

Saving Uighur Culture From Genocide

China's repression of the Uighurs in Xinjiang has forced those in the diaspora to protect their identity from afar.

Story by Yasmeen Serhan October 4, 2020

HOW DO YOU PROTECT a culture that is being wiped out?

For Uighurs, this is more than just a hypothetical. Repressive measures against the ethnic minority have progressively worsened: The Chinese government has corralled more than 1 million of them into internment camps, where they have been subjected to political indoctrination, forced sterilization, and torture.

The targeting of the Uighurs isn't limited to the camps. Since 2016, dozens of graveyards and religious sites have been destroyed. The Uighur language has been banned in Xinjiang schools in favor of Mandarin Chinese. Practicing Islam, the predominant Uighur faith, has been discouraged as a "sign of extremism."

Beijing frames these moves as its way of rooting out terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. But the aim of China's actions in Xinjiang is clear: to homogenize Uighurs into the country's Han Chinese majority, even if that means erasing their cultural and religious identity for good. What is taking place is a cultural genocide.

The repercussions bear heavily even on Uighurs living outside the country. Their burden is more than just raising awareness about what is taking place in their homeland—a task many have taken up at great cost to themselves and their families. It's also about preserving and promoting their identity in countries where few people might know who the Uighurs are, let alone what the world stands to lose should their language, food, art, and traditions be eradicated.

In an effort to understand what this kind of cultural preservation looks like in practice, I spoke with seven Uighurs residing in Britain, France, Turkey, and the United States. As chefs, poets, singers, filmmakers, language teachers, and musicians, each of them is contributing to this work in different ways. All of them are passionate about ensuring that their heritage will be passed on to future generations. None of them is under any illusions about what's at stake if they fail.

"Every Uighur now is under very big psychological pressure," Omer Kanat, the director of the Uyghur Human Rights Project, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, told me. "We cannot sleep at night."

BY APRIL 2017, few people outside of Central Asia might have known much about the Uighurs. Though the ethnic group totals more than 11 million people in Xinjiang, about 1 million live outside China, mostly

in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey, with much smaller numbers in the United States and Europe. Reports of their persecution by the Chinese state wouldn't reach wider international audiences until later that year.

It was against this backdrop that Mukaddes Yadikar, a Uighur woman from Ili in the northwest of Xinjiang, near China's border with Kazakhstan, decided to open Etles, one of London's first Uighur restaurants. Nestled on a busy North London high street brimming with corner stores, betting shops, and cafés, Etles's bright-blue exterior stands in marked contrast to much of its surroundings—a differentiation befitting its distinctive offerings. Owing to the Uighur homeland's place along the ancient Silk Road trade route, Uighur cuisine takes its influences from across Central Asia, incorporating dishes as seemingly disparate as hand-pulled noodles and crispy naan. Even diners accustomed to the culinary diversity of the British capital might not expect to find dumplings, samosas, and shish kebabs on a single menu. At Etles, however, these dishes are only a representative sample of what makes Uighur cooking unique.

“Our food is very rich, very different,” Yadikar told me one Sunday afternoon over tea. Its absence from Britain's food scene is what she said first inspired her to open the restaurant with her husband, Ablikim Rahman. At the time of its opening, Etles catered to a predominantly Chinese clientele—a trend Yadikar chalked up to Britons' lack of familiarity with Uighur cuisine. In the years since, that has changed. “Now most of our customers are English,” Yadikar said, adding that their menu has appealed to many within the British Muslim community, for whom halal Chinese food can often be difficult to find. Today, the couple runs two North London restaurants (the second opened in December, just months before the pandemic forced both locations to close).

Etles feels like a living homage to Uighur culture. Etles silks, the traditional Uighur cloth from which the restaurant gets its name, are laid across every table. A tapestry of the artist Ghazi Ehmet's *Uyghur Muqam*, one of the most recognizable paintings in Xinjiang, is prominently featured at the center of the dining room. Every wall is adorned with models of traditional instruments, embroidered caps, and decorative plates.

When I asked Yadikar and Rahman about the role they see themselves playing in protecting Uighur culture, they paused for several seconds. It's not a question many people are asked to consider. The silence was filled by their three young children who, sitting one table over, were clamoring over schoolwork. In a way, they answered the question for their parents.

“We're just [trying to] pass our culture, identity, and religion to the next generation,” Rahman said, nodding to the kids. Though the children speak Uighur fluently at home, only two of them have been to Xinjiang, and are too young to remember it.

So Yadikar and Rahman keep the spirit of their homeland alive at Etles. “From the restaurant, we can introduce our people, our culture, and our traditions,” Yadikar said. “We can’t go [to Ili]; we can’t see our people. They can’t leave. So we have to introduce our people then; we have to protect.”

FEW UNDERSTAND THE exhausting task of piecing a culture back together like Devin Naar. For nearly two decades, the historian and Sephardic-studies professor at the University of Washington has sought to understand and recuperate the lost world of Sephardic Jewry, an effort that began when he was in college. His interest in the topic stems from his own family history, “a puzzle” he says spans from the Greek port city of Salonica (now known as Thessaloniki), where one of the world’s largest Sephardic Jewish communities once lived, to the substantial Sephardic population in Seattle, where he currently resides.

Toward the end of the 15th century, the Iberian Peninsula was home to one of the largest Jewish communities in the world. That is, until 1492, when Spain issued its Jewish population an ultimatum: to convert, leave, or be killed. As many as hundreds of thousands of expelled Sephardic Jews (deriving from the Hebrew word for Spain, *Sepharad*) sought exile in places such as Portugal (which not long after delivered a similarly stark demand), Italy, and the Netherlands. Others, like Naar’s ancestors, made their way to the Ottoman empire.

“They didn’t speak either Greek or Turkish at home, but they spoke a language that they called Spanish,” Naar told me of his ancestors in Salonica. In fact, like other Sephardim, they spoke a centuries-old variant of Spanish known as Ladino, which uses Hebrew script. Growing up in the U.S., Naar said he found very little information about Sephardic history and culture, and some books offered barely more than footnotes about the Jews of the late Ottoman empire—an erasure he attributed in part to assimilation and the Holocaust, during which tens of thousands of Sephardic Jews from Salonica perished. “We were just invisible,” Naar said. “We literally did not exist in the narrative.”

Naar wasn’t completely without resources, though. One of his great uncles had a stack of letters dating as far back as 1935, all written in Ladino, a language Naar would ultimately learn in order to decode them. The correspondence revealed painful parts of his family history, including details about the family members who sought, and failed, to secure visas to the U.S. at the height of World War II, and those who were put on trains to Auschwitz. “When I began to open up that story ... I was like, *I have to do something*,” he said. “*I have to enter more deeply into this world*.”

His quest took him as far afield as Salonica, Jerusalem, Moscow, and New York City, culminating in a book about the history of Salonica’s Sephardic Jews. But the effort to revive Sephardic culture is far from complete. Today, there are thought to be anywhere from 60,000 to 400,000 Ladino speakers worldwide.

Few have spoken the language from birth, and it's safely assumed that none of them speak it exclusively. Their dwindling numbers mean that few, if any, new works are being published in Ladino. Even the world's last Ladino-language newspaper, *El Amaneser*, or "The Dawn," is written using Latin script. Though there have been some recent efforts to preserve the language, including Spain's 2018 decision to recognize Ladino as a Spanish language and to establish a new Ladino academy in Israel, it is still widely considered to be at risk of extinction.

For Sephardic Jews, the loss of their language means more than just the disappearance of their ancestors' native tongue. It means being unable to access a wealth of Ladino literature, hundreds of thousands of pages of which Naar has worked with the University of Washington to digitize as part of the world's first virtual Ladino library. It also means missing out on troves of stories, perspectives, and ways of thinking. "Without the language as an organizing feature," Naar said, "there is really a lot that is lost."

THE SITUATION FACING Sephardic Jews is undoubtedly different from that facing the Uighurs today. Whereas the Sephardim confronted expulsion more than 500 years ago, the suppression of the Uighurs is happening in real time. Although the former had to maintain their traditions within their families, in many cases secretly, the latter have been able to utilize modern tools such as the internet to keep their culture alive. Still, some lessons can be gleaned from their shared challenges.

The first has to do with the issue of homeland, and how a community can go about preserving a culture outside of one. For Sephardim, this issue is ever-present. Since their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula, they have carried with them a distinctive diasporic identity. And despite Spain's and Portugal's offers to extend citizenship to Sephardic Jews who were forced out of both countries hundreds of years earlier, this hasn't really changed. "There is no country in the world that speaks on behalf of Sephardic Jews as Sephardic Jews," Naar said. "Spain speaks on behalf of them as part of the Spanish empire ... Israel speaks on behalf of Jews because of their Jewishness. But there is no Sephardistan. That does not exist."

Uighurs, by contrast, *do* have a homeland, albeit a rarely autonomous one. (Though there was a short-lived Republic of East Turkestan, as some Uighurs prefer to call Xinjiang, the region has been under Chinese control since 1949.) But their suppression by the Chinese state has put the future of Uighur culture in their native land in doubt, prompting many Uighurs with means to leave. Such was the case for Rahima Mahmut, a London-based Uighur singer and activist from the northern town of Ghulja. Born to a family of musicians, Mahmut began singing from a very young age. "According to my mother, I could sing when I started speaking," she told me over the phone, laughing. Her four brothers provided the music, playing the drums, the violin, and traditional Uighur instruments such as the dutar and the tãmbur. "Naturally, it became a part of me."

Mahmut's decision to leave Ghulja came decades before Beijing's internment of Uighurs. During a visit home to see her family in 1997, Mahmut witnessed a violent crackdown on peaceful protesters calling for an end to religious and ethnic discrimination. Dozens were killed and thousands were arrested. Among those detained, Mahmut said, was her brother-in-law, who received a 12-year prison sentence. "I could see that the situation was getting really, really bad," she said.

Three years later, she traveled to Britain for a master's degree and eventually moved to London, where she met other Uighurs and musicians with whom she would form the London Uyghur Ensemble, which has toured Britain, Europe, the U.S., and Canada.

When I asked Mahmut whether she felt she could more freely enjoy her culture outside the Uighur homeland, she said she could never be truly free while speaking out against abuses by the Chinese government: Of her immediate family, she is the only one who managed to leave Xinjiang, along with her then-husband and son. The last time she spoke with her remaining family was in 2017. She has avoided contacting them for fears of compromising their safety.

Hundreds of prominent Uighur cultural figures including singers, musicians, novelists, scholars, and academics have been detained, imprisoned, or have disappeared since 2017, according to the Uyghur Human Rights Project. Tahir Hamut Izgil, a Uighur poet and film director based in Washington, D.C., told me via an interpreter that this suppression of the Uighur cultural sphere dates back to at least 2012, when the Chinese government began a "reexamination" of Uighur-language publications, films, and music, many of which were blacklisted. "Uighur music and dance troupes were obligated to perform entirely in Chinese ... on topics like opposing separatism, loving the motherland, loving the party, unity of the peoples," Izgil said.

His work often touches on themes such as homeland, religion, and exile—topics that would be almost impossible to write about in Xinjiang today. Not until 2017, just before Izgil planned to leave for the U.S., did he decide to formally publish a collection of his poems. "I knew that if I left for America, I might never return to my homeland," he said. "I wanted to ensure that at least one volume of my work was distributed among my people so that they would have it." In the end, he said, he was able to distribute 1,000 copies; 2,000 more were confiscated.

Izgil nevertheless continues to publish his poems in Uighur online. As a father of three, he said he sees it as his responsibility to ensure that his children are able to speak Uighur. Others have taken a more formal approach to preserving it. The Turkic language, like other minority languages, is banned from being taught in schools in China, though this hasn't stopped Uighurs in the diaspora from setting up their own language

schools abroad, including in France, the U.S., and Turkey. “Language is the key to preserve the nation,” Muyesser Abdul’ehed Hendan, a Uighur-language teacher based in Istanbul, told me in an email. She runs an informal language school for children ages 5 to 12, and though the pandemic forced her to pivot to online-only instruction, she said it also enabled her to reach more pupils. To date, Hendan said that she, alongside Uighur teachers as far afield as Norway, Sweden, Australia, and France, is teaching nearly 150 students worldwide. “If a language and culture are inherited by an enough number of children,” Hendan said, “it won’t be in danger.”

Language alone may not guarantee the culture’s continued survival, though. “If [future generations] are unable to visit their homeland, if they are unable to see their native soil, if they are unable to experience the culture in that place, it will be much more difficult for them,” Izgil said. “If in the next several generations Uighur culture is destroyed in its homeland, it will be very difficult for Uighurs in the diaspora to preserve it. Even in the diaspora, it may cease to exist.”

SAFEGUARDING A CULTURE requires more than simply maintaining a historical record of its existence. Cultures, after all, can’t be placed behind glass like museum artifacts; much like the people who inhabit them, cultures are meant to grow, adapt, and evolve. The Ladino language offers a prime example of this: The medieval variant of Spanish is not identical to the modern Ladino used today. As the language traveled, it “absorbed like a sponge the linguistic and cultural elements of its surrounding environment in the Ottoman empire,” Naar said, noting that the language has since incorporated elements of Arabic, Greek, Italian, French, and English.

For Mukaddas Mijit, a filmmaker, ethnomusicologist, and expert on Uighur dance and music from Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang, the tension between preserving elements of culture as they are and allowing them to grow and evolve is at the heart of the challenge facing Uighurs in the diaspora. When she first left Xinjiang in 2003 to study at Paris Nanterre University, “no one really knew where I was from or who I was, who were the Uighurs,” she told me. Culture, she thought, could play a role in raising awareness, so she began organizing Uighur cultural events known as *meshrep*. This social, and traditionally male, gathering brings people together to enjoy a meal, poetry, music, and dance. A traditional *meshrep* has a structured hierarchy, including a master of ceremony, and serves as a forum for the community to mediate conflicts and impart important customs and traditions.

(Though *meshrep* is included on UNESCO’s list of “intangible cultural heritage,” Chinese authorities have banned “illicit” or “unhealthy” versions of the practice.)

Yet not everyone in the Uighur diaspora has been supportive of Mijit’s efforts, she told me. Some criticized the events for not being entirely authentic, while others questioned why the community should

be focused on culture at all, as though to say, *How can we focus on frivolous matters while our people are being repressed?* This concern has been raised beyond France. “Many [Uighurs] have been very reluctant to hold public events or celebratory events—the kind of spaces in which this culture continues to live and breathe—because it feels so wrong to them when their relatives and friends are suffering back home,” Elise Anderson, an expert on the Uighur language and Uighur music and a senior program officer at the Uyghur Human Rights Project, told me. “A lot of people feel this sort of strange, sometimes contradictory set of feelings about wanting to celebrate, but wondering, *Is it appropriate?*”

An argument could be made that these things shouldn’t be mutually exclusive. Although raising awareness about what is happening to Uighurs in China is important, their persecution doesn’t alone tell the full story of who the Uighurs are, nor why people should care. By representing their culture beyond the prism of its repression, Uighurs in the diaspora are giving the world a better understanding of not only who they are, but what it stands to lose should the culture be allowed to disappear.

For them to be successful, though, Mijit argues that the diaspora must be willing to move beyond simply aiming to be authentic. “The whole point of having a different culture is to communicate it with others and share it,” she said. “People are so stressed about preserving that they forget that this thing that they want to preserve is something alive. If we really want to keep it in a box, that means we will kill it ourselves.”

This admission points to a broader truth about cultural preservation: Even when cultures aren’t facing active persecution, as is the case for the Uighurs, they are still prone to transform as a result of more natural causes, such as migration, assimilation, or integration. Joshua Freeman, a historian of China and Inner Asia at Princeton and a translator of Uighur poetry into English who spent seven years living in Ürümqi, told me that he observed this kind of cultural hybridity occur in real time. “There were many Uighurs, especially in the younger generation, who spoke perfect Chinese and were in many ways able to navigate those societies in both languages,” he said, noting that “if the Chinese state’s project was to integrate Uighurs as a community into China, there were many Uighurs in the younger generation who could have played a part in that and were beginning to.”

By giving up on that possibility and opting instead for assimilation by force, China has threatened Uighur culture and identity. But it has also, paradoxically, spurred its greatest growth outside the Uighur homeland. Today, Uighurs in the diaspora are slowly rebuilding some of what has been lost in Xinjiang: Uighur restaurants, bookstores, and language schools are being opened. Uighur poems, books, and magazines are being published. Traditional Uighur music and dance are being introduced to the wider world.

“This relatively small number of writers and poets and artists and filmmakers and musicians in the diaspora ... are creating an incredible amount of new and important work,” said Freeman. Thanks to them, Uighur culture isn’t just surviving abroad—it’s flourishing.

None of this is to say that Uighur culture is no longer under threat. If Uighurs are unable to study their native language, practice their faith, or freely celebrate their identity in their homeland, their culture will continue to be hollowed out—perhaps beyond repair. Still, many of the people I spoke with expressed optimism that, so long as the diaspora continues to promote and develop its culture, not all will be lost.

“The Chinese state’s project of erasing Uighur identity and culture will not be successful,” Freeman said. “Even in the diaspora, Uighur culture is vibrant. It has a lot to give to the world.”

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/10/chinas-war-on-uighur-culture/616513/>