is also a huge issue. These days parents are likely to tell their kids to "look after yourself and mind your own business." Our ancestors didn't think like that. A portion of farming households in southern Xinjiang have preserved good traditions. For example, they'll go out themselves and sweep the sidewalk. The kids don't litter, even when there are no garbage bins around. We never used to be a selfish people. What we lack is a transition to modernity.

The issues we now face need to be borne, to a degree, by the current generation of young people: we don't look after ourselves as a people, and as a people we are having a crisis. Maybe it's because I'm a teacher, but when I see the young Uyghur students today, I really become anxious. It's as though you've lost the sense of responsibility for suffering and thinking about our people. Most of your time is wasted in online games and chat rooms.

SN: Isn't this a whole social malady? Children from the majority ethnicity, the Han people, are the same, aren't they?

Ilham: Even though there are all sorts of comments in society about the millennial generation of the Han, I actually think their millennials are quite exceptional. They're more capable than the generation before. On the other hand, our young people are failing to carry on our culture, and we're losing the better parts of our own traditions. We seem lost as a people. Uyghurs are facing a "cultural crisis." Even though Han people are also facing their own cultural crisis, they're still doing better than us—at the very least, their intellectual class is quite outstanding compared to ours.

SN: Maybe, as in your generation, there aren't many in our cohort who dare to speak out.

Ilham: Indeed. Now it's not merely a question of whether we dare or want to speak up—the entire social and political environment in Xinjiang is completely different to how it was back then. At the very least, when we were growing up, teachers could speak about the history and culture of our people in class. Now, that happens very little. There's no room for expression or research either. The environment for Uyghurs to survive and develop socially is extremely dire.

At University, I Got the Nickname “News for Reference”²

SN: When you left Xinjiang and moved to the interior for university, was it difficult for you academically?

Ilham: Back then I matriculated because I had exceptionally high grades. I scored 68 in mathematics on the national college entrance test. It was pretty decent where I came from, but when I got to university [in Changchun, Jilin province], I discovered that among Han students, the lowest score was 99. During middle school I was a “three good” student [as evaluated ideologically, educationally, and physically], and I was always ranked among the best. But in university I was surrounded by better students, and I felt the gulf. Also, in my first year, first semester, I failed a course.

SN: Presumably this had a big impact on you at the time?

Ilham: That’s for sure. I always worked hard in my studies. After I flunked the class, I didn’t lose heart. I reflected, and I even pinned up a poem above my bed. I forget the exact lines, but it was basically encouraging me to study in earnest, and that I’d come to study in order to represent my people, so I just couldn’t fall behind. I never slacked off. I’d be at the library all the time, and worked so hard that at one point I only weighed 50 kilograms.

At university I got the nickname “Reference News.” I sought knowledge like I was quenching a thirst. I

went to the library and read all the newspapers of the day, and then the magazines, and then the books in my area of specialty. I knew where they were, and librarians would let me into restricted areas to read. The library closed at 9:00 p.m., but then I’d head to the self-study room to keep reading. I remember an essay I wrote in university which I sent, as a kind of experiment, to *Guangming Daily’s* theoretical page—amazingly, they published it. Even my teachers began to look at me differently.

SN: In those four years, how many times did you go back home?

Ilham: Not once. I wanted to stay at school, read more books, and improve my language.

SN: What would you do on summer and during winter breaks?

Ilham: I studied English, among other things. At that point my English wasn’t bad. I carried a little radio around with me all the time to improve my Mandarin as well.

SN: Why didn’t you choose to go straight home after graduation?

Ilham: I was afraid that if I went home there would be nothing to do. I was afraid that there was no use for me in Xinjiang. I also had misgivings, because I took part in pro-democracy demonstrations in 1985 and 1989.

SN: So you chose to study further?

lems. For example, in a certain place in southern Xinjiang, they were unable to find a Mandarin teacher, so they went to a brick factory and grabbed a migrant worker. The education bureau chief, who was Han, was furious at this. From a certain perspective, what's happening now in Xinjiang is a Great Cultural Revolution that is destroying the indigenous culture. Even though the propaganda about bilingual education is that it's great for minority students, in the future a great number of problems are going to surface.

SN: Though bilingual education and encouraging minority students to study Mandarin is a good thing, why has the effect been opposite to that portrayed by the government?

Ilham: Bilingual education around the world is a mature field with a wealth of experience in both success and failure. What's being practiced now in Xinjiang is not entirely bilingual education. For instance, in ethnic-language elementary schools nowadays they don't teach the alphabet of the mother tongue until the fourth grade; there are schools in which the kids aren't allowed to communicate in their own ethnic language. Teachers call out and criticize students who don't speak Mandarin. The result of this is that many students go home and speak to their parents in Mandarin. Bilingual education shouldn't be built on a foundation of harming native languages and cultures, under the slogan of "mother-tongue education is the foundation; foreign-

language education is the pillar; bilingual education is the path." For the bilingual education to be actually welcomed by the public, the mother tongue can't be marginalized and neglected.

SN: It's not merely bilingual education that is a sham; in Xinjiang, the entire education system for peoples other than Han has seen a decline from earlier eras.

Ilham: Our modern education used to be just as good as that in the rest of China. If you examine Uyghur education history, you'll see. Uyghur modernizing educators used to invite teachers from Turkey, Tajikistan, and Tashkent [the capital of Uzbekistan]. Before China's interior was teaching geography, we had this curriculum established. We also taught several branches of mathematics, including geometry and algebra. In the 1930s and 1940s we established the first accounting school in China at Ili; the first school for animal husbandry was also founded in Xinjiang by Uyghurs. There were also the old leaders; Burhan Shahidi⁵ graduated from Berlin University, while Saifuddin Azizi⁶ and others were graduates of well-known Soviet universities and colleges. They were highly educated and knowledgeable. Nowadays, you can count the number of these types of leaders on your fingers. A solid education in the humanities is crucial for any people. But now, the transmission of culture and education among our people has been severely damaged. Ethnic pedagogy in Xinjiang is in a terrible state.

SN: Should the intellectuals of our people bear some responsibility for this?

Ilham: Intellectuals are indeed a backbone of a people. But as a people we've suffered so much control and restriction. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China grew vigilant about the Central Asian region. A consequence of this was that its policies toward Uyghurs in Xinjiang, especially toward the Uyghur educated class, became stricter and stricter.

SN: The difficulties in ethnic education have also led to a range of social problems.

Ilham: In the society we had before, there was no such thing as AIDS, street urchins, theft, and other such social problems. A great part of the old Silk Road stretched through Xinjiang, and these paths were unobstructed and clear. Uyghurs were never bandits. Also, for instance, the drug problem. When the entire society was enveloped in opium smoke, Uyghurs never suffered this problem. In fact, the watershed year for drugs as a serious social problem in Xinjiang was 1991. Prior to 1991, there were very few people who smoked and drank. After that, living conditions for Uyghurs began to get worse and worse, and drug problems got out of control. Especially after 1997, I found that a lot of young people from Ili came to the Weigong Cun and Ganjia Kou areas in Beijing and they stole from people and also traded drugs.

The Importance of “Uyghurbiz” as a Platform

SN: I heard about you through an article that appeared in *Phoenix Weekly*, vol. 17, 2007, about street urchins from Xinjiang. The article cited some of the research you'd done.

Ilham: Actually, the *Phoenix Weekly* reporter worked with Uyghurbiz staff to put that piece together.

SN: It's very rare to see articles like that, even among Uyghurs, reporting on social problems in Xinjiang.

Ilham: I think it's because Uyghur society finds it hard to accept. If we as a people expose ourselves like that, some will be angry, saying, “Why are you saying all these bad things about us?”

SN: Are there people among our group who don't want to forth-rightly face our failings?

Ilham: I've seen some nativist Uyghur websites where Uyghurs themselves are avoiding these issues. But we're influencing them. The most important thing Uyghurbiz is doing is working hard to teach young Uyghur people that they should dare to speak the truth.

SN: Is daring to speak the truth the same as simply complaining?

Ilham: In Uyghur society, resigning oneself to adversity and not caring about other people has already become an entrenched social phenomenon. The “speaking” I'm referring to is about telling others about our own history, culture, who we are, the conditions of our ethnic

regions, the employment situation of young people, and so on. Some people think that Uyghurbiz is just about giving people with ethnic sentiments a space online to sound off. But that's not what it's about. There needs to be a platform for people to make their feelings known, and every people has the right to express their own ideas and rights.

SN: Is that your goal in setting up Uyghurbiz?

Iham: That's right. I really think Uyghurbiz is an important platform. We're doing our best right now to let every corner of the world understand the Xinjiang and Uyghur issue. We're trying to change the prejudicial views that people have toward Uyghurs. Our efforts have seen some preliminary results. A number of well-known publications inside and outside China have republished some of the high-quality articles we posted to the website.

SN: Did you encounter any interference when first setting up the website?

Iham: There were obstacles. Whether we could even use the word "Uyghur" was a point of contention. I was frequently summoned and questioned by police. But despite the obstacles, we've been moving forward.

SN: Are you not afraid?

Iham: I once told the relevant organs that even if they lock me up for twenty years, it'll be the same whether I'm in jail or not. On the outside, I'm very pained; inside jail, maybe it'll actually be easier. I acknowledge the fact

that I'm a supporter of ethnic self-determination. But even more than that, I'm a Chinese patriot. What we want to do is open channels of communication, to have society progress peacefully.

SN: Uyghurbiz has been running for nearly three years. What has its impact been?

Iham: There's been impact, and the name recognition of the website itself has slowly been on the rise. Our click-throughs have been growing steadily year by year, which is quite rare in China when it comes to websites that introduce and discuss minority ethnicity issues. Even though Uyghurbiz is a tiny platform, it has in fact led to some changes. For instance, if you search "Uyghur" online now, our website is among the first three results. Our website is also used as study material for students in universities outside China.

SN: How about among Uyghurs?

Iham: I'm not sure about working-class folks, but the influence among intellectuals has been quite significant. Most of our registered users at the moment are Uyghur intellectuals, students, and those of other minority ethnicities who are interested in Uyghur issues. Our collective efforts have also led to the government paying attention to some of the social problems we've pointed out—for instance, the problem of street kids. This word hadn't even appeared on the Chinese internet until we began using it; you could say that we're the first ones to introduce this concept.

SN: Was the street kid issue something that Uyghurbiz began to focus on as soon as it was established?

Ilham: It was one or two months after the website went live. At the time you'd go online and all the news about Xinjiang street kids was entirely negative—that they're thieves and so on. We thought that this was just unacceptable, so we began gathering materials and really investigating the matter on the ground. As a result we set up a page specifically focused on this issue.

SN: Street kids are very common in southern Xinjiang. Why is that?

Ilham: Again, it's an educational issue. In Kashgar, only about 7 percent of high school students in the city are from rural households, though the vast majority of households in Kashgar—92 percent—are rural. This shows that the matriculation rate for Uyghur children in Kashgar is extremely low. Poverty is an educational issue, and people are indeed destitute. It goes back to what I said before about there being problems in our own education.

SN: The website once attempted to rescue a young girl named Nurgül, but in the end it didn't work out, correct?

Ilham: We did actually rescue her, and we requested that the government provide support, but some cadres sat on their hands and refused to take care of it. That child was rescued, in the first place, but in the end she wound up back in the same circumstances.

SN: Do you often think of these children?

Ilham: I think of them often. When I get involved in that sort of rescue work, I often think of them. Sometimes we get calls at night seeking our help, and of course we do whatever needs doing, including sending money to people.

SN: A lot of volunteers have come in during this period.

Ilham: Among those who volunteer to rescue Uyghur children, many of them were Han, but very few were Uyghur. Our young people lack a certain degree of compassion. We ourselves haven't faced these issues squarely—instead, we've simply relied on the government, which won't solve the problem. We can't save every single child ourselves, but we can call for society to pay more attention to them.

SN: The website was blocked in May. Was it temporary?

Ilham: I don't know. The block had received a lot of attention in both the domestic and foreign media.

SN: Why was it blocked?

Ilham: It was suddenly closed one afternoon. To this day it's still not clear why they did that.

SN: Was it retaliation for some articles that were published?

Ilham: It wasn't that. Now and then the relevant organs demand that we remove certain articles, but we won't remove them as long as I think they haven't broken the law.

SN: What sort of difficulties does Uyghurbiz face?

Ilham: Money. Last year we invited experts to translate forty works by Uyghur authors; making these assignments and so forth all requires a lot of money. This year we bought our own server, and we have someone dedicated to maintaining the site. We registered a company, we have our own office, and we opened a Uyghur-language version. Even if we do nothing, just the office itself costs 100,000 yuan (about \$16,000). This year we didn't have too many original articles. We had planned to start English- and Turkish-language versions, but now we're having trouble just making ends meet.

SN: Can you run ads?

Ilham: We haven't done any advertisements at all. We're using the word "Uyghur," and I don't want to sell out this word for money. And of course, no one dares to run ads with us either.

SN: There are some vicious attacks against you online. In particular, some say that you harbor splittist intentions. Does this sort of thing prey on your mind?

Ilham: Of course not. Doing what I'm doing, I had to psychologically prepare for it and not be afraid of people attacking me. There is plenty of slander and rumor-mongering on the Uyghurbiz forums, and I never deleted those negative posts. As I said earlier, I am a Chinese patriot and also a humanitarian. We're part of the country, and we absolutely have no intention of splitting it. At the same time, we should also be able to

enjoy the protection of the law, and the government should extend this protection.

Returning to Xinjiang after Retirement

SN: Aside from your day job, you run a business as well as a website. Given that you've taken on so many roles, are you still able to focus a lot of energy on teaching?

Ilham: I really like to teach—I love the teaching profession. Last year, Yale University invited me to a conference with scholars from around the world; a few days ago I received another of their invitations, but I didn't go. If it wasn't for teaching, I would have long ago left China, like many of my colleagues.

SN: Will you stay in Beijing after you retire?

Ilham: I won't. I'm going to go back to Xinjiang. I wanted to go back years ago, but the environment in Xinjiang is bad in so many different ways that I just can't do anything there. I just think that there are so many opportunities for study and work in Beijing, but apart from that I don't have too much attachment to the place.

SN: Do you think you'll be able to integrate into Xinjiang society when you return?

Ilham: There's not a question of being able to integrate or not. In the first place, I travel back and forth to Xinjiang from Beijing several times a year. I'm also in contact

with Uyghurs in Beijing on a regular basis, and I study Uyghur social issues. I love the people of my homeland. I love the land I was raised on, and my heart belongs to it even though I live in the interior.

SN: Do you ever get tired, thinking of so many issues, traveling so much?

Iham: I don't feel it; maybe I get a bit tired. But I won't slack off. If I have nothing on, then I just read books or read things online. I don't look after myself very well. Sometimes I don't eat from morning to night, and I don't even realize.

SN: If you can't relax, does that mean you're not able to put a lot of your time and energy into your children and family?

Iham: That's true. From yesterday to today, I haven't seen my daughter.

SN: Does she get mad at you?

Iham: She doesn't. But I know she gets a bit upset. That in turn upsets me, her father.

1 Shohret Nijat is one of the seven students charged with involvement in the Uyghurbiz.net website; he was tried and sentenced during a secret trial held in November 2014. The seven students received sentences of between three to eight years in prison. It's unclear where they are now held.

—Editors

2 *Cankao Xiaoxi*, or *News for Reference*, is a daily published by China's state news agency, Xinhua. It carefully selects articles from world media and translates them into Chinese. Before the 1980s, it was the only channel enabling the Chinese public to get a glimpse of the outside world.—Editors

3 Also known as the Ghulja Massacre, in early February 1997; an estimated 100 or more peaceful Uyghur protesters were killed by gunfire in the city of Ghulja, as the authorities put down a protest against the mass execution of Uyghur activists and restrictions on Uyghur culture.—Editors

4 An independence movement led by Uyghur rebels in northern Xinjiang, supported by the Soviet Union, in the regions of Ili, Tarbaghatai, and Altai in the mid-1940s.—Editors

5 Burhan Shahidi (1894–1989) was a prominent Uyghur leader who studied in Germany and, during the era of the Republic of China, assumed various government positions, including chairman of Xinjiang Provincial Government, beginning in January 1949. In December 1949, he became Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial People's Government under the new regime led by the Chinese Communist Party. During the Cultural Revolution from the 1960s to 1970s, he was accused of being a collaborator and imprisoned for eight years. He was later described as an “outstanding representative of the Uyghur people” by the CCP's official biography of him. “The life of Comrade Burhan,” cpc.people.com.cn.

6 Saifuddin Azizi (1915–2003), also known as Seypidin Azizi, was a prominent Uyghur leader. He grew up in Xinjiang and was educated in the Soviet Union. In 1949 he became a Communist Party member, and from 1955 to 1967, succeeding Burhan Shahidi, and again from 1972 to 1978, he was the Chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. He held the position of Vice Chairman of the National People's Congress in Beijing for nearly four decades, from the 1950s to the 1990s, and he was a Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference from 1993 to 1998. RFA reported in 2017 that Saifuddin's books were removed from bookstores in Xinjiang per an internal Party directive: “Xinjiang Authorities