6. Language Ideologies and Cultural Security: The Status and Meanings of the Uyghur Language[1]

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Abstract: As one of the official languages of Xinjiang and the official language of the Uyghurs, Uyghur has spread across various domains of the public sphere and has become a symbol of cultural autonomy. While China guarantees the legal status and freedom of officially recognized ethnic minority languages to be developed and used in the public sphere, government language policy has intensely promoted Standard Chinese, particularly in the education sector. This chapter covers the years from mid-2000 to 2017 and addresses how language ideologies of an "authentic" and "pure" Uyghur have been seen as a tool to protect the language and how the discourse on bilingualism has been used as a way to guarantee social and economic integration for the group. Finally, it assesses the extent to which the language is an important element in defining group consciousness among Uyghurs in light of the current policies of re-education and assimilation.

Keywords: Uyghur language, language policy, language ideologies, purism, bilingualism

As Jarmila Ptáčková and Ondřej Klimeš state in the introductory chapter to this volume, language is one of the cultural markers that can contribute to a sense of common affiliation for a certain group, and therefore, a significant element in the study of cultural security. In this chapter, I look at language

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as a tool that, with its different symbolic meanings, has the power to stress diversity. I will discuss the role of the Uyghur language and its implications for language and cultural maintenance as a code independent of the national language, Standard Chinese,[2] and as a resource to be protected and used for the development of the group.

In discussing the relationship between the Uyghur language and cultural security, I draw upon the notion of cultural security that arises in the thematic volume edited by Carbonneau, Jacobs and Keller (2021, 35–58): the need for groups to counteract asymmetric power dynamics and to build self-consciousness and autonomy within the political and social system in which they live through different institutional and territorial means and collective and resilience practices. Research in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology demonstrates that language plays a central role in group identification and in the process of gaining cultural, social, and political recognition (Irvine and Gal 2000; Woolard and Sheffelin 2004; Cru 2015).

Language ideologies, described as beliefs and attitudes towards a language (Irvine 1989), constitute a useful theoretical framework to analyze the role of language in the definition of cultural security for a given community. Language ideologies can be a catalyst to claim educational autonomy (Jaffe 1999), to organize resistance against colonization (Blommaert 1999), to assure resilience in periods of political crisis and provide a basis for self-determination (Clua I Fainé 2017, 42) and to challenge social structures and norms of monolingualism (Heller 1995).

In this context, language ideologies have an impact on the structure of language and language practices: common phenomena are the devaluation of the non-standard and the search for authenticity (Milroy 2001; Yang 2018), language purism (Thomas 1991), the support of a variety of the language spoken in the past as a form of respect (Hill 1992), and the creation of bilingual elites (Heller 1995). In general, these choices are made in opposition to the dominant language(s) and group(s), which are seen as a threat to the minoritized language and community. Ideas of authenticity and language purism are, at the same time, often rejected or contested. In the context of minority languages, these ideologies might not accommodate different language practices or varieties and are often partly or fully imposed (Gill 2007; Hornsby

2 In this chapter I refer to China's national language as Standard Chinese, also called in the literature *Putonghua* "common language" or Standard Mandarin. In some cases, I refer simply to "Chinese," since I refer to a language continuum that include Standard Chinese and other varieties that are part of the linguistic repertoire of the Uyghurs, such as varieties of Northwest Mandarin spoken in the region.

2022). In other cases, ethnolinguistic groups negotiate some of their traits to accommodate social and economic changes brought about by state-building and globalization. They might give up some features of their language, their entire language, or some cultural traits (Mufwene 2003; Ehala 2014).

The Uyghur language is one of the official languages in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and a lingua franca among Turkic and other ethno-linguistic groups in the region. From a demographic point of view, the region is inhabited primarily by Uyghurs, one of the officially recognized ethnic groups (*shaoshu minzu*, "minority nationality"), and Han. Other smaller ethno-linguistic groups, such as Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Mongols, and Hui, also live in the region. This multi-ethnic composition corresponds to a high level of linguistic diversity. Languages spoken in the area belong to the Turkic (e.g., Kazakh, Kirghiz), Mongol (e.g., Daur), Indo-European (e.g., East Iranian languages such as Sarikoli), and Sinitic groups (varieties of Northwest Mandarin). Many of these languages are considered endangered because they only have a small number of speakers.

According to the 2020 census, there are approximately 11.6 million Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Tianshan 2021), and they are generally described as a Turkic-speaking group which follows Turkic and Central Asiatic cultural traditions and Islamic heritage practices. However, as in many contemporary communities, differences regarding education, class, faith, rural-urban environments, north-south origins, and social and political aspirations make Uyghurs a heterogeneous group (see Smith Finley 2013; Grose 2019).

During the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, the use of Uyghur spread in different domains of the public sphere (Zhou 2004, 89). However, since the early 2000s, PRC language policies downgrading the status of Uyghur in education, the growing Han population, and the importance of Standard Chinese for employment and social mobility have led to the development of a diglossic situation in which Standard Chinese has become the high-status language, and to language contact phenomena such as code switching and borrowing (Abulimiti 2009; Mijiti 2012; Cabras 2018). These changes in language status and language practices have resulted in discussions among Uyghurs on the importance of not abandoning the language and speaking it properly, as this chapter shows. The chapter focuses on the discourse about the protection of the Uyghur language as it emerges from intellectual and academic production, artistic pursuits, and the language attitudes of speakers. I will discuss how language ideologies about an "authentic" and "pure" Uyghur have been seen as a tool to protect the language from assimilation to Chinese, the discourse on bilingualism as a way to guarantee social and economic integration for the group, and the reality of language

practices in which Chinese is often present in Uyghurs' speech for different social, educational, professional, and personal reasons.

The discussion approximately covers the years from mid-2000 to 2017. In August 2016, Chen Quanguo was appointed as the CCP secretary of the XUAR, leading the consolidation of the political and social situation in Xinjiang.[3] Since 2017, the region has established a high-tech system of cyber control of the population and set up a system of detention and re-education for those Uyghurs who are deemed too religious or conservative, or unsuitable for the modernization and development of the state. Moreover, members of the Uyghur elite have been detained or silenced (Smith Finley 2019). Besides incarceration and securitization, this policy has led to the destruction or closure of mosques and shrines (Thum 2022), regulations targeting traditional domestic spaces (Grose 2020) and cultural "engineering" establishing permitted and forbidden cultural differences and forms of Uyghur piety (Byler 2017a).

The years from mid-2000 to 2017, characterized by intellectual and artistic pursuits dealing with the use and survival of the Uyghur language, are particularly suitable for the study of language ideologies and the role of language in the perception of cultural security. This is also a period in which many scholars, including the author, conducted fieldwork in the region and had the opportunity to conduct ethnographic studies and investigate language practices and attitudes. As documented in 2018, the atmosphere of surveillance, the feeling of fear, and the risk of imprisonment for Uyghurs who have had contact with foreigners have made it impossible to build friendship and trust relationships (Ernst 2019). Moreover, the pandemic has prevented access to China and further endangered friendships and academic relationships that were already fragile.

The end of the chapter features a discussion of the latest developments related to the status of Uyghur, which are possible to grasp thanks to information available in researchers' reports, preliminary studies, news published by Chinese media, and posts on Chinese social media. Finally, it assesses the extent to which the language is, and could be in the future, an important element in the definition of group consciousness among Uyghurs.

3 Discontent with various state policies implemented in the region (state-orchestrated Han migration, economic measures, social and ethnic inequalities, and restrictions on religious practices) have led to both violence (from clashes between protesters and police to premeditated attacks against civilians) and non-violent conflicts in the last decades. Since the start of the Global War on Terrorism in 2001, the PRC government has framed these responses as acts of terrorism or religious extremism, marginalizing the social and cultural factors that have led to discontent (Bellér-Hann 2002; Millward 2004; Rodríguez-Merino 2019).

The Context: PRC Language Policies

In the PRC legal system, the use and development of ethnic minority languages is protected by the Constitution (Moneyhon 2002, 136; Kaup 2000, 79) and other national legislation, such as the 1984 Law on Regional National Autonomy, amended in 2001 (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo minzu quyu zizhifa*; Central government of the PRC 2001), and various local regulations. Indeed, the state grants a system of "autonomy of nationality regions" (*minzu quyu zizhi*) for the fifty-five officially recognized minority groups, which also includes linguistic rights. Inspired in part by the Soviet Union, this system was adopted to ensure territorial integrity and national unity (Dreyer 1976, 261–63; Bergère 1979; Kaup 2000; Harrell 2001).

Legal provisions affirm the premier status of Standard Chinese and support its diffusion in the public sphere, while guaranteeing the officially recognized ethnic minority languages legal status and the freedom to be developed and used in administration, media, and education. However, the notion of "freedom" (*ziyou*) instead of a "right" (*quanli*) to use and develop minority languages, which does not require state action, the absence of legal procedure to enforce this "freedom," and stronger rights and support for Standard Chinese constitute an obstacle to the implementation of language rights (Grey 2021, 67–82). Moreover, the support for minority languages is exclusively directed to officially recognized languages, leading to a relationship of inequality between the standard and non-standard varieties of a language (Dwyer 1998; Roche and Suzuki 2018).

The relationship between the national and the minority languages since 1949 has been influenced by political, demographic, social, and economic changes. In some periods, language rights were reduced or repressed, as during the Cultural Revolution; in other phases, as in the 1980s and 1990s, they were largely upheld—for example, in the media industry and education (Zhou 2004).

Since the end of the 1990s, and in particular since 2000, language policies have increasingly focused on issues such as the improper and non-standardized use of spoken and written Chinese, and the establishment of formal criteria to test the level of Standard Chinese of employees working in the media and education. While acknowledging minority language rights and the need for flexible measures, the Law of the National Commonly Used Language and Scripts of the PRC (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo tongyong yuyan wenzifa*), passed in 2000 (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2000), highlights the leading role of Standard Chinese as the national language and the importance of its standardization and diffusion (Rohsenow 2004).

Furthermore, the 2000 national law provided the basis for the promulgation of new local language regulations. In Xinjiang, the 2002 Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Language and Script Work Regulations (*2002 Xinjiang Weiwuer'zu zizhiqu yuyan wenzi gongzuo tiaoli*) recognized the legal status and use of Standard Chinese and Uyghur. This regulation is not different from the previous legislation, which dates back to 1993: it provides for the equality of languages, the use of bilingual and dual writing systems in autonomous organs and the public sphere, and the personal right to use and choose a language in the fields of education and administrative duties (Zhou 2020, 253–54). However, there was a change in the political context in which these regulations were issued: linguistic and cultural integration were by then (and still are) seen as solutions to solve problems related to social stability, preservation of the unity of the state, and separatism (Dwyer 2005; Zhou 2020, 252). In these years, Xinjiang University, which offered programs in Uyghur in social, natural, and formal sciences, switched to monolingual education and allowed the use of Uyghur as a teaching language only for some courses (Dwyer 2005, 40).

Moreover, a crucial change in the language policies of Xinjiang was the reform of the education system in 2000, with the switch towards the system of "bilingual education" (*shuangyu jiaoyu*). Before 2000, the system was based on education in Chinese or the minority language, with the so-called division between *minkaohan* and *minkaomin* students. *Minkaohan* refers to minority students who studied in Chinese-medium schools; *minkaomin* refers to minority students who studied in Uyghur-medium schools. In Uyghur-medium schools, children began learning Standard Chinese in the third grade. Although Standard Chinese enjoyed a higher status as the national language and a tool of educational and economic advancement, the system guaranteed the development of generations educated in the Uyghur language.

The reform dismisses the *minkaohan/minkaomin* system and supports two different modes of education for primary schools, both marginalizing the status of Uyghur in education: "type two bilingual education" and "type three bilingual education." In the former, Standard Chinese is used for scientific subjects, with limited explanations in Uyghur; in the latter, all subjects are taught in Standard Chinese, with Uyghur used to supplement the teaching (Simayi 2013).

The reform of "bilingual education" has been presented by the authorities and some experts as a way to improve Standard Chinese competence and to facilitate the modernization of Uyghur society and its integration into the Chinese state (Schluessel 2009; Ma Rong 2014). However, policy formulations

often clash with their implementation, and the reform has led to different responses and developments because of a lack of teacher training, inadequate teaching material, the gap between rural and urban environments, and Han-Uyghur segregation (Simayi 2013; Tsung 2014).

From 2017, the shift towards monolingual education in Standard Chinese is more evident. Government policy documents exhibit less frequent use of the term "bilingual education" to stress the importance of spreading the National Common Language and Script (*guojia tongyong yuyan wenzi*) and set forth the implementation of a Chinese-only policy for primary schools (Burdorf 2020). Although this policy seems to have been enforced in a large number of schools across the region, differences between policy formulation and implementation persist: there are accounts of some schools in south Xinjiang using Uyghur to supplement teaching, and some schools in Ürümchi reintroduced Uyghur language classes in 2020 (Burdorf 2020).

Standard Modern Uyghur, Spoken Uyghur, "Pure" Uyghur, "Messy" Uyghur: The Search for Purity and Authenticity

Standard Uyghur, officially called "Modern Uyghur" (*Uyghur hazirqi zaman tili*), mirrors a long history of cultural encounters and political developments. It derives from Chaghatay, and the majority of Uyghur loans display Arabic and Persian origins. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the lexicon incorporated loanwords from Russian and, from the mid-nineteenth century (particularly after the 1950s) from Chinese (Nadzhip 1971, 31; Memtimim 2016).[4]

As a standardized variety, Modern Uyghur is highly codified: it is based on the Ghulja and Ürümchi dialects, with elements from Central dialects such as the Qumul and Yarkand dialects. Its diffusion in the public sphere has been the result of collaboration between the state's institutions on language planning and the local Uyghur elite, such as the Language and Script Work Committee of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (*Shinjang Uyghur aptonom rayonning milletler til-yëziq xizmiti komitëti*) and the various translating and editing departments (*terjime-tehrir bölümi*) of state-owned media (e.g., the Xinjiang Television Station and the Xinjiang Education Press). The state support for the use of Uyghur in media and education performs a double function: it makes possible the expression in

4 Some examples are "meat" (*gösh*) from Persian, "political" (*siyasiy*) from Arabic and "cake" (*tort*) from Russian.

Modern Uyghur of various technical and professional domains, but also the translation of political terms aimed at spreading political propaganda, thereby including the ethnic language in the PRC's state-building.[5]

Despite the increasing contact with Chinese, Modern Uyghur can be seen as resistant to extensive borrowing from Chinese in formal language (Baki 2005, 11–12). An exception to this was the introduction of neologisms in the form of phonetic borrowings from Chinese in the 1960s—for example, "inch" (*sung*), "ability" (*bengsi*), and "instructor" (*jolian*; Baki 2005, 11–12). While Chinese terms are not common in formal language, they are on the contrary abundant in the informal spoken language. Reasons can be found in cultural influences and the increased presence of Chinese in the linguistic environment (Dwyer 2005); speakers proficient in both Chinese and Uyghur may alternate between Chinese and Uyghur in the same utterance or conversation (Ablimit 2009; Mijiti 2012; Cabras 2018).

The increasing use of Chinese insertions in the informal spoken language has prompted the growth of purist attitudes aimed at eliminating the presence of Chinese in so-called "messy" (*qalaymiqan*) Uyghur and spreading a "pure" (*sap*) Uyghur (Thompson 2013). The table below shows some Standard Chinese terms often used in Uyghur conversations and their "pure" counterparts.

Loanword in Spoken Uyghur	"Pure" Uyghur	English
wangba	*torxana*	cybercafé
wangzhan	tor bëkiti	internet site
Weixin	ün didar	WeChat
U pan	USB eghizi	USB
shenfen zheng	kimlik	identity card
Xinjiang shifan daxue	Pëdagogika uniwërsiteti	Xinjiang Normal University

Figure 6.1: Standard Chinese insertions and "pure" Uyghur. Based on Mijiti 2012; Thompson 2013; Cabras 2018, 113–16

The examples above show that purism aims to reduce the presence of Chinese, which is the current source used to substitute existing words and create new loanwords in spoken Uyghur. The "pure" vocabulary is formed from Perso-Arabic and Russian loanwords, as can be noted, for example, in the words "place" (*xana*), "encounter" (*didar*), and "university" (*uniwërsitët*). These terms are established in the Uyghur vocabulary and are considered

5 On the official support for minority languages and its implications for state-building, see also Thurston (2018, 203–4) regarding Tibetan.

part of the language. Although Russian could be considered a "colonial" language due to its role in the Russian Empire and Soviet assimilatory policies in western Central Asia, it is considered in this case a language that does not threaten the status of the Uyghur language. This is probably related to the fact that Russian terms are well established in the vocabulary and that the language is not felt, as in the case of Chinese, to be a threat to the maintenance of Uyghur language.

Purist attitudes are directed at words that have recently been substituted by Chinese loanwords, as some old Chinese loanwords—for example, "potatoes" (*yanyü*)—are accepted.[6] As in many purist movements, purification occurs at the lexical level and is based on the avoidance of loanwords (Thomas 1991, 189). In the case of Uyghur, the phonetic presence of Chinese is avoided. However, Chinese is present in the semantic criteria of word-formation. Some neologisms may be considered calques from Standard Chinese terms—for example, the Uyghur "internet bar" (*torxana*, literally net space/place) and "website" (*tor bëkiti*, literally internet station). These terms reproduce the same pattern found in the Standard Chinese terms, respectively "cybercafé" (*wangba*, literally net café) and "website" (*wangzhan*, literally internet station). Hence, Standard Chinese still plays a hidden role, not as a source of phonetic borrowings but as a source for constructing meanings.

Often, ideologies of language purism emerge in periods of crisis and subordination for a given linguistic community and are directed at the language and group whose survival is considered to be at risk (Thomas 1991, 188–90). In the context of the increased presence of Chinese in education and the language habits of the Uyghurs, the erasure of Chinese elements is seen as a way to make the language authentic and independent. The discourse is based on the opposition between homogeneous Uyghur and Chinese languages: it considers neither the diversity within the Uyghur system nor the local varieties of Chinese spoken in the region.[7]

6 Interview with a linguist teaching at Xinjiang Normal University, Ürümchi, March 2015.

7 The Uyghur language exhibits significant dialectal variation, but the official dialect division theory has hindered research on the topic (Hahn 1998). Current dialectology divides the Uyghur language according to a South–North division, with the dialect of Kashgar sharing northern and southern features. According to Dwyer, the classification seems to be guided by the ideological need to include all the sedentary Turkic speakers of Xinjiang among Uyghur speakers (2016, 10). For this reason, groups whose status as Uyghur speakers could be questioned, such as the Lops and Dolan, are included in this grouping (Dwyer 2016, 10).

Regarding Chinese, the varieties of Mandarin spoken in Xinjiang can be summarized as Lan-Yin Mandarin (areas of Gansu and Ningxia), Zhongyang Mandarin (Central regions), and Beijing Mandarin (Baki 2012). These varieties have been influenced by contact with Uyghur, resulting

Moreover, Uyghur purism entails terms related to modernity: the aim is to raise the status of the language as a code able to express meanings and content in different fields of knowledge and daily life without drawing from Standard Chinese. This is a common strategy among minoritized languages, often associated with tradition and obsolescence (May 2012, 6).

The Actors Calling for the Protection of the Uyghur Language

Ideas about purity and calls for language maintenance are often developed within a given part of society and then spread within the general public and civil society (Thomas 1991, 100–114). This section provides examples of language ideologies emerging from a journal on Uyghur linguistics, "Language and Translation" (*Til we terjime*, Uyghur version of the Chinese-language journal *Yuyan yu fanyi*), managed by the Language and Script Work Committee, and from artistic and entertainment pursuits.[8]

The journal "Language and Translation," which publishes contributions from Uyghur elites studying linguistics, offers insights into the discussion regarding the standardization and empowerment of the Uyghur language, as shown in some issues published between 2006 and 2014. Besides topics related to linguistic research, such as historical linguistics and Turkology, the journal discusses the translation of Chinese words into Uyghur and ways to create meaning from internal resources, language standardization, and rules for translation.

According to the articles analyzed, language is fundamental for the economic and social development and well-being of the "states" (*döletler*) and "ethnic groups" (*milletler*; Abduxaliq 2010) and for building a "harmonious" (*inaq*) society (Yiltizliq 2014). Moreover, Uyghur connects the ethnic group to its past, elucidates cultural connections with other civilizations (Abdurëhim 2006; Abduxaliq 2010), and is the source of the historical cultural achievements of the Uyghurs (Yiltizliq 2014).

As far as the lexicon is concerned, some scholars argue that the Uyghur language must not display Chinese elements and needs to retain an accurate

in phonetic, grammatical, and lexical changes. For example, Xinjiang Mandarin is characterized by the dropping of tones, the extensive use of the plural suffix *–men*, changing word order from SVO to SOV, and Uyghur borrowings such as "onion" (*piyazi*), "young boy" (*balangzi*; see also Michal Zelcer-Lavid's chapter), and "almond" (*badamu*; Baki 2012; Gao 2018).

8 For this purpose, I have consulted articles in the journal published in 2003, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017. A discussion on Abdurëhim (2006) and Abduxaliq (2010) can also be found in Cabras (2018, 272–76).

technical vocabulary. The mix of the two languages is connected to the lack of purity in the ethnic group, which could develop into a "mixed race" (*shalghutlashqan sortluq*) and is one of the "bad habits" (*nachar adetler*) practiced by people who do not care about linguistic and cultural integrity (Abdurëhim 2006, 36–37).

These statements express different language ideologies: Uyghur gives the group a sense of continuity, it is used as a marker of demarcation and ethnic purity, and it is instrumental for the definition of the Uyghurs. In these articles, the language is addressed in affective and positive terms. It is called "our mother tongue" (*ana tilimiz*; Abdurëhim 2006; Abduxaliq 2010; Yiltizliq 2014), a term frequently used to refer to the Uyghur language.

Moreover, Uyghur is described as pleasant to listen to and easy to understand (Yiltizliq 2014). In the titles of the articles and the texts, the use of the verb "to protect" (*qoghdimaq*) and the verbal form "let's" (the voluntative suffix *ayli~eyli*) indicates an emotional involvement in language issues and the need to involve the speakers.[9]

The discussion among linguists also took place on Chinese social media applications. In 2014–16, linguists and scholars from other disciplines created a WeChat group called "linguists" (*tilshunaslar*). The group discussed neologisms and ways to best reproduce the meaning of words and avoid borrowing from Chinese (Cabras 2018, 113).[10]

In the 2010s, the issues of Chinese insertions in the spoken language and the importance of speaking Uyghur were addressed by artists and performers. The comic sketch "I don't understand" (*Chüshenmidim*) by Abdukërim Abliz (2012)[11] is one of the most praised cultural works based on the theme of language mixing and purism in the Uyghur language, described in this sketch as "our mother tongue." The plot is based on misunderstandings between the protagonists, who are supposed to share the same language but do not understand each other and keep misspelling words in Uyghur and Standard Chinese (Cabras 2017; Searcy 2018).

9 As shown in the titles "Let's protect the purity of our mother tongue" (*Ana tilimizning sapliqini qoghdayli*; Abduxaliq 2010), "Let's protect the perfection of our language" (*Timilizning mukemmellikini qoghdayli* (Abdurëhim 2006), and "Protect the virtue of the language" (*Til exlaqni qoghdap*; Yiltizliq 2014, 26).

10 In 2016, WeChat groups (made up of no more than one hundred users) were popular in Xinjiang and a forum for people to gather virtually and discuss different topics related to culture, society, and everyday life. These groups gradually disappeared as the control of cultural, religious, and intellectual expression in Xinjiang became more intense from 2017.

11 Abdukërim Abliz, author and lead actor of the sketch, is one of the best-known Uyghur comedians.

Another artistic pursuit that addresses language practices is "The pomegranate is ripe" (*Anar pishti*), an online sketch comedy produced and performed by a group of young Uyghurs. The sketch comedy started airing online in 2016 and quickly became one of the most popular online short-video series. The sketches take place in Ürümchi and take inspiration from the urban daily life of young people. The series addresses current social issues, including the current devaluation of Uyghur. For example, a gag references Chinese as a symbol of coolness and power, equivalent to physical strength (Frangville 2020, 121). Moreover, although the series reproduces young urban Uyghurs' life, code switching or Chinese borrowings are avoided, or just reserved for particular gags.

Regarding Uyghur songs, "Alphabet" (*Ëlipbe*) by Berna and Gülmire Tugun and "Dear Teacher" (*Söyümlük mu'ellim*) by Ablajan Awut are the most representative. "Alphabet," sung by a young child from the urban upper class, introduces the Uyghur alphabet (Byler 2013).[12] The lyrics connect words with the letters in alphabetical order and elements of Uyghur heritage. The song "Dear Teacher" addresses education at school; the singer Ablajan Awut plays a teacher who encourages his students to study hard and with enthusiasm (Byler 2017b).[13] The song refers to elements of the Chinese school curriculum and political discourse, such as the hard sciences, mathematics, physical education, and Xinjiang's economic development due to its natural resources. The singer dedicates the initial verses of the song to learning Uyghur: it is the first subject mentioned, encouraging the students to learn the grammar and study it with passion. I will further discuss this song in the next section, particularly its message supporting speaking Uyghur and, at the same time, learning the national language.

In the video clips, the heritage language is interwoven with traditional Uyghur elements: the child Berna and Gülmire Tugun wear a *doppa*, the Uyghur skullcap, and embroidered blouses; Ablajan, who is represented in most parts of the video as a modern and secular teacher, is disguised in one scene as an elderly man with a beard and a *doppa*, who teaches his children (males wearing the *doppa* and embroidered clothes; young women in braids) how to be polite and wise. Both songs refer to well-known characters from the Uyghur historical and cultural heritage, such as Amannisa Xan and Yusuf Xass Hajib Balasaguni.[14]

12 Available on the YouTube channel of the London Uyghur Ensemble (2014). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TGIBTeqKUY.

13 Available on the YouTube channel of the *Art of Life in Central Asia* (2017). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPmdkB8Ww3Y.

14 Amannisa Xan was the concubine of Abdurashid Xan of the Yarkand khanate (1533–60). She is considered an icon of Uyghur cultural heritage, credited with the collection of the Twelve

The examples above show an engagement in language issues, materialized in discussions on the beauty and the importance of the Uyghur language for the cultural continuity and well-being of the group. Such statements in articles, social media, and cultural and music productions make these actors representative of a sort of "cultural nationalism" (Fishman 1973), aiming to bring self-representation and the protection of cultural markers within the political system of the state where they live. Moreover, they show an attempt to raise the status of the language, and evoke an "imagined hegemony," as found by Michal Zelcer-Lavid in her chapter about the representation of Uyghur masculinity in the modern literary domain. Notably, the discussion on the importance of learning the Uyghur language does not hide criticism of the policy of "bilingual education," parts of the Uyghur elite and officials that support it, and Uyghurs who have abandoned their interest in the heritage language in order to learn Chinese and embrace more opportunities for social mobility (Baranovich 2020). Moreover, despite the existence of public and open concern regarding the status of Uyghur, these years witnessed the imprisonment of several intellectuals engaged in the Uyghur language cause.

Actions to preserve the language found in intellectual and artistic pursuits among the Uyghurs are not so different from those existing in other ethnic groups in China. For example, works on Tibetan (Thurston 2018; Tunzhi et al. 2018), the Yi language (Kraef 2012) and Mongol (Baioud 2017) show similar concerns and reactions. First, the discourse on these languages is characterized by an emotional approach towards the mother tongue, which is seen as beautiful and in need of protection and a central element for the maintenance of the ethnic culture. Secondly, awareness-building involves different actors that play a central role in society. Intellectuals, artists and, in the case of Tibetan, lamas (Thurston 2018) lead the discussion on language maintenance. In spreading their ideas, they use traditional means of communication, such as essays, or more modern ones, such as WeChat groups and video channels. Third, in order to be protected, the mother tongue is set in opposition to the language that endangers it. Uyghur, Tibetan, and Mongol language ideologies see the Chinese language as the main threat to the survival of the ethnic language and overlook internal linguistic diversity and non-standard varieties. The debate about the representativeness of the standard form of the Yi language, as described in Kraef (2013, 228) and in Jan Karlach's chapter, is an exception in this respect.

Muqam. Yusuf Xass Hajib Balasaguni is the writer of the famous eleventh-century Kutadgu Bilig "The Wisdom of Royal Glory."

The Usefulness of Bilingualism

In the years from 2010 to 2017, articles and artistic output raising awareness of the importance of speaking Uyghur did not imply a refusal to learn and use Chinese, as long as it was used as a separate code. The importance of bilingualism is addressed in the comic sketch "I don't understand" by Abdukërim Abliz and Ablajan Awut's song "Dear teacher," both mentioned in the previous section.

In "I don't understand," Abdukërim Abliz affirms that "Chinese is the language of our country, Uyghur is our mother tongue, knowing how to speak both is good for our work, for our life, for our production, to make business between us." In this statement, the rhetoric on the Uyghur language as mother tongue and marker of Uyghurness goes hand in hand with the unifying rhetoric of Chinese as the national language. Following a utilitarian vision, the knowledge of Chinese and Uyghur is deemed fundamental for communication and business. This pragmatic statement is followed by an emotional one: "Go back home immediately, this means studying Chinese and Uyghur, do you understand? It means that you don't have to forget your language!!" This emotional gag emphasizes two crucial points in the discourse on the Uyghur language: the invitation to be bilingual and separate Chinese and Uyghur in conversation (Cabras 2018) and the expression of an act of resistance against the current language policy (Searcy 2018).

Ablajan Awut's song does not mention a particular language in its verses, affirming instead the benefits of learning languages in general: "You have to learn a lot of languages, they are like a tool and a mirror." However, in the video clip, the blackboard behind him shows sentences in Chinese and English. Therefore, Ablajan's verse addresses the importance not only of learning Chinese but also of learning global languages, such as English. English is indeed seen as linguistic capital by young Uyghurs and their families—as something that may possibly help them to avoid marginalization and become competitive in Chinese and global society (Sunuodula 2015).

Similar ideologies framing Uyghur as the language of cultural identification and Chinese as the language of social mobility are found in educational choices. During the author's fieldwork in 2013–14, educated families in Ürümchi, left without much choice in the language of instruction at school, and seeing education in Chinese as a better option, planned to teach the heritage language within the family context (Cabras 2018, 26–27). The rejection of total assimilation is also found in research conducted on families from other areas of Xinjiang, such as Aksu and Kashgar, whose children

have received education in Chinese (Han and Johnson 2021, 192–94). In this way, families negotiate between social interests (increased possibilities of economic advancement), political imperatives (supporting the promotion of the Chinese language as a state project) and private needs (transmitting an element to build group-consciousness).

Another example of positive language attitudes towards bilingualism comes from the Uyghur graduates of boarding schools in China. Grose (2019) notes that although these students have undergone intense study of Chinese, are proficient in Chinese and live in areas where Chinese is dominant, Uyghur is the language of their conversations with their Uyghur peers. In one account, willingness to speak Uyghur does not exclude knowledge of Chinese, which is also seen as *bilim*, a form of knowledge (Grose 2019, 57–58).

Beyond the interest in learning Chinese, there is often the wish to obtain more socio-economic benefits and enjoy the same opportunities as the Han (Wilson 2012, 143–56). Therefore, this attitude is connected to material aspirations and the desire to overcome issues related to Uyghur society, such as employment pressure. Certainly, the investment in learning Chinese leads to different outcomes according to personal experiences. In personal narratives, scholars observe satisfaction with employment prospects, regret for not having studied Uyghur (Wilson 2012, 143–56), and a sense of disappointment with discriminatory hiring practices (Grose 2019, 92). These accounts show that learning and mastering Chinese is not always the solution to issues of marginalization affecting Uyghurs.

The experiences mentioned above exhibit tendencies towards both demarcation and accommodation: the desire to feel part of a community that shares the same or a similar linguistic and cultural background, which brings inclusion and social advantages within the community, and the need to communicate and participate in the social and economic development of the state. Thus, mastering Uyghur and Chinese is presented as a way to safeguard the heritage language while adopting more opportunities to avoid marginalization. At the same time, it demonstrates acceptance of the state's language policy regarding the diffusion of Standard Chinese.

The Complexity of Language Attitudes and Practices

Another aspect related to the status and meanings of Uyghur and their implications for cultural security is the fluidity of language attitudes, which change according to a combination of different social, educational,

professional, and personal experiences. Language attitudes, ideas of ethnic belonging and language proficiency have often been studied by scholars in terms of educational background, such as the choice of "bilingual education" or the opposition between *minkaohan* and *minkaomin*. *Minkaohan* have often been described as assimilated to the Han population, with insufficient command of Uyghur, and *minkaomin* as reluctant to establish relationships with *minkaohan* (Smith Finley 2000; Taynen 2006; Wilson 2012). However, research also indicates a wide range of different experiences and attitudes, which also change through life. For example, people who studied in Chinese-teaching schools started speaking Uyghur later (in their thirties) as a way to strengthen their political identity and denounce ethnic inequality (Smith Finley 2007); some *minkaohan* students attending Xinjiang classes in inner China do not demonstrate a preference for speaking Chinese (Grose 2019, 57); in the early 2000s, in rural areas, where ethnic conflict was less evident compared to the city, speaking some Chinese was a novelty, not a sign of assimilation (Smith Finley 2013, 139–40).

Moreover, in everyday language practices, the role of Uyghur as the language of ethnic and cultural belonging is put aside for pragmatic and communicative reasons. Studies show that speakers utilize either Chinese or Uyghur according to their daily contacts with Han Chinese (Anaitula 2012; Baki 2015), the linguistic background of their Uyghur interlocutors, or the verbal or written nature of the interaction[15] (Baki 2015). Besides perceptions and values associated with Uyghur, as mentioned previously, Chinese is a code frequently used in the public sphere. It is present to some extent in the everyday informal speech of Uyghurs, especially in urban areas (Anaitula 2012; Baki 2012; Cabras 2018). Taking into account this fluid and unstable role that the language plays in spoken practices, the language ideologies surrounding purism and authenticity define boundaries and memberships within groups and assign examples of language use a level in the continuum of group mixing or impurity. This does not take into consideration the fact that Uyghurness is performed in various ways through life, sometimes also with an imperfect mastery of Uyghur or while using some Chinese words. As remarked by Yang (2018) in her study of language ideologies among Tibetan students, the search for authenticity can reproduce the same dynamics of alterity and hierarchy found in majority (Chinese)-minority language relationships.

15 According to a survey conducted in 2011 by Baki Elterish (2015), *minkaohan* tend to use Chinese to read and write and accommodate their interlocutors' language preferences. Uyghur and Chinese-Uyghur code switching can be used in verbal interaction with *minkaomin*.

The Current Situation and Its Impact on the Uyghur Language

So far, this chapter has discussed experiences of language maintenance leading up to the years 2016–17. Although the situation is ever-changing and access to information limited, in this section, I discuss some developments related both to the general political situation in Xinjiang and the status and use of the Uyghur language that may be useful for contextualizing past experiences and understanding current changes.

As described in the previous sections, the Uyghur intellectual and artistic elite has played a significant role in sharing positive attitudes about speaking and protecting the Uyghur language. With its actions, it has encouraged the development of a bilingual society in which Uyghur and Chinese are valued languages, albeit with different pragmatic and symbolic values.

In these last four years, many members of the Uyghur elite have been detained, such as the geographer Tashpolat Tëyip and the anthropologist Rahile Dawut, or have stopped appearing on stage and on social networks, such as Ablajan Awut, mentioned earlier in this chapter (Xinjiang Documentation Project 2022; Xinjiang Victims Database 2022). Many of these intellectuals and celebrities were members of the CCP, proficient in Standard Chinese, and praised by the government for their professional achievements and as examples of successful Han-Uyghur relations. They are now often accused of endangering state security, separatism, terrorism, or corruption. As a result, intellectuals and artists have stressed in their pursuits their commitment to political stability and patriotism.

An example comes from two articles from a 2017 issue of the journal *Language and Translation*, both written by the Language and Script Work Committee members. The first article points out the need to maintain "stability" (*muqimliq*) against terrorism and extremist forces that endanger the economic and social achievements made in Xinjiang and to be united under the leadership of the CCP (Musa 2017). The second article (Eli 2017) praises the benefits of "bilingual education" policy and the party's efforts to support linguistic minority rights. Among the reasons for learning Chinese, the author mentions the possibility of studying the advanced knowledge and culture of the Han and using Chinese as a bridge to understand foreign cultures. Although the issue still deals with Turkic and Uyghur linguistics and translation studies, the articles mentioned display the adoption of a "patriotic" tone, the emphasis on the state and regional authority discourse on securitization, and the subordination of Uyghur to Standard Chinese, which is described as an "advanced" (*ilghar*) language. Moreover, references to the role of Uyghur as the language of ethnic well-being and the desire

to raise its status are missing. The domain of education has followed this tendency with the shift towards monolingual education, as mentioned in the presentation of language policies in this chapter (Burdorf 2020).

Artistic pursuits reflect this turn. Some recent Uyghur pop songs address Chinese nationalism and patriotism (Anderson 2020). The series "The Pomegranate Is Ripe," mentioned in this chapter, also made a stark departure in 2018. The 2018 season does not engage with social issues and features several scenes with the Uyghur actors interacting in Chinese (Frangville 2020, 128). However, the status of Uyghur in entertainment is ever-changing. 2020 has seen, for example, the launch of several Uyghur-language TV series and shows (Steenberg and Tenha Seher 2022).

As far as language planning is concerned, the work on the standardization of the language and creation of vocabulary mandated by China's language policies has continued up to the present, probably with some breaks.[16] News published by Chinese media from the years 2017–20 on language planning advertises the development of Uyghur-Chinese/Chinese-Uyghur voice translator software (China Ethnic Language Translation Center 2017; China Ethnic Language Translation Center 2020) and new terminology in Uyghur (Sohu 2020). For example, a list of terms related to the COVID-19 pandemic displays neologisms created using Modern Uyghur words (Sohu 2020). Some examples are: "wear the mask" (Uy. *maska taqash*, Ch. *dai kouzhao*) and "National Health Commission" (Uy. *dölet sehibe-saghlamliq komitëti*, Ch. *guojia weisheng jiankang weiyuanhui*). These translations are no different from those created during recent decades in that they avoid Chinese loanwords and employ words from other languages (Arabic, Persian and Russian) established in Modern Uyghur.

One last observation can be made about the promotion of Standard Chinese, which, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, has been intensively promoted in Xinjiang since 2000. The promotion of the national language emulates other cultural policies aiming to strengthen national values, securitization, civilization, and a sense of national identity (see the chapters by Jarmila Ptáčková and Ondřej Klimeš and Mohammed Alsudairi).

The intensive teaching of Standard Chinese is one of the activities taking place in the system of re-education (Smith Finley 2019, 6). The teaching of the Chinese language is also included in activities organized in the rural areas of south Xinjiang, in public spaces and in Uyghur homes, with officials of

16 It seems that the work of the Language and Script Work Committee had some discontinuities. However, some Uyghur linguists may still be employed to pursue language standardization projects (online conversations with two Uyghur scholars, September 2021).

the Becoming Family campaign[17] teaching Chinese to adults and children (*Sina* 2017; *Daily Headlines* 2018; Byler 2018; Xinjiang People's Publishing House 2019).[18]

Standard Chinese proficiency is presented by the authorities and state media as one of the skills, together with learning a profession, that will be valued in the marketplace and will therefore open up the future of Uyghurs who are socially and economically marginalized, as well as being a way to contain extremism and backwardness (China live 2019a; 2019b). Social mobility, progress, stability, and national unity have been the main pillars of the campaign to spread the Chinese language and script in Xinjiang. However, some changes have taken place in recent years. So far, the spread of Standard Chinese has mainly concerned the younger generations in the context of education reforms. Now, the campaign to teach Chinese targets also adults (for example, religious people who are suspected of having separatist or extremist thoughts, or those from impoverished, rural backgrounds) in facilities where re-education and learning are coercive.

The developments discussed in this section indicate both continuity and change. On the one hand, it is possible to notice continuity with the main objectives of China's language policy: the work on standardization and development of Uyghur, which coexists with the spread of Standard Chinese in the public sphere. Moreover, from the point of view of language practices, Uyghur is used as a language of communication in daily life and in public and private media.

On the other hand, what is new is the coercive nature of linguistic assimilation experienced in re-education facilities, the established shift to Chinese-based education, and a major emphasis on linguistic assimilation as a way to solve social, political, and economic issues in Xinjiang and build a Chinese national consciousness. Furthermore, we notice the absence of public expression encouraging the use of the Uyghur language, which can be interpreted as a threat to stability and lead to imprisonment, a situation prefigured by the imprisonment of two advocates of the protection of the Uyghur language, Ilham Tohti and Abduweli Ayup. These developments clash with the past experiences described in the previous sections of this chapter.

17 The campaign started in 2014 and consists of party cadres visiting rural areas in Xinjiang. The official aim is to explore people's conditions and establish good relationships. In Xinjiang, this campaign involves teaching Chinese, law, and secular and Han habits, as well as checking extremist behaviours.

18 In the sources cited in this article, the Chinese language is referred to as the "common national language and script" (*guojia tongyong yuyan wenzi*) or "national language" (*guoyu*).

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the status and meanings of Uyghur language and its implications for cultural security. As a response to increased language contact and the sinicization of spoken Uyghur, intellectual and artistic elites have raised concerns about Uyghur language maintenance, seen as an important element in assuring group demarcation and cultural continuity. Language ideologies have addressed the purity of the language and avoidance of Chinese elements, seen as features that can endanger the Uyghur language, its "beauty" and its role as an ethnic marker. Intellectuals and those engaged in artistic pursuits have also highlighted that Uyghur can survive if it is spoken and not mixed with Chinese but accompanied by the mastery of Chinese as a separate code. Moreover, Uyghur has been presented not as a symbol of folklore and tradition but as a tool for constructing modern Uyghur identities in Xinjiang, as a catalyst for the present and future well-being of the group.

As in all groups dealing with language ideologies, ideas of linguistic demarcation collide with the realities of language hierarchies and multilingualism. First, Chinese is the language of social mobility and the language used to assert state loyalty. Secondly, notwithstanding concerns about the status and development of the Uyghur language, the Chinese language is nowadays present in many speakers' daily language practices, in borrowing and code switching, especially in urban areas. Beyond the dimension of linguistic ideologies, speakers use their bilingual resources according to their audience and the context, developing rich linguistic and communicative outcomes. Moreover, as noted for other ethnic groups, the discourse overlooks linguistic diversity: it sees Chinese and Uyghur as opposite systems, closed in their boundaries, and does not address the protection of Uyghur varieties and other languages spoken in the region.

This chapter has presented the involvement of intellectual and artistic elites, as well as the interest among Uyghurs, in the protection of the language before 2017. It is difficult to assess whether the current system of linguistic assimilation will foster or limit, at least in the private realm, a desire for language maintenance, and how much any such desire will be shared among the Uyghurs in their homeland. The engagement of the Uyghur diaspora in speaking Uyghur, transmitting it to their children, and opening Uyghur schools and classes, tells us that this assimilationist push has fostered, rather than discouraged, a desire for language maintenance. The experiences narrated in this chapter on language ideologies and the promotion of the language, together with the current mobilization of the

diaspora, show that Uyghur can be used as a tool to preserve cultural security and develop a sense of belonging.

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