


RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Farewell, My Uyghur Language’: Linguistic anxiety and resistance in Uyghur poetry and songs, 1990s–2010s

Nimrod Baranovitch 

Department of Asian Studies, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

Email: nbaranov@research.haifa.ac.il

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Abstract

In recent decades, as part of the efforts of the Chinese government first to integrate and, more recently, to forcibly assimilate the Uyghur population into China’s mainstream culture and society, the Uyghur language has been marginalized and repressed to an unprecedented extent. The academic literature on Xinjiang’s language policy has repeatedly acknowledged that this repression is a major source of concern and discontent among many Uyghurs. However, to date, little has been written about the public response of Uyghurs to this policy and their open efforts to challenge it. In particular, with very few exceptions, little is known about the public response of Uyghur writers and artists. In this article I analyse a large corpus of Uyghur poems and songs that engaged openly with the Uyghur language crisis and were published and disseminated in the Uyghur public sphere between the mid-1990s and the mid-2010s. Unlike some studies that try to assess the condition of certain languages at a certain point in time through objective methodologies, these literary and artistic works provide an insider view on how the Uyghur cultural elite and many other Uyghurs experienced the repression and loss of their native language, and also, how they struggled against this repression. In the article I examine the diverse sentiments, perceptions, and discourses that these literary and artistic expressions communicate, and the different strategies that the Uyghurs used to struggle against the language policy and its consequences. I also explore what these works tell us about the development of Xinjiang’s language policy over time, the linguistic reality in the region, and the impact that the language policy has had on Uyghur society. Finally, the article also investigates the broad political meanings of these works and speculates on the link between them and the efforts of the Chinese government to further marginalize the Uyghur language.

Keywords: Xinjiang; Uyghurs; language policy; linguistic anxiety; resistance; mother tongue; bilingual education; assimilation; cultural erasure

Introduction

In recent decades, as part of the efforts of the Chinese government first to integrate and, more recently, to forcibly assimilate the Uyghur population into China’s

mainstream culture and society, the Uyghur language has been marginalized and repressed to an unprecedented extent. This trend has been manifested most clearly in the fact that in the last two decades or so Uyghur has been gradually replaced with Chinese as the dominant and, in many cases, the sole medium of instruction in the entire local education system in Xinjiang, as part of the so-called ‘bilingual education’ policy.¹ This is not the first time that assimilationist pressure has been put on Uyghurs and their language by the Chinese state. However, as I explain below, never before has this pressure been so comprehensive and implemented so systematically for such a long period of time, and in such a forceful and institutionalized manner.²

Indeed, the marginalization of Uyghur has also been evident for many years in the different forms of schooling that existed alongside the Uyghur education system and

¹Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, ‘Language blow for China’s Muslims’, *BBC News*, published online on 1 June 2002, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2020009.stm>, [accessed 22 June 2023]; Arienne M. Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict: Uyghur identity, language policy, and political discourse* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2005); Eric T. Schluessel, “‘Bilingual’ education and discontent in Xinjiang”, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2007, pp. 251–277; Guljennet Anaytulla, ‘Present state and prospects of bilingual education in Xinjiang: An ethnographic perspective’, *Chinese Education and Society*, vol. 41, no. 6, 2008, p. 44; Ma Yueyong (马岳勇) and Dong Xinqiang (董新强), ‘Shaoshu minzu wenhua yujing zhong de Xinjiang shuangyu jiaoyu’ (少数民族文化语境中的新疆双语教育) [Xinjiang’s bilingual education in the context of minority culture], *Zhongnan minzu daxue xuebao*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2012, p. 18; Mamtimyn Sunuodula and Yu Cao, ‘Language learning and empowerment: Languages in education for Uyghurs in Xinjiang’, in *Trilingualism in education in China: Models and challenges*, (eds) Anwei Feng and Bob Adamson (New York: Springer, 2015), pp. 66, 84; Radio Free Asia, ‘China bans Uyghur language in schools in key Xinjiang prefecture’, published online on 28 July 2017, available at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/language-07282017143037.html>, [accessed 22 June 2023]; Radio Free Asia, ‘China bans use of Uyghur, Kazakh textbooks, materials in Xinjiang schools’, published online on 13 October 2017, available at <http://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/ethnic-textbooks-10132017135316.html>, [accessed 22 June 2023].

²Earlier episodes of assimilationist pressure on the Uyghur language by the Chinese state took place as early as the late Qing period. Indeed, when the Qing completed its re-conquest of Xinjiang in the late nineteenth century, it established a network of Confucian schools that provided education in Chinese language and culture and attempted to compel the children of the local Turkic Muslim elite to attend them. See Eric T. Schluessel, ‘Language and the state in late Qing Xinjiang’, in *Historiography and nation-building among Turkic populations*, (ed.) Birgit N. Schlyter (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014), p. 151. Another early episode of even greater assimilationist pressure took place during the Mao era. Although in the first few years following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 the new government showed a high level of tolerance towards Uyghur and other minority cultures and languages, and enshrined minority cultural and linguistic rights in the new Constitution, this attitude changed dramatically during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). During the latter period in particular, minority cultures and languages came under open and severe attack. Several sources suggest that for an entire decade some of these languages were not taught at all. See Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict*, pp. 8, 36; Joanne Smith Finley, *The art of symbolic resistance: Uyghur identities and Uyghur-Han relations in contemporary Xinjiang* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 37. Referring specifically to teaching in and of Uyghur during this period, one source maintains that Uyghur was not taught in Kashgar. See Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict*, p. 36. Other sources state that few Uyghur schools in Xinjiang remained open and most Uyghur children in urban areas were forced to attend Han schools. See Chris Hann, ‘Harmonious or homogenous? Language, education and social mobility in rural Uyghur society’, in *On the fringes of the harmonious society: Tibetans and Uyghurs in socialist China*, (eds) Trine Brox and Ildikó Bellér-Hann (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2014), p. 193; Joanne Smith Finley, “‘Ethnic anomaly’ or modern Uyghur survivor? A case study of the *minkaohan* hybrid identity in Xinjiang”, in *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*, (eds) Ildikó Bellér-Hann, M. Cristina Cesàro, Rachel Harris and Joanne Smith Finley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 219.

before the shift to 'bilingual education' took place. One such form, which was already in existence in the Mao era, is *minkaohan*, a term that denotes Uyghurs who received their education in Chinese, usually in classes and schools dominated by Han Chinese students.³ Another form of schooling is the 'Xinjiang Class' programme (usually referred to in Chinese as *neigaoban*, which is the abbreviated form of *Xinjiang neidi gaozhong ban* [Xinjiang inland senior high school class]), which was launched in 2000. Under this programme, Uyghur students have been sent to Han Chinese boarding schools in China proper to receive their senior-secondary level education in Chinese.⁴ In 2004 a third form of education in Chinese was established, this time of boarding schools at the junior-secondary level in urban areas with a large Han Chinese population within Xinjiang.⁵ Although the intention behind each of these forms of schooling, especially the first two, was not necessarily to marginalize Uyghur, as far as their impact is concerned, they certainly contributed to this result. Indeed, the state has strongly encouraged these different forms of schooling in Chinese, and they have attracted an increasing number of Uyghur children,⁶ who, after joining them, became competent in Chinese, but often at the expense of Uyghur. Nevertheless, given that in recent years the entire educational system in Xinjiang has moved to instruction in Chinese,⁷ these forms have lost much of their special historical significance, at least as far as language is concerned.

The marginalization of Uyghur in Xinjiang has reached an unprecedented scale and has become an obvious form of repression in the context of the ongoing 'de-radicalization' and political 're-education' campaigns that the Chinese government launched in Xinjiang in 2016 and 2017, respectively. During these campaigns hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs were reportedly sent to internment camps,⁸ and numerous

³Jennifer Taynen, 'Interpreters, arbiters or outsiders: The role of the *min kao Han* in Xinjiang society', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2006, pp. 45–62; Smith Finley, "'Ethnic anomaly' or modern Uyghur survivor?"; Rong Ma, 'The development of minority education and the practice of bilingual education in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region', *Frontiers of Education in China*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2009, pp. 215–220; David Tobin, 'Nation-building and ethnic boundaries in China's northwest', PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2013, pp. 235–240; Uyghur Human Rights Project, 'Uyghur voices on education: China's assimilative "bilingual education" policy in East Turkestan', pp. 16–20, published online in 2015, available at <https://docs.uighuramerican.org/pdf/Uyghur-Voices-on-Education.pdf>, [last accessed 14 March 2022].

⁴Yangbin Chen, *Muslim Uyghur students in a Chinese boarding school: Social recapitalization as a response to ethnic integration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); Ma, 'The development of minority education', pp. 236–237; Timothy Grose, *Negotiating inseparability in China: The Xinjiang class and the dynamics of Uyghur identity* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019); James Leibold and Timothy A. Grose, 'Cultural and political disciplining inside China's dislocated minority schooling system', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2019, pp. 16–35.

⁵James Leibold, 'Interior ethnic minority boarding schools: China's bold and unpredictable educational experiment', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2019, pp. 6–7.

⁶Taynen, 'Interpreters, arbiters or outsiders', p. 59; Smith Finley, "'Ethnic anomaly' or modern Uyghur survivor?", p. 219; Ma, 'The development of minority education', pp. 217–219; Leibold, 'Interior ethnic minority boarding schools', p. 6.

⁷Zuliyati Simayi, 'The practice of ethnic policy in education: Xinjiang's bilingual education system', in *Minority education in China: Balancing unity and diversity in an era of critical pluralism*, (eds) James Leibold and Chen Yangbin (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), p. 135.

⁸Adrian Zenz, "'Thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude': China's political re-education campaign in Xinjiang", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2019, pp. 122–123.

reports suggest that forced Chinese learning constitutes a major part of the daily routine in these camps and is probably one of their central goals.⁹ Moreover, it has been reported that at least in some camps the use of Uyghur is banned and Uyghur internees are punished for speaking it.¹⁰ In addition, extreme pressure is also put on Uyghurs outside of the camps not only to learn Chinese but also to avoid using Uyghur. Indeed, a recent report suggests that, at least in some regions in Xinjiang, state employees are required to avoid using Uyghur not only in public but also at home, and if they use Uyghur in public, they risk being considered unpatriotic, an accusation that can lead to their imprisonment.¹¹

Several reports also indicate that in recent years Uyghur has been totally banned in some Uyghur schools, even outside of the classroom.¹² Furthermore, publications in Uyghur have declined significantly, and Uyghur script is disappearing from many public spaces.¹³ These reports should come as no surprise, given that for many years leading officials in Xinjiang have considered Uyghur (like other minority languages in China) a backward language that is incompatible with modern life and development.¹⁴ Moreover, since the late 2000s, and particularly after the 2009 Urumchi riots, the Uyghur language has increasingly been associated with terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism, three phenomena that are collectively referred to in China as the ‘three evil forces’.¹⁵

Most recently, an increasing number of new reports indicate that in the last few years nearly half a million children in Xinjiang (and according to some reports even

⁹Gerry Shih, ‘China’s mass indoctrination camps evoke Cultural Revolution’, *AP*, published online on 18 May 2018, available at <https://apnews.com/6e151296fb194f85ba69a8abd972e4b>, [accessed 22 June 2023]; Darren Byler, ‘The “patriotism” of not speaking Uyghur’, *SupChina*, published online on 2 January 2019, available at <https://upching.com/2019/01/02/the-patriotism-of-not-speaking-uyghur>, [last accessed 14 March 2022]; Joanne Smith Finley, ‘Securitization, insecurity and conflict in contemporary Xinjiang: Has PRC counter-terrorism evolved into state terror?’, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2019, p. 6; Zeng, “‘Thoroughly reforming them’”, pp. 114, 119–120.

¹⁰Darren Byler, “‘As if you’ve spent your whole life in prison’”: Starving and subdued in Xinjiang detention centers”, *SupChina*, published online on 5 December 2018, available at <https://supchina.com/2018/12/05/starving-and-subdued-in-xinjiang-deterntion-centers/>, [last accessed 14 March 2022]; Byler, “The ‘patriotism’ of not speaking Uyghur”; Smith Finley, ‘Securitization, insecurity and conflict’, pp. 6, 8.

¹¹Byler, ‘The “patriotism” of not speaking Uyghur’.

¹²Adila Yilihamu (阿迪拉·依力哈木 [ADILE ILHAM]), ‘Wei Han huaxue shuangyu jiaoxue xianzhuang, wenti he celüe chutan: yi Xinjiang Tulufan diqu Shanshan xian di-yi zhongxue wei li’ (维汉化学双语教学现状, 问题和策略初探: 以新疆吐鲁番地区鄯善县第一中学为例) [Initial exploration of the current situation, problems and strategies of the Uyghur-Han bilingual chemistry teaching: The case of no. 1 middle school in Shanshan County in the Turpan area, Xinjiang], Master’s thesis, Central China Normal University, 2015, p. 35; Radio Free Asia, ‘China bans Uyghur language’.

¹³Byler, ‘The “patriotism” of not speaking Uyghur’.

¹⁴Nicolas Becquelin, ‘Criminalizing ethnicity: Political repression in Xinjiang’, *China Rights Forum*, no. 1, 2004, p. 45; Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict*, p. 37; Schluessel, “‘Bilingual” education and discontent in Xinjiang”, p. 254.

¹⁵*China Daily*, ‘Govt investment doubles for kindergarten program in Xinjiang’, published online on 3 August 2009, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-08/03/content_8507036.htm, [last accessed 14 March 2022]; Jia Cui, ‘Mandarin lessons in Xinjiang “help fight terrorism”’, *China Daily*, published online on 4 June 2009, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-06/04/content_8250223.htm, [last accessed 14 March 2022]; Xiqian Liu, ‘A multiple view: A study of bilingual education in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region’, Master’s thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 2013, p. 20.

more), most of whom are probably Uyghur, have been placed in boarding kindergartens and schools, as well as orphanages. Most of these boarding facilities were reportedly built or transformed to function as such only recently as part of the ongoing ‘re-education’ campaign in the region. According to these reports, children in these new boarding facilities are immersed in Chinese language and culture, and the purpose of these facilities is to distance the children from the influence of their families and religion and assimilate them into Han Chinese culture. Significantly, the parents of many of these children were sent to ‘re-education’ camps or prison, and state officials forcibly placed the children in these boarding facilities without the permission of their parents or other relatives. In some cases, their parents did not even know where their children were.¹⁶ A rare report on two Uyghur children who were raised in Turkey and were forcibly sent to one such boarding school during a family visit to China, where they spent nearly 20 months, indicates that by the time they returned to Turkey, they were not only malnourished and traumatized, but also had forgotten how to speak their mother tongue (and Turkish), while becoming fluent in Chinese. According to the children themselves, they were taught only in Chinese for six days a week, and anyone in their class who spoke Uyghur was hit with a ruler.¹⁷

There are extensive studies about the language policy in Xinjiang, particularly in the context of the region’s education system; Uyghur attitudes towards this policy; as well as the impact that this policy has had on the language ecology in the region.¹⁸ Many of these studies have noted the ambivalent attitudes of Uyghurs towards the learning and use of Chinese in everyday life, but most of them have also made it clear that China’s language policy in Xinjiang and the growing dominance of Chinese in Uyghur daily life constitute a major source of concern and discontent among many

¹⁶Lily Kuo, ‘Chinese detention “leaving thousands of Uighur children without parents”’, *The Guardian*, published online on 16 October 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/16/thousands-of-uighur-children-orphaned-by-chinese-detention-papers-show>, [accessed 22 June 2023]; Amy Qin, ‘In China’s crackdown on Muslims, children have not been spared’, *The New York Times*, published online on 15 October 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/world/asia/china-xinjiang-children-boarding-schools.html>, [accessed 22 June 2023]; BBC, ‘China sending children of exiled Uighur parents to orphanages, says Amnesty’, published online on 21 March 2021, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-56454609>, [accessed 22 June 2023]; Radio Free Asia, ‘Uyghur children face legacy of trauma caused by mass incarceration campaign’, published online on 22 March 2021, available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/children-03222021190834.html>, [accessed 22 June 2023].

¹⁷Emily Feng, ‘Uyghur kids recall physical and mental torment at Chinese boarding schools in Xinjiang’, *NPR*, published online on 3 February 2022, available at <http://www.npr.org/2022/02/03/1073793823/china-uyghur-children-xinjiang-boarding-school>, [accessed 22 June 2023].

¹⁸Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict*; Schluessel, ‘“Bilingual” education and discontent in Xinjiang’; Ma, ‘The development of minority education’; Robert Warren Wilson, ‘A tear in my eye but I cannot cry: An ethnographic multiple case study on the language ecology of Urumchi, Xinjiang and the language practices of Uyghur young adults’, PhD thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2012; Simayi, ‘The practice of ethnic policy in education’; Joanne Smith Finley and Xiaowei Zang, ‘Language, education and Uyghur identity: An introductory essay’, in *Language, education and Uyghur identity in urban Xinjiang*, (eds) Joanne Smith Finley and Xiaowei Zang (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–33; Nimrod Baranovitch, ‘The “bilingual education” policy in Xinjiang revisited: New evidence of open resistance and active support among the Uyghur elite’, *Modern China*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2022, pp. 134–166.

Uyghurs, who viewed the policy as an official strategy that aims to annihilate their language, culture, and ethnic identity.¹⁹

Several recent studies that have explored more active forms of Uyghur engagement with and resistance to this policy and its consequences have advanced our knowledge about the Uyghur response to the language policy in Xinjiang beyond negative attitudes and sentiments. One such form is the efforts of some Uyghur individuals and organizations to promote the ‘purification’ of Uyghur by avoiding or advocating the avoidance of Uyghur-Chinese code switching and the use of Chinese loanwords.²⁰ Other recent studies have extended our understanding of the Uyghur response to the language policy and linguistic reality in Xinjiang further by focusing on more explicit forms of resistance, including the open, contentious, and sometimes even belligerent struggles that several Uyghur intellectuals have waged against the policy. These struggles included a popular Uyghur ‘Mother-Tongue-Based Education Movement’ that three young language activists launched in the early 2010s,²¹ on which I elaborate later, as well as publications that several prominent Uyghur academics and other Uyghur academics have published since the early 2000s.²²

However, despite these recent studies, our knowledge about the Uyghur response to the language policy and linguistic reality in Xinjiang, especially in the public sphere, is still very limited. In particular, we know very little about the response of Uyghur writers and artists, who were naturally more aware of and anxious about the language crisis that their people were facing and its dangerous consequences. This article hopes to fill part of this gap by focusing on a large corpus of Uyghur poems and songs that engaged with the Uyghur language crisis and were published or released between the mid-1990s and the mid-2010s. Most of these works can be immediately identified as dedicated to the language issue because they are called ‘Mother Tongue’ or ‘My Mother Tongue’ (Uyghur: *ana til* and *ana tilim*, respectively), or because these words occupy a central place in their lyrics when they have different titles. For the sake of convenience, I refer to all of these works collectively as *ana til* poems and songs. The article examines the diverse sentiments, perceptions, and discourses that these literary and artistic expressions contain, the goals that they aimed to achieve, and the different strategies that

¹⁹Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict*, pp. 39, 41, 51; Schluessel, “‘Bilingual’ education and discontent in Xinjiang”, pp. 252, 259–260, 263; Wilson, ‘A tear in my eye but I cannot cry’, p. 9; Smith Finley, *The art of symbolic resistance*, p. 44; Sunuodula and Cao, ‘Language learning and empowerment’, pp. 87–88; Baranovitch, ‘The “bilingual education” policy in Xinjiang revisited’, pp. 134–153.

²⁰Ashley C. Thompson, ‘Our “messy” mother tongue: Language attitudes among urban Uyghurs and desires for “purity” in the public sphere’, Master’s thesis, University of Kansas, 2013; Giulia Cabras, ‘Between resistance and adaptation: The place of the Uyghur language in the sinicised zone of Ürümqi’, *China Perspectives*, no. 4, 2017, pp. 41–48; Giulia Cabras, ‘Language ideologies in a Uyghur comedy sketch: The comedy sketch *Chüshenmidim* “I don’t understand” and the importance of *sap Uyghur*’, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, no. 248, 2017, pp. 97–111.

²¹World Uyghur Congress, ‘Movement for Uyghur mother language based education’, published online in February 2014, available at www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wp-content/uploads/Movement-for-Uyghur-Mother-Language-Based-Education.pdf, [accessed 22 June 2023]; Rustem Shir, ‘Resisting Chinese linguistic imperialism: Abduweli Ayup and the movement for Uyghur mother tongue-based education’, A special report published by the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), published online on 16 May 2019, available at <https://uhrp.org/report/resisting-chinese-linguistic-imperialism-abduweli-ayup-and-movement-uyghur-mother/>, [accessed 22 June 2023].

²²Baranovitch, ‘The “bilingual education” policy in Xinjiang revisited’.

they used to do so. It also explores what these works tell us about the development of Xinjiang's language policy and linguistic reality over time, the impact that this policy has had on Uyghur society, the language practices of Uyghurs in different periods, and the Uyghur response to different stages in the development of this policy and changes in the general reality in Xinjiang. In addition, I examine the general political meaning of these works and speculate on their impact on Uyghur society, as well as on the link between these works and the efforts of the Chinese government to further marginalize and repress the Uyghur language.

Based on an analysis of this body of work, I argue that between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s Uyghur writers and musicians engaged intensively with the language issue, and that their works contain powerful expressions of linguistic ethno-nationalism. Furthermore, I maintain that these works reflect the intensification of general Uyghur ethno-nationalism since the early 1990s, and that they also contributed to this trend.²³ In addition, I show that *ana til* poems and songs contain many expressions of linguistic anxiety, and at the same time also reflect intense resistance to China's language policy and the linguistic reality in Xinjiang. Indeed, I demonstrate that these works were used to express sentiments that did not approve of this policy, and to introduce ideas that contradicted the goals that this policy aimed to achieve. Thus, many of these works were often used in the most direct way to encourage Uyghurs not to 'abandon' their native language, and tried to mobilize them to act to preserve it. In addition, the works also illustrate that Uyghurs were engaged for decades in an overt and vocal struggle against the language policy and linguistic reality in Xinjiang, which took place in the most public spaces. This finding challenges the picture that emerges from many of the studies on the Uyghur response to the language policy in Xinjiang, according to which Uyghurs engaged mainly in covert forms of resistance, and that in most cases this resistance was confined to private spaces. Finally, I show that Uyghur anxiety and resistance has strengthened since the late 2000s and early 2010s in response to the intensification of official efforts to marginalize and repress their native language and also in the wake of the 2009 Urumchi riots, which led to a heightened ethnic awareness among increasing number of Uyghurs.

This strengthened ethnic awareness and the intensified anxiety and resistance amid the exacerbation of the language crisis led to an *ana til* 'fever'. This was manifested in the increased production of *ana til* works and in the fact that this production expanded to more literary and artistic forms and reached a larger audience. Significantly, most of the *ana til* works that have been produced since the late 2000s, as reflected in this article, were published online. One reason for this new trend was the rapid development and increasing popularity of the internet in Xinjiang. However, it was also the result of the fact that since the mid-2000s, the *ana til* theme has become politically sensitive. This latter development led publishers to avoid publishing *ana til* works in print form. Therefore, many writers and artists published their works online because censorship on the internet has always been less strict than that imposed

²³On the intensification of Uyghur ethno-nationalism, see Justin Jon Rudelson, *Oasis identities: Uyghur nationalism along China's Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Nicolas Becquelin, 'Xinjiang in the nineties', *The China Journal*, no. 44, 2000, pp. 84–90; Colin Mackerras, 'Xinjiang at the turn of the century: The causes of separatism', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2001, pp. 289–303; James Millward, *Violent separatism in Xinjiang: A critical assessment* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2004).

on printed materials. However, the *ana til* 'fever' that swept Xinjiang between the late 2000s and mid-2010s came to an end when the ongoing political 're-education' campaign was launched in 2017. As a result of this campaign, the production and dissemination of *ana til* poems and songs in Xinjiang ended completely.

A note on methodology and some theoretical considerations

The corpus of works that I collected and analysed in the research that led to this article includes 38 poems and songs that are dedicated entirely to the language issue. My search for these poems and songs comprised various printed sources, including newspapers, literary and other journals, anthologies of various poets, alphabet books, school textbooks for different grades, and study guides for high school students. It also included cassettes, CDs, and VCDs (video CDs), recordings of live performances and TV programmes, as well as numerous internet websites. Apart from one exceptional poem from the 1930s, which will be discussed below, the search covered sources from the early 1980s on. However, because during the 1980s and early 1990s only a few relevant poems and songs were published, and the production of such poems and songs in large numbers started only in the mid- and late 1990s, the chronological framework of this study covers the period between the mid-1990s and the mid-2010s.²⁴

The works that I collected are very diverse in form and style. They include 'serious' poetry that was published in print or uploaded to the internet, online poetry in more vernacular language, and songs in different styles, including folk, pop, rock, and hip-hop, as well as children's songs. Moreover, as I suggest above, these works are also diverse in terms of the media through which they were disseminated. This diversity indicates that the works targeted various age and socio-economic groups, which together encompass large parts of Uyghur society. Furthermore, many of the works were created by some of the most well-known Uyghur writers and musicians and became very popular. This implies that they were not associated with a marginal group or represented a marginal voice. Rather, they reflected what many people thought and felt, and most likely also influenced many people.

Most of the article is dedicated to an analysis of the lyrics of the works, but some references are also made to the music and video clips that accompany them as well as to their performance. The analysis also draws on information that I obtained from hundreds of conversations and non-formal interviews that I have held in and outside Xinjiang since the early 2000s with dozens of Uyghur informants. All of my informants

²⁴Although I did not conduct a systematic search for *ana til* works from the Mao era, it is reasonable to assume that, given the suppression of Uyghur and other minority cultures and languages beginning in the late 1950s and even more so during the Cultural Revolution, as described earlier (see Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict*, pp. 9, 36), even if such works were created during this period, they were fewer compared with those produced during the 1980s and early 1990s and did not become popular. Indeed, none of my informants, including a university professor of Uyghur now in his early seventies, could remember a single *ana til* work from that period. Moreover, whereas the corpus of *ana til* works disseminated in Xinjiang between the early 1980s and mid-2010s included one work from the 1930s (that will be discussed later), which suggests that during the former period earlier works were not necessarily forgotten, this corpus did not include a single work from the Mao era.

were educated urbanites, and some of them were leading writers, artists, and academics who specialized in the field of Uyghur language and education. Others included less well-known academics as well as university students and other intellectuals. The majority of the informants were in their thirties and forties, some were in their twenties, and a few in their sixties and early seventies. Several of these informants left or fled China in the mid- and late 2010s and never returned because of the current situation in Xinjiang. With the exception of a few individuals, all of my informants, including those who now live outside China, will remain anonymous in this article to protect their safety and the safety of their families in China. In addition to these sources, the article also draws on posts that have been uploaded to social media platforms, TV programmes, and publications that have been published in academic and popular magazines, or uploaded to various internet sites.

Several of the *ana til* poems and songs discussed in this article, particularly the later ones, as noted earlier, originally appeared only online. However, since the launching of the ongoing political 're-education' campaign in Xinjiang in 2017, most of the works that were uploaded to the Chinese internet in previous years have been deleted, and the original links are now invalid. Therefore, in most cases the links that I provide in the footnotes and references in this article lead to websites or platforms outside of China where some of the works can be found. In some cases, however, no link is provided at all because the original link is no longer active and the work has never been published outside of China. I also provide links to internet websites and platforms outside of China for the poems and songs that I found in printed sources, recordings of TV programmes, and CDs, because in recent years it has become difficult, and in some cases impossible, to get hold of the original sources. These links will allow readers to read the entire original works, or watch and listen to the video clips and music. In these cases, the internet links appear in the footnotes after the full bibliographic or discographic information that relates to the original source. Finally, the organized disappearance of much of Uyghur culture since 2017, and sometimes even earlier, made it difficult in several cases to date the works accurately. In these cases the dating is approximate and relies mainly on the memory of my informants. Therefore, in the references to these works I added a question mark in square brackets after the approximate date.

The article is organized according to the major thematic motifs and strategies that appear in the body of the *ana til* works that I collected. Although most of these works clearly aim to persuade Uyghurs to cherish their mother tongue, recognize its value, and act to keep it alive, the writers and artists who created them tried to achieve this goal by engaging with different motifs and by using different strategies. The thematic and strategy-centred organization helps highlight this diversity and enables an in-depth analysis of each of these motifs and strategies. Moreover, although different motifs and strategies are often combined in a single work, and similar ones sometimes appear in works from different periods, certain motifs and strategies nevertheless tend to dominate works that were created in certain periods. Therefore, the thematic and strategy-centred organization also helps to underscore the close link between certain motifs and strategies and specific stages in the development of Xinjiang's language policy as well as particular changes in the general reality in Xinjiang.

Highlighting the crucial role of the Uyghur language in defining Uyghurness and maintaining Uyghur culture and identity

One of the main messages in most *ana til* songs and poems is that the Uyghur language, or the ‘mother tongue’, as it is called in these works, defines Uyghurness, that it is an essential component of Uyghur collective identity and culture, and is also key to the survival and continuity of the Uyghur ‘nation’ (Uyghur: *millet*). The Uyghur linguistic nationalism that is celebrated in contemporary *ana til* poems and songs is not a completely new phenomenon, and can be traced back to as early as Ali-Shir Nava’i’s famous treatise from 1499, ‘The Comparison of Two Languages’ (*Muhakamat al-lughatayn*).²⁵ More manifestations of early Uyghur linguistic nationalism were also evident during the late Qing period and, like many of the *ana til* works that I discuss in this article, these manifestations emerged as a reaction to the assimilationist language policy of the Qing state, which I mentioned earlier.²⁶

In the early decades of the twentieth century Uyghur linguistic nationalism was also expressed in poetry and songs. One source suggests that as early as the 1910s and 1920s students in a newly established modern school near Turfan sang a song that glorified the local national ‘mother tongue’. Ironically, however, the lyrics of this song were in Tatar.²⁷ Another early *ana til* work was a poem in Uyghur from 1935 called ‘Mother Tongue’, which is one of the most famous *ana til* works to date. For many decades this important and exceptional poem was erroneously attributed to Qutluq Haji Shewqi,²⁸ a prominent modern Uyghur intellectual who was active in Xinjiang in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, a recent article has made it clear

²⁵Ali-Shir Nava’i (1441–1501 AD) is a famous fifteenth-century Turkic writer, artist, scholar, and government official. In his famous treatise, ‘The Comparison of Two Languages’, he asserted the superiority of the Turkish language over Persian for literary purposes in a period when the latter dominated the literary world and high culture in Central Asia. See Robert Devereux, *Muhākamat al-lughatayn by Mīr Ali Shir: Introduction, translation and notes* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), pp. vii–xi. Because Nava’i wrote his essay in Chagatay, an extinct Turkic language that is considered the predecessor of modern Uyghur and Uzbek, it could be argued that his essay provides an example of early or proto-Uyghur linguistic nationalism. Indeed, although applying the modern ethnonym ‘Uyghur’ to Nava’i would be completely anachronistic, many Uyghur intellectuals today consider him to be Uyghur.

²⁶Although the reaction of the local Turkic elite to the attempts of the Qing state to compel their children to attend Confucian schools was not always negative, these attempts nevertheless led to anxiety and resentment among many local elite families against the Qing, prompting a large number of them to flee Xinjiang to Central Asia. See Schluessel, ‘Language and the state’, pp. 146–147, 150–163; see also Eric Schluessel, *Land of strangers: The civilizing project in Qing Central Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 80–115. Proto-Uyghur linguistic and cultural nationalism was also evident during this period in the negative attitudes of locals toward local bilingual translators, which derived in part from the perception that the latter violated linguistic and cultural boundaries. See *ibid.*, p. 107. Significantly, the assimilationist language policy of the late Qing also contributed to the rise of local Turkic activists in the realm of education who promoted nationalistic language policies that emphasized the use of the native language. The activities of these activists became increasingly influential during the 1930s, as I describe in the next paragraph. See Schluessel, ‘Language and the state’, p. 151.

²⁷James A. Millward, *Eurasian crossroads: A history of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 176.

²⁸Sultan Mahmut Kasgarli, ‘The formation of modern Uighur literature and current developments’, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1993, p. 578; Mamtimyn Sunuodula, ‘“One belt one road”, one language or multiple languages? Multilingualism and language policy along the Silk Road’, in ‘“One belt, one road” and China’s westward pivot: Past, present and future. Conference report’, Danish Institute for International

that it was actually written by another intellectual from the same period called Abdulla Ne'imi.²⁹

These two early *ana til* works were created in a period when modern Uyghur nationalism was starting to take shape. It was also during this time that the nationalistic educational activists mentioned earlier began implementing the notion of mother tongue education in Xinjiang. These activists also promoted the idea that the Uyghur mother tongue was the chief marker of Uyghur ethno-national identity.³⁰ Significantly, this period (particularly the 1930s and 1940s) also saw two major attempts by Uyghurs to establish a modern independent state, although many of those who participated in these attempts, especially in the early 1930s, did not identify themselves as 'Uyghurs' yet, but rather as 'Muslims' or 'Turkic'.³¹ It is quite reasonable to suggest that in this historical context, and similar to more recent *ana til* works, Ne'imi's 'Mother Tongue' not only reflected the emergence of modern Uyghur nationalism, but also played an important role in its formation, as numerous other poems from that period did.³² Moreover, the clear resemblance of many contemporary *ana til* works to these earlier poems suggests that the former were most likely inspired by the latter.

Abdulla Ne'imi's 'Mother Tongue' suggests that the Uyghur language defines a group of people who share all of the characteristics that are conventionally regarded, since at least the early twentieth century, as those that make up a nation. The speakers of this language not only share a common language that distinguishes them from other groups, but also a common culture (religion in this poem), a common 'homeland' (Uyghur: *weten*), and a common origin and history. Indeed, the poem maintains that the Uyghur language is a marker of an exclusive collective identity that is based on an exclusive bloodline, which runs from 'the great ancestors' of the remote past to the present, and it is also the means that enable the members of this group to maintain its continuity into the future. This notion clearly defies the inclusive official Chinese narrative according to which Uyghurs, like all of China's ethnic minorities, are, and have been since ancient times, part of the Chinese nation (Chinese: *Zhonghua minzu*)

Studies, 2017, p. 78, available at <http://dro.dur.ac.uk/23758/1/23758.pdf#page=76>, [accessed 22 June 2023].

²⁹See Ömerjan Nuri, 'Qutluq Shewqige qilinghan töhmet tetqiqat' [Research on the slander against Qutluq Shewqi], *Shinjang tarix—medeniyyiti*, no. 47, 2013, pp. 109–115. The article is also available at <http://www.akademiye.org/ug/?p=7752>, [accessed 22 June 2023]. Based on my own observation, Ne'imi's name appears right under the poem in the newspaper in which it was published in 1935. See Abdulla Ne'imi, 'Ana til' [Mother tongue], *Yéngi hayat*, no. 81, 12 August 1935. For the lyrics of the poem online, see <http://www.akademiye.org/ug/?p=7752>, [accessed 22 June 2023].

³⁰Millward, *Eurasian crossroads*, p. 176; Eric T. Schluessel, 'History, identity, and mother-tongue education in Xinjiang', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2009, pp. 384, 387–388, 399.

³¹Linda Benson, *The Ili rebellion: The Moslem challenge to Chinese authority in Xinjiang, 1944–1949* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1990); Millward, *Eurasian crossroads*, pp. 201–206, 215–230; David Brophy, *Uyghur nation: Reform and revolution on the Russia–China frontier* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 233–247.

³²Rudelson, *Oasis identities*, pp. 145–153; Ondřej Klimeš, *Struggle by the pen: The Uyghur discourse of nation and national interest, c. 1900–1949* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 97–119; Brophy, *Uyghur nation*, pp. 246–247; Joshua L. Freeman, 'Print and power in the communist borderlands: The rise of Uyghur national culture', PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2019, esp. pp. 160–183.

and thus share common origins with China's Han majority and other ethnic groups.³³ The link in the poem between the Uyghur language, the Uyghur people, Uyghur culture, the Uyghurs' origin and history, as well as the Uyghur homeland, is so strong that those who 'abandon' (Uyghur: *tashlimaq*) the mother tongue are considered strangers who do not belong to the homeland. This last notion indicates the central role of language in defining who is Uyghur and who is not. Moreover, it also reflects the popular notion among many Uyghurs (at least until recently) that those Uyghurs who are not competent in their mother tongue (usually *minkaohan*) are not real Uyghurs or not entirely Uyghur. In line with this notion, some Uyghurs have even considered *minkaohan* Uyghurs as a separate ethnic group (often referred to by Uyghurs humorously as 'Xinjiang's fourteenth nationality').³⁴ Below are several lines from Ne'imi's 'Mother Tongue' from 1935:

... I want to preserve [the mother tongue] and pass it on to the next generation./
 ... Oh, mother tongue, you are a reminder left to us by the great ancestors./ ...
 The people who deny their own father, their own language, their own religion,
 and their own homeland,/ I want to say that they are alike./ The one who abandons
 this language is not a friend of the homeland,/ I want to tell you that this
 person is a stranger everywhere./ ...³⁵

During the 1980s and 1990s Ne'imi's 'Mother Tongue' was well-known to Uyghur intellectuals and school students, despite the fact that nearly half a century had passed since the poem was first published. Indeed, despite its strong message of Uyghur nationalism, which has been one of the most politically sensitive issues in contemporary China, several lines from this poem, which I cite later and in which Uyghur ethno-nationalism is expressed in softer terms, were included for many years in Uyghur school textbooks, beginning in 1981.³⁶ These lines were later popularized further when they were set to music and turned into a new popular song by one of Xinjiang's most prominent musicians, Abduréhim Héyt (sometimes written Héyit). Héyt's new song, which was released in 2006 according to two of my Uyghur informants who were familiar with his work,³⁷ reflected the dramatic increase in Uyghur ethno-nationalism that had begun in the previous decade. Considering the musician's popularity among Uyghurs, there is little doubt that the song also contributed to this trend. At the same time, it also reflected the efforts of Uyghur writers and artists to challenge the cultural repression that the Chinese state had started to implement

³³Gardner Bovington and Nabijan Tursun, 'Contested histories', in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim borderland*, (ed.) S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 353, 361.

³⁴Taynen, 'Interpreters, arbiters or outsiders', pp. 45–46; Smith Finley, "'Ethnic anomaly" or modern Uyghur survivor?', pp. 221, 226, 229; Tobin, 'Nation-building and ethnic boundaries', pp. 209–210, 212, 235–240.

³⁵Nei'imi, 'Ana til'.

³⁶See, for example, Kashgar Uyghur Press and Xinjiang People's Press (eds), *Élipbe* [Alphabet] (Urumchi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 1981), p. 58.

³⁷Abduréhim Héyt (music and performance), 'Ana til' [Mother tongue], in *Dutarim* [My dutar], disc 5 (Minzu yinxiang chubanshe, 2011 [2006]). ISBN CN-M06-11-320-00/A.J6 (audio version).

in Xinjiang during the same period in response to the intensification of Uyghur ethno-nationalism.³⁸

Héyt's musical rendition of Ne'imi's 'Mother Tongue' became one of his most popular songs, and it is still the most famous *ana til* song to date and one of the few *ana til* works that have been mentioned in previous studies.³⁹ The emphasis in the lyrics of the song on the Uyghurs' collective and distinctive identity is also manifested in its music and performance. Héyt performs his song in his typical traditional Uyghur folk style, singing in his deep masculine voice and accompanying himself with the *dutar*, one of the most distinctive and popular Uyghur musical instruments and thus an important symbol of Uyghurness in itself. Furthermore, in the most famous video clip of this song, he is also seen wearing the Uyghur *doppa* skullcap, which is another important symbol of Uyghur identity. In addition, Héyt performs the song while sitting on the ground outside, in the midst of a mountainous landscape, a choice that may be hinting at the emphasis placed on the physical 'homeland' in the full text of Ne'imi's poem.⁴⁰

With the exception of one line—'Oh, mother tongue, you are a reminder left to us by the great ancestors'—Héyt's song does not include the lines from Ne'imi's poem that were quoted above, but only those that praise the mother tongue in very general terms (I will elaborate on these lines in the next section). One can assume that he decided to exclude these lines because, with their reference to Uyghur history, ancestors, homeland, and religion, they were too nationalistic and he probably wanted to avoid the risk of censorship or even persecution. Significantly, in the years that preceded the release of this song, Héyt had already run into trouble with the authorities because of several songs that contained politically problematic content.⁴¹ Nevertheless, despite his decision to avoid the more politically sensitive lines from Ne'imi's poem, Héyt was arrested in early 2017, like many other Uyghur writers and artists, when the 're-education' campaign that is currently still taking place in Xinjiang was launched. Several reports suggest that he was released in 2019 and placed under house arrest, but it is difficult to verify this. Thus, his current status remains unclear.⁴²

While Héyt did not include the politically sensitive lines from Ne'imi's poem in his song, beginning in the late 1990s other Uyghur writers and artists began reviving the more explicit nationalistic messages that this early poem contains. One example is one of the best-known and earliest *ana til* works from the more contemporary period, which was published in 1999 by Exmet Imin, one of the most prominent contemporary

³⁸On the Chinese repression, see Rémi Castets, 'The Uyghurs in Xinjiang: The malaise grows', *China Perspectives*, no. 49, 2003, pp. 34–48; Becquelin, 'Criminalizing ethnicity'. On the Uyghur challenge, see, for example, Bovingdon and Tursun, 'Contested histories', p. 370.

³⁹Tobin, 'Nation-building and ethnic boundaries', pp. 208–209; Sunuodula, "'One belt one road", one language or multiple languages?', p. 78.

⁴⁰The clip is no longer available on the Chinese internet but has been accessible on YouTube since 2014. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AF35EBUCDxA>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

⁴¹Neil Strauss, 'Music; in a far-flung corner of China, a folk star', *The New York Times*, published online on 7 February 1999, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/07/arts/music-in-a-far-flung-corner-of-china-a-folk-star.html>, [last accessed 14 March 2022]; Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in their own land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 96; Smith Finley, *The art of symbolic resistance*, pp. 206–221.

⁴²World Uyghur Congress, 'Abdurehim Heyit', date of publication unknown, available online at <https://www.uighurcongress.org/en/aburehim-heyit/>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

Uyghur writers. Called 'My Mother Tongue', the work takes the form of a long poem in freestyle. It belongs to a literary genre called *nesir* in Uyghur, which some scholars have translated as 'prose poetry'.⁴³ The poem starts with very personal statements in which the writer expresses his attachment to his mother tongue. He suggests that this sentiment is inseparable from his love and respect for his mother, because both he and his mother used Uyghur to express their love for each other in words for the first time. However, this personal tone is soon replaced with an overt collective message that evokes a strong sense of Uyghur ethno-nationalism. In this section of the poem the writer highlights an additional aspect of the link between the Uyghur language and the Uyghurs' collective identity, namely, that much of Uyghur cultural knowledge, heritage, and history is actually embodied in this language, and that it is also essential for the transmission of Uyghur cultural knowledge from one generation to another. In other words, Imin suggests that, for him, mastering the mother tongue is not only an abstract symbol of a specific collective identity, or a spiritual link that connects him to his ancient ancestors. It is also instrumental in the most practical way as a tool that enables him to learn about, absorb, and experience the history and culture of his people.

Many of the cultural artefacts and relics that Imin mentions in his prose-poem are texts, some written and some oral, which Uyghurs consider the essence of Uyghur cultural heritage. In addition, he also mentions the names of prominent historical figures, places, political entities, and other cultural artefacts and relics that educated Uyghurs have celebrated for decades as symbols and evidence of the long, rich, and independent history and culture of the Uyghur nation, despite the efforts of the Chinese state to suppress this ethno-nationalist interpretation. Imin's work reminds us of the importance of language, both written and spoken, for minority and other subaltern groups, for the production, maintenance, and transmission of their history. Indeed, its importance is particularly evident in the context of colonization or other forms of domination in which this history is often silenced and suppressed by the colonizer/dominant group and its history and language.⁴⁴

Oh, my mother tongue! ... I learned about the identity of the ancestors only through you; I learned about the meaning of the motherland only through you.
... I learned the secrets of the Orkhon Inscriptions⁴⁵ in the Orkhon Valley through

⁴³Neşe Harbaliöğlü, 'Çağdaş Uygur edebiyatında mensur şiir türünün bir temsilcisi: Ehmet İmin' [A representative of the prose poetry genre in contemporary Uyghur literature: Exmet Imin], in *Uluslararası Türk dünyası araştırmaları sempozyumu* [International Symposium of Turkic World Studies], 26–28 April 2017, Niğde Ömer Halisdemir University, pp. 649–656. Available in academia.edu.

⁴⁴Bovingdon and Tursun, 'Contested histories'.

⁴⁵The Orkhon Inscriptions are two memorial stone steles from the eighth century that were discovered in the Orkhon Valley in present-day Mongolia. Carved in old Turkic script and Chinese, they were erected by the Kök Türks during the Second Turkic empire and commemorate the achievements of two contemporary Turkic princes, one of whom, Bilge Khaghan, ruled the empire between 716 and 734 AD. The monuments also describe the history of the Turkic tribes, among them Uyghurs, that inhabited and ruled large parts of the Eurasian steppes during that period, and their complex and changing relationship of dominance, subordination, independence, peace, and war with Tang China and other neighbouring peoples and polities. See Hao Chen, 'On the authorship of the old Turkic inscriptions', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2020, pp. 707–719. Many contemporary Uyghur intellectuals consider these

you, and the history of my ancestors was revealed before my eyes. ... I learned about the *Altun Yaruk*⁴⁶ through you. ... I looked at the ruins of Idiqu⁴⁷ today and imagined the wonderful glory of the past. ... I read *Divanu Lugat-it-Türk* through you. I read *Kutadgu Bilig*⁴⁸ ... I read ancient poems and stories, I read many priceless scientific facts. Through you I listened to the *Twelve Muqam*,⁴⁹ and through you I sang the *Twelve Muqam* ... Yes! My mother tongue is the language of our wise, brave, and hardworking nation! You taught me many things, you have instilled in me a lot of wisdom. Without you I cannot imagine my existence, without you I also cannot imagine my culture. ...⁵⁰

inscriptions to be important documentation of the glorious and independent history and culture of their Turkic ancestors. For this general Uyghur view of Turkic history in Central and East Asia, see, for example, Bovingdon and Tursun, 'Contested histories', pp. 357, 362, 364.

⁴⁶*Altun Yaruk* (or *Altun Yaruk Sudur*) is the Uyghur name of the famous Buddhist *Sutra of Golden Light*. The sutra was translated from Sanskrit to Chinese in the eighth century and from Chinese to Old Uyghur in the early tenth century. Different copies and fragments of the various manuscripts carrying the sutra have been studied extensively for over a century now and they constitute an important source for the study of the Old Uyghur language and the development of Turkic languages in general. The manuscripts also provide important evidence of the long period in which a large part of Uyghur society was Buddhist, prior to the gradual conversion of Uyghurs to Islam beginning in the tenth century. See Simone-Christiane Raschmann, 'The pre-eminent sūtra. New traces of the *Altun yaruk sudur*', in *Unknown treasures of the Altaic world in libraries, archives and museums*, (eds) Tatiana Pang, Simone-Christiane Raschmann and Gerd Winkelhane (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2013), pp. 93–113.

⁴⁷After the fall of the Orkhon-based Uyghur empire in 840, part of the Uyghur elite and ordinary population of that empire migrated to the Turfan area in present-day Xinjiang and established a new kingdom, called Qocho. Following this migration, the rulers of this new Uyghur kingdom, who back in their Orkhon-based empire were titled 'Khan', replaced this title with the new word '*Idiqu*' which meant 'sacred majesty'. In addition to denoting the Uyghur rulers of the Qocho Uyghur state, the term '*idiqu*' also denotes the city of Qocho (referred to as Gaochang in Chinese), which was the capital of the Qocho Uyghur state. The Qocho Uyghur state existed from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, at times as an independent state and at other times as a vassal state of other polities. For a concise discussion of the term '*idiqu*' and Qocho, see Millward, *Eurasian crossroads*, pp. 46–48.

⁴⁸*Divanu Lugat-it-Türk* and *Kutadgu Bilig* are two canonical books that were published in the late eleventh century by two Central Asian Muslim Turkic scholars who are considered by contemporary Uyghurs to be Uyghur national cultural heroes. The first book, written by Mahmud Kashgari and known in English as *Compendium of the Languages of the Türks*, is a dictionary of Turkic languages that contains a wealth of information about different Turkic languages and literatures and about the history, culture, and life of various Turkic peoples of that period. The second book, written by Yusuf Khass Hajib and known in English as *Wisdom of Royal Glory*, belongs to the genre of mirrors for princes. It contains instructions for good governance intended for rulers, as well as Islamic ideas and philosophical discussions on various topics. For concise information on both texts and their authors, see Millward, *Eurasian crossroads*, pp. 53–54.

⁴⁹The Uyghur Twelve Muqam (Uyghur: *On ikki muqam*) is a set of musical suites that consist of instrumental music, sung poetry and stories, as well as music for dance. They are regarded today as a key component of Uyghur culture, history, and ethnic identity. See Rachel Harris, *The making of a musical canon in Chinese Central Asia: The Uyghur Twelve Muqam* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

⁵⁰Exmet Imin, 'Ana tilim' [My mother tongue], in *Söyimen séni dunya 1* [I love you world 1] (Urumchi: Xinjiang People's Press, 2013 [1999]), pp. 504–507. For the lyrics of the poem online, see https://ug.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A6%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7_%D8%AA%D9%89%D9%84%D9%89%D9%85, [accessed 23 June 2023].

Like Ne'imi's poem, Imin's work was also included in Uyghur school textbooks for several years.⁵¹ Moreover, a video version of the work recited by a young Uyghur couple, which was uploaded to the internet in 2013,⁵² provides evidence that the poem was also popularized among the general Uyghur population, a point that was corroborated by several of my informants.⁵³ Reflecting the ethno-nationalistic message of the work, and similar to Abduréhim Héyt's performance of his *ana til* song, the couple in the video clip recites the poem wearing *doppas* and dressed in *kanway konglek* (Uyghur ethnic shirts) adorned with traditional-style embroidery. Moreover, the performance is accompanied by the Uyghur *satar*, another traditional Uyghur musical instrument that immediately evokes a sense of Uyghurness. Significantly, the piece was uploaded to the internet on 21 February to mark International Mother Language Day. The timing reflects the fact that, from the late 2000s, this day started to become increasingly important among Uyghurs all over the world. Indeed, in recent years, every year on around this date Uyghurs have posted or shared *ana til* poems and songs on social media, and some have also recited or performed the works themselves.

The engagement with the language issue, and more specifically with the notion that the Uyghur language is an essential component of Uyghurness and is crucial to maintaining Uyghur culture and collective identity, has not been confined only to 'serious', highbrow poetry by Uyghur intellectuals, but has also extended to widely disseminated, trendy Uyghur pop songs. This expansion became obvious, especially from the late 2000s and early 2010s when several such songs began to celebrate this notion quite openly and forcefully in what was apparently a response to the more aggressive language policy that China had started to implement in Xinjiang during that period. Some of my informants suggested that this change in policy took place at least in part as a result of the 2009 Urumchi riots. Several official reports I mentioned earlier corroborated this claim, suggesting that the riots enhanced the perception among officials in Xinjiang that the lack of proficiency in Chinese among Uyghurs created an environment that promoted terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism.⁵⁴ However, the increased engagement of Uyghur pop musicians with the *ana til* theme may have also been related to the Urumchi riots in another way. Indeed, several of my informants suggested that the riots also increased the Uyghurs' ethnic awareness, a development implying that many Uyghurs probably also became more aware of the language crisis. This claim clearly offers another explanation as to why the engagement with the *ana til* theme became so clear in Uyghur pop culture, particularly from the late 2000s onwards. One example of this new trend is the song 'Mother Tongue' by the pop musician Eli Kroran, who wrote the song's lyrics and music and also performed it. The song

⁵¹I was not able to find the actual textbooks, some of which were banned and disappeared recently. However, several study guides that prepare students for university entrance exams suggest that it was included in the *Language and literature* textbook for high school students at least during the mid-2010s and probably much earlier. See, for example, Eli Ghoxajun (ed.), *Toluq ottura mektep oqughuchiliri üchün muhim qoral; bilim jewherliri; til—edebiyat* [An important tool for high school students; essences of knowledge; language and literature] (Urumchi: Xinjiang People's Press and Xinjiang People's Health Press, 2014).

⁵²See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3E-BBqdtQ>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

⁵³For more information in Uyghur about Exmet Imin and his creative work, see <http://www.ewlad.biz/uyghurkitap/Journallar/Tarim/tarim-2010-3.pdf>, pp. 120–123, 32, and <http://www.ewlad.biz/uyghurkitap/Journallar/Xjmedeniyiti/Xjmedeniyiti-2016-3.pdf>, pp. 51–59 [both accessed 23 June 2023].

⁵⁴*China Daily*, 'Govt investment doubles'; Cui, 'Mandarin lessons in Xinjiang'.

was released in the early 2010s with an accompanying clip, and is performed in a standard Westernized pop style. Nevertheless, the singing in Uyghur and a short prelude and interlude played on a traditional Uyghur plucked instrument called a *tembur* add an ethnic flavour:

... Mother tongue is the language that is loved by your mother/ Mother tongue is the legacy from the ancestors/ Mother tongue is the legacy from the descendants/
... Mother tongue is the pillar of the nation/ Mother tongue is the bridge of the generations/ Mother tongue is the blessing of the nation/ ... Be an example for our descendants/ ... Be a Uyghur in our land/ ... Uyghur!⁵⁵

Praise and love of the mother tongue

Another important motif that appears in many *ana til* poems and songs is praise and love of the mother tongue. Uyghur is praised for its beauty, power, richness, and uniqueness, and is compared to beautiful and precious things such as flowers, high mountains, gems, and sweet fruits, as well as Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities in Islam. Moreover, many works also express a personal attachment to the mother tongue and a commitment to remain loyal to it and not to abandon it. Although Uyghur is personified and is often referred to in the second person in many *ana til* works, the personification is strongest in those works in which the motif of praise, love, and devotion dominates.

In some poems and songs the mother tongue is compared to a mother, and the love for and attachment to the former is compared to the love for and attachment to the latter. An illustration of this association is found in the first stanza of Exmet Imin's 'My Mother Tongue', before the poem moves into the collective realm:

Oh, my mother tongue—you are the language of my mother! My mother tongue!
Oh, the language that my mother gave [me]! I cherish you as my mother! When I hear you, I feel like hearing my mother's warm call from her heart; When I speak in you, I feel like responding her call. When my mother said to me 'my sweet heart' for the first time, she spoke in you, the Uyghur language. When I said 'mother' for the first time, I also spoke in you, the treasured language. ...⁵⁶

In several *ana til* works the mother tongue is also depicted as a lover, and sometimes as a god. In the former, similar to the mother tongue being compared to a mother, the personification helps articulate the intimate and corporeal relationship between the poet and the language. In the latter case, on the other hand, there is a sense of a sacred and eternal relationship between the two. Abdulla Ne'imi's poem from the 1930s provides the earliest example of the praise and love motif. The poem opens with

⁵⁵Eli Kroran, 'Ana til' [Mother tongue], released in the early 2010s. Similar to the clip of the recitation of Imin's poem, the clip of Kroran's song was uploaded to Youku, the Chinese equivalent of YouTube, on 20 February 2014, to mark International Mother Language Day (21 February). This clip, however, is no longer available on Youku, but can be found on YouTube. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESWSPYY27QM>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

⁵⁶See Imin, 'Ana tilim'.

several lines of praise and contains several more such lines in its later part. (The lines that are printed in bold are those that were set to music by Abdurêhim Héyt in the mid-2000s.)

I want to respect the person who knows their mother tongue,/ I want to give gold to get the mother tongue spoken from their mouth./ ... If this mother tongue is in America or Africa,/ I want to spend thousands of gold coins to go there./ ... I want to be proud of you in the world./ ... You are a rose or a nightingale ... ,/ ... You are an apple, a pomegranate ... ,/ I want to smell you like a rose and put you in my hair./ ...⁵⁷

These lines of praise must have influenced many of the *ana til* works that have been created since the mid-1990s. One of these works, in which the words of praise sometimes evoke an image of a lover and at other times remind one of praises of God or another deity, is the poem ‘My Mother Tongue’, by the famous writer Osmanjan Sawut. The poem was probably published in 2011.⁵⁸

My mother tongue, .../ ... Each word of yours sounds like a very elegant melody,/ No one can argue with that at all./ My mother tongue, there are countless gems in your treasure,/ Because of your power, everyone in my homeland is a poet./ ... I am amazed at how wise you are./ My mother tongue, .../ It is hard to defeat your attractiveness./ All the greatness belongs to you and is connected with you,/ ... My mother tongue, you are my whole wealth—you are Heaven and Earth./ ... My mother tongue, the Tengritagh [(Mountains)] is a reminder of your supreme stature./ ... I can conjugate a verb into two hundred forms,/ ... When I become weak, I seek power from your inspiration./ ... Betraying you is like death for me,/ If you are alive, I will be alive, I will never die./⁵⁹

The praise motif is found in works throughout the period that constitutes the focus of this article. However, it dominated those produced between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, whereas, as I will demonstrate later, subsequent works were dominated by other motifs. I suggest that this motif, like the intensified production of *ana til* works beginning from the mid-1990s, was closely related to the simultaneous increase in Uyghur ethno-nationalism. In fact, both the praise motif and the massive production of *ana til*

⁵⁷See Nei’imi, ‘Ana til’.

⁵⁸This poem is the second *ana til* poem that Osmanjan Sawut wrote. The first one, called ‘Mother Tongue’, was published more than a decade earlier in 1998. See Osmanjan Sawut, ‘Ana til’ [Mother tongue], in *Tanglar bilen sözlishish* [Talking with the dawn] (Urumchi: Xinjiang People’s Press, 2000 [1998]), pp. 141–142. For the lyrics of the poem online, see https://ug.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A6%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7_%D8%AA%D9%89%D9%84_%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%89%D9%85%D9%89, [accessed 23 June 2023]. I was unable to find the later poem in any of the published collections of Sawut’s works. The only version that I could find was published online in 2011. The link to this poem, however, is not valid any more. For two articles in Uyghur that provide brief biographical information about Osmanjan Sawut and discuss his creative work, see <http://izdinish.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/izdinish-13-uey.pdf>, pp. 14–15, and <http://uyghur.people.com.cn/185084/310091/310269/15477995.html>, [both accessed 23 June 2023].

⁵⁹Osmanjan Sawut, ‘Ana til’ [Mother tongue], published online in 2011 [?]. No valid link is available.

works were probably among the most concrete manifestations of this increased ethno-nationalism and among the earliest manifestations of Uyghur linguistic nationalism in the post-Mao era. Clearly, in producing a large number of poems and songs that were dedicated to praising their language, Uyghurs celebrated and proudly asserted their distinct culture and collective identity. I would further argue that the praise motif, like the increase in Uyghur ethno-nationalism and the surge of *ana til* works, was also a reaction against the new wave of Han Chinese in-migration into Xinjiang, and the related fact that the local economy, administration, media, and other sectors started to integrate more closely than ever before with the rest of the country; and the growing presence and influence of the Chinese language in Xinjiang, which was the direct result of the two former trends.

Finally, the praise motif was probably also a reaction to the emergence of official, explicit linguisticism against Uyghur in the early and mid-1990s. One conspicuous manifestation of this linguisticism, albeit from a few years later, is several statements made by Wang Lequan, the Party secretary of Xinjiang between 1994 and 2010, regarding 'minority languages'. In one of these statements, from 2002, Wang was quoted as saying: 'The languages of the minority nationalities have very small capacities and do not contain many of the expressions in modern science and technology, which makes education in these concepts impossible. This is out of step with the twenty-first century.'⁶⁰ Wang Lequan is remembered as the initiator and main promoter of the 'bilingual education' policy in Xinjiang,⁶¹ and his statements clearly provided the needed authoritative, 'scientific' justification for its implementation. The 'bilingual education' policy started as a pilot in the early 1990s in a few selected 'experimental' schools and classes, and based on the underlying logic of the abovementioned statement by Wang Lequan, it initially pushed for the replacement of Uyghur with Chinese only in the teaching of mathematics, physics, and other science-related subjects, but later expanded to other subjects as well.⁶² I maintain that this development was an additional factor that led to the spread of Uyghur linguistic nationalism, as manifested in the new intense engagement of Uyghur writers and artists with the language issue, and in the praise motif that dominated many of their early works. Indeed, through the praise of their native language, Uyghur poets and musicians not only asserted and affirmed their ethno-national identity, but also, and more specifically, the value of their language. In doing so, they refuted the official notion that Uyghur is an inferior, backward language incompatible with modern knowledge. Significantly, it was this latter notion that justified the gradual shift to Chinese in the entire Uyghur education system, which in a few years' time extended to all subjects taught in schools and universities, with the exception of courses in Uyghur language and literature.⁶³

Obviously, because all *ana til* poems and songs were written and performed in Uyghur, these works did not try to persuade Chinese officials that Uyghur was not an inferior language, or that Chinese was not a superior one. Rather, the target audience was Uyghurs, and the main goal of the poets and artists who created these works was to convince their fellows not to be persuaded by the new official narrative

⁶⁰Cited in Becquelin, 'Criminalizing ethnicity', p. 45; see also Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict*, p. 37.

⁶¹Baranovitch, 'The "bilingual education" policy in Xinjiang revisited', p. 141.

⁶²Simayi, 'The practice of ethnic policy in education', pp. 135, 146.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 147.

that disparaged their native language. Yet, as the lines above from Osmanjan Sawut's poem illustrate, not all *ana til* works that praise the mother tongue or express love for it necessarily aimed to communicate a message about Uyghur collective identity or the Uyghur nation. Indeed, in several works the focus is rather on the personal bond between the poet and the language, with the collective seemingly irrelevant. The best example of such a personal voice is found in another poem called 'Mother Tongue', which was published in 2005 by the famous Uyghur writer Perhat Tursun. Some Western journalists have called Tursun 'China's Salman Rushdie' because of a novel he published in 1999, which some prominent Uyghur intellectuals interpreted as anti-Islamic.⁶⁴ As a result, for many years Tursun was denounced as a religious and ethnic traitor, and, given his controversial status and the allegations made against him, no publisher in Xinjiang was willing to publish his works for about a decade.⁶⁵ Due to this situation, Tursun's 'Mother Tongue' was published online, like many of his works from that period.

In his poem, Tursun celebrates the personal bond between a certain individual and the Uyghur language. The poet describes a friend who, just before dying of an illness in a foreign country in Europe, expresses his deep love for his mother tongue, and most of the poem is narrated by this real or imagined friend. Despite this framing, the poem is filled with a strong autobiographical flavour, and one cannot avoid the sense that the words actually express Tursun's own feelings for and strong bond with his native language. Significantly, Tursun refused to study Chinese and was able to communicate only in Uyghur until he reached adulthood.⁶⁶ Furthermore, since starting to write more than two decades ago, he has written only in Uyghur. The strong personal attachment to Uyghur that the poem describes seems quite natural if one also considers the fact that Tursun is a writer who relies on language for his creative work. The bond between the poet's friend, and/or Tursun himself, and the Uyghur language began at birth and strengthened as they grew older and had more experiences in life:

A friend of mine lived in Europe for many years/
Last year he passed away from
liver cancer in a foreign city/
His wife was European/
His children also grew
up there/
His only wish before dying/
Was to say farewell, one last time in the
mother tongue, Uyghur/
Unfortunately, no one was there for him./
Therefore,
he said to his wife:/
When I was born, the first language I heard was Uyghur/
When I cried, my parents used to comfort me in Uyghur/
They used to kiss and
caress me/
My mother used to croon a lullaby in Uyghur/
The lullaby used to
make my sleep sweet, and I could not sleep without hearing it/
I didn't close
my eyes all night, I used to be afraid of nightmares/
I felt love for the first time
in Uyghur/
I felt beauty for the first time in Uyghur/
I heard freedom for the
first time in Uyghur/
I obtained wisdom for the first time in Uyghur/
I learnt
to talk/
I expressed my needs for the first time in Uyghur/
I revealed my pain
and grief for the first time in Uyghur/
I boasted about my happiness for the first

⁶⁴Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, 'Meet China's Salman Rushdie', *Foreign Policy*, published online on 1 October 2015, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/01/china-xinjiang-islam-salman-rushdie-uyghur/>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

time in Uyghur/ I explained my love for the first time in Uyghur/ I constructed
my whole spiritual world in Uyghur/ ...⁶⁷

Tursun's poem suggests that Uyghur was part of his friend's/his own life from its very beginning. The sound of the mother tongue was the first sound he heard after his birth. It connected him to his parents and helped him communicate with them even before he was able to talk or understand the meaning of words. Indeed, it was the sheer sound of his mother's lullaby in Uyghur, when he was too young to understand the meaning of the lullaby's lyrics, that calmed him down and made him feel safe. His experience of the language at this stage was completely corporeal, like the kiss, or the loving caress and embrace of his mother and father. This description implies a primordial bond, beyond any reason, knowledge, or any ideology or interest, like a blood relationship among close kin, which is often perceived as stronger, deeper, and truer than any other social tie. As the friend/poet grows up, the Uyghur language not only accompanies him in each of the most important personal experiences in his life as an individual human being, but is also an inextricable part of each of these experiences in the physical, emotional, and mental sense. Thus, it is also an inextricable part of his individuum and most personal development as a human being.

Indeed, most of Tursun's poem is completely personal. With the possible exception of one reference to his dying friend's longing for his motherland, it contains no hint about any collective, and certainly not a nation. However, the poem ends with the following lines, which seem to contrast with the rest of the poem because they appear to express a political voice: '... I only exist in my mother tongue/ It is my only land, there is no way to occupy it/ I am free only in my mother tongue/ It is my only dream, there is no way to destroy it./'.⁶⁸ Considering the situation in Xinjiang in the last two-and-a-half to three decades, it is quite possible, and even tempting, to interpret these lines as a veiled reference to the Chinese oppression and 'occupation' of Xinjiang, in which the poet articulates the message that he can attain freedom only in his mother tongue and in his writing. This interpretation is also consistent with the line that appears earlier in the poem: 'I heard freedom for the first time in Uyghur'. Indeed, both this line and the poem's last four lines quoted above may be interpreted as suggesting that the Uyghur language is the only space in which Uyghurs can maintain their freedom and sovereignty—and perhaps even independence—from Chinese repression and colonial violence.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Perhat Tursun, 'Ana til' [Mother tongue], published online in 2005, available at <https://www.akademiye.org/ug/?p=7900>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹The link between the Uyghur language and freedom is also celebrated in a poem from 2002 by the famous Uyghur poet and scholar Abduqadir Jalalidin called 'Mother tongue is my life, mother tongue is my freedom' (Uyghur: *Ana til hayatim, ana til erkim*). The notion of freedom in this poem, however, seems to have a more explicit collective meaning than that which is celebrated by Tursun, as hinted at in its two ending lines: 'If your language is safe,/ One day there will be a place to speak it./'. See Abduqadir Jalalidin, 'Ana til hayatim, ana til erkim' [Mother tongue is my life, mother tongue is my freedom], published online in 2002. No valid link is available. Jalalidin was arrested in 2018 and has not been seen since. See Shirakawa Marina and Nakanishi Hideharu, 'Daughter's anguish over missing Uyghur scholar', *NHK World-Japan*, published online on 24 April 2021, available at <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/1610/>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

However, even if we interpret these lines as a veiled political protest against the Chinese colonization of Xinjiang, they do not necessarily express a collective voice, and one can still see in them a very individual and personal political statement. Moreover, it is equally reasonable to interpret these lines as an affirmation of the poet's individuality not only vis-à-vis the Chinese state, but also vis-à-vis his own ethnic group, or the collective that he as a minority poet is perhaps expected to represent. Such an interpretation is certainly appropriate if one considers Tursun's non-conformist character and rift with large parts of Uyghur society. In any case, Tursun's 'Mother Tongue' illustrates the diversity of sentiments and meanings that are embodied in the corpus of *ana til* poems and songs, even if the individualistic message that dominates this poem is quite exceptional. Notwithstanding this message and the fact that Tursun was accused for many years by other prominent Uyghur intellectuals of being an enemy of Islam and even an ethnic traitor,⁷⁰ in early 2018 he was detained, like many other Uyghur intellectuals, and, according to a recent report, he was later sentenced to 16 years in prison.⁷¹

Linguistic anxiety, grief, and anger

My suggestion that the praise and love motif was at least in part a reaction to Han Chinese in-migration to Xinjiang, the growing presence of Chinese in the region, the emergence of explicit official linguisticism against Uyghur, and the early implementation of the 'bilingual education' policy implies that this motif can also be interpreted as an early indication of some sense of anxiety about the condition of Uyghur and its future. However, while this concern was only implied in works published between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, by the late 2000s and early 2010s it had become explicit, resulting in another major motif that started to dominate many later *ana til* works. This change clearly reflected the fact that the language policy in Xinjiang had started to marginalize Uyghur much more aggressively and, as a result, language loss among Uyghurs, especially children, had become more severe and widespread than ever before. This development also meant that, for the first time, at least in recent decades, the Uyghur language seemed endangered and its future was uncertain. Given this situation, many *ana til* works, especially from the early 2010s, started to communicate a strong sense of crisis, danger, and urgency. Moreover, some even suggested that the Uyghur language and Uyghur identity as a whole might disappear.

This sense of crisis led several poets and musicians to call on Uyghurs to 'protect' (Uyghur: *qoghdimaq*) their native language. It was also during this period that more and more *ana til* poems and songs started to articulate the message that the Uyghur nation could not exist without the Uyghur language. This change not only implied that the existence of the Uyghur language could no longer be taken for granted, but also that many Uyghurs had started to feel that the survival of Uyghur identity in general was under real threat. This sense of anxiety manifests itself in *ana til* works in various forms, often in the same work. Most notably, expressions of concern for the future of Uyghur

⁷⁰Allen-Ebrahimian, 'Meet China's Salman Rushdie'.

⁷¹Darren Byler, 'The disappearance of Perhat Tursun, one of the Uyghur world's greatest authors', *SupChina*, published online on 5 February 2020, available at <http://www.supchina.com/2020/02/05/disappearance-of-perhat-tursun-uyghur-worlds-greatest-author/>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

and the Uyghurs are often accompanied by expressions of grief and anger amid the deteriorating condition of the language and the expansion of language loss. In some works there is even a tone of lament, which implies that their creators have already come to terms with the death of their native language. The strong mood of anxiety and grief that dominates many works from the late 2000s and early and mid-2010s stands in sharp contrast to the upbeat tone and sense of pride that prevailed in earlier works, most of which were dominated by words of praise for the mother tongue.

This linguistic anxiety⁷² is evident even in the titles of these works. 'Farewell, My Uyghur Language' (Uyghur: *Uyghur tilim elwida*), which appears in the title of this article, is one vivid example. This is the title of an online poem from 2008 by a poet who used the pen name Wapadarim.⁷³ The title frames the poem in a melancholic narrative of departure, which implies that Uyghur is about to disappear from view. The sense of melancholy is enhanced by the fact that the speaker in the poem refers to Uyghur as 'my Uyghur language', a phrase that suggests an intimate relationship between himself and the language, and thus makes its disappearance even more painful. 'Farewell, My Uyghur Language' contains 61 stanzas of four lines each, in which Wapadarim provides more than 150 examples of Uyghur words that, according to him, have been replaced by Chinese loanwords in everyday Uyghur life and discourse. In this poem Wapadarim clearly uses hyperbole for effect, as some of the loanwords that he mentions were rarely used by Uyghurs in 2008 and are seldom used even today, with the possible exception of sinicized Urumchi. However, the point of giving so many examples is clearly to raise the readers' awareness of and alarm about the extent of language loss among Uyghurs, and thereby to convey the poet's perception that the Uyghur language is becoming assimilated into Chinese and is about to be lost:

... We called building '*lufang*' [(from Chinese *loufang*)]/ ... We called beauty '*miynü*' [(from Chinese *meinü*)]/ Farewell, my Uyghur language./ ... We called fridge '*bingshiyang*' [(from Chinese *bingxiang*)]/ ... Celery is called '*chingsey*' [(from Chinese *qincai*)]/ ... Library is '*tushugü'en*' [(from Chinese *tushuguan*)]/ Waiters are '*fuwuyü'en*' [(from Chinese *fuwuyuan*)]/ ... Farewell, my Uyghur language./ ...⁷⁴

Wapadarim's poem is imbued with a mixture of anxiety, criticism, and lament. These sentiments, especially the last one, are highlighted in the poet's choice to end each of the stanzas in the poem, except for the last two, with the same phrase that is used in its

⁷²Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Mongolian ethnicity and linguistic anxiety in China', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 105, no. 4, 2003, pp. 753–763.

⁷³Wapadarim's real name is Eysajan Nizamidin. He works for a government company and became well-known in Xinjiang in 2006 after establishing a private charity called 'One Yuan Plan'. For recent articles in Uyghur and Chinese that provide more biographical information and describe his social activity, see <http://uyghur.people.com.cn/156325/15582064.html> and <https://xw.qq.com/cmsid/20210304A08X6T00>, respectively [both accessed 23 June 2023].

⁷⁴See Wapadarim, 'Uyghur tilim elwida' [Farewell, my Uyghur language], published online in 2008, available at <https://www.uyghur-archive.com/izdinix/izdinish32828.html>, [accessed 23 June 2023]. In fact, Uyghurs in Xinjiang use the words '*fuwuyü'en*' and '*miynü*' only occasionally, and '*lufang*' and '*tushugü'en*' are rarely used by most Uyghurs even today. In addition to enhancing the effect of his poem, Wapadarim clearly included some of the not-so-common Chinese loanwords for rhyming purposes.

title: 'Farewell, my Uyghur language'. Thus, the melancholic and pessimistic mood pervades the entire poem, as this phrase is repeated again and again—almost 60 times—in the same rhythm (every four lines), like a dark mantra or a refrain that underscores the tragic situation and the poet's anxiety and grief. This phrase, however, can also be interpreted as implicit criticism that Wapadarim directs at his fellows in order to awaken them to the danger facing their mother tongue.

At one point, towards the end of the poem, there is a short moment of hope, when the poet asks his readers to protect the mother tongue, implying that the process of language loss is still reversible. However, the small hope that this call to action instills in the lyrics immediately fades away and is overshadowed by a sense of tragedy and lament when the poet suggests that the process whereby an increasing number of Uyghur words are being replaced by Chinese ones has already ruined Uyghur and might eventually lead to its death. This message is conveyed in the closing stanzas of the poem:

... Mixed language became a fashion (Uyghur: *moda*),/ ... The mother tongue was ruined,/ Farewell, my Uyghur language./ ... My summer turns into winter without the mother tongue!/ Don't cry, my Uyghur language!/ There is no tree without roots,/ There is no nation without its own language,/ Without you, I would rather die!/ Don't cry, my Uyghur language!/⁷⁵

Another online poem by Wapadarim, called 'Grandchildren' (Uyghur: *Newriler*), which was published in 2011, provides another example of the anxiety and grief that many late *ana til* works began communicating in the late 2000s and early 2010s. In this poem, as in several other poems that Wapadarim published during this period, the speaker depicts the inability of his children to read, write, or even speak fluent Uyghur, as well as the pain of his father, who is unable to communicate with his grandchildren. Moreover, similar to 'Farewell, My Uyghur Language', 'Grandchildren' also suggests that Uyghur is vanishing and that without the Uyghur language, the Uyghurs as a people, or nation, will cease to exist. This message, like the pain that is felt, is communicated through the voice of the grandfather, who laments the fate of the Uyghurs while weeping:

The grandchildren could not read the invitation card received at home./ Not even one syllable at a time, like the sparrow pecks the grain./ When my father asked them why,/ The grandchildren could not make up an excuse in pure Uyghur./ ... 'What makes us Uyghur if we do not know the mother tongue?'/ My father asked. But the grandchildren could not understand./ ... Eventually, my father cried and said 'Oh, my nation'./ The grandchildren did not weep and could not console my father!/ 'I have ten grandchildren from two daughters and five sons'./ 'Instead of being scholars, may God let the grandchildren be Uyghur'./⁷⁶

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Wapadarim, 'Newriler' [Grandchildren], published online in 2011, available at https://www.uyghur-archive.com/bozqir/bozqir_450.html, [accessed 23 June 2023].

The image of the grandfather weeping because of the inability of his grandchildren to communicate in their native language, and because of the decline of Uyghur and the perceived tragic fate of the Uyghur people that derives from this decline, is representative of the general mood that prevails in many late *ana til* poems and songs. The sense of grief is so strong that in some of these works it is also projected onto the Uyghur language itself as part of its personification. This projection is illustrated, for example, in 'Farewell, My Uyghur Language' in the line 'Don't cry, my Uyghur language!' which I quoted earlier. This line appears at the end of the poem's last two stanzas and leaves the reader with a powerful impression of grief. Another example is provided by a poem called 'The Uyghur Language Cries in Urumchi' (Uyghur: *Ürümchide Uyghur tili yighlaydu*), which was published online by an anonymous poet, probably in 2010. Similar to Wapadarim's 'Farewell, My Uyghur Language', the poem laments the replacement of many Uyghur words with Chinese loanwords in Uyghur everyday speech, particularly in sinicized Urumchi. And in another similarity with 'Farewell, My Uyghur Language', the gloomy mood prevails throughout the poem and is enhanced by the fact that each of its 11 stanzas ends with the same sombre phrase that is used as the poem's title, 'The Uyghur language cries in Urumchi'.⁷⁷

In the early and mid-2000s public and explicit expressions of linguistic anxiety and resistance among Uyghurs were confined mainly to articles written by prominent academics.⁷⁸ However, similar to the situation with Uyghur linguistic ethno-nationalism in general, since the late 2000s and early 2010s, the anxiety and resistance have not only intensified, but also expanded to large parts of Uyghur society and culture. This change is evident in the fact that during this period expressions of linguistic anxiety and resistance became widespread in most general Uyghur culture, including popular youth culture, very much like the celebration of Uyghur linguistic ethno-nationalism in pop songs such as Eli Kroran's 'Mother Tongue', which I discussed earlier. An example of this new trend is provided by another song entitled 'Mother Tongue' by a hip-hop group called Eros, a recording of which was uploaded to the internet in the early 2010s. Like Wapadarim's poem 'Farewell, My Uyghur Language', the lyrics reflect a strong sense of crisis and urgency, and call on young Uyghurs to protect their language. Although the lyrics do not mention the Chinese language by name, they compare its influence to a 'virus' that 'destroys' (Uyghur: *buzmaq*) the mother tongue, and state that this influence can lead to the disappearance of Uyghur:

... I am going to speak in my mother tongue/ I am going to protect my language
in my life/ I am going to clean up the viruses that destroy my mother tongue/ ...
I am going to restore the original status of what is everything for my Uyghurs/
Everyone now has passion for speaking in a foreign language/ If this continues,
there is no doubt that the Uyghur language will disappear/ ...⁷⁹

⁷⁷Anonymous, 'Ürümchide Uyghur tili yighlaydu' [The Uyghur language cries in Urumchi], published online in 2010 [?], available at <https://www.uygur.com/archives/urumchide-uyghur-tili-yighlaydu/>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

⁷⁸Baranovitch, 'The "bilingual education" policy in Xinjiang revisited'.

⁷⁹Eros (lyrics, music, and performance), 'Ana til' [Mother tongue]. Published online in the early 2010s [?]. No valid link is available.

As noted earlier, the strong sense of anxiety that exists in many late *ana til* poems and songs is often accompanied by expressions of anger. This anger features prominently, for example, in another online poem by Wapadarim called ‘The Nikah that Made the Imam Cry’ (Uyghur: *Axunumni yighlatqan nikah*), which was published in 2008 and was later also disseminated online under the title ‘The Unusual Nikah of a *Minkaohan* [Couple] that Angered the Imam’ (Uyghur: *Imamni ghezpeplendürgen minkawxenning ajayip nikahi*). The poem depicts, with black humour and sarcasm, a *nikah* (a traditional Muslim wedding ceremony) that is held for a young Uyghur *minkaohan* couple and exposes their total sinicization. Before the most recent attack on Islam in Xinjiang in 2016/2017, with very few exceptions, all Uyghur couples were married in such a ceremony, which was always performed by an imam (a Muslim religious leader) and involved various religious elements, such as reciting verses from the Qur’an.⁸⁰ Like other Muslim practices, such as observing Ramadan or not eating pork, most Uyghurs have regarded this ceremony as an inseparable part of their culture and identity. However, because of the fact that the bride and groom in Wapadarim’s poem are *minkaohan*, their *nikah* goes wrong and turns out to be a complete disaster.

The main point of this poem is to illustrate how Uyghurs who lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue inevitably become ignorant about the most basic Uyghur cultural identifiers. The young bride and groom are not only unable to understand Uyghur, they are also completely unfamiliar with the figure of the imam, his religious role, the verses from the Qur’an that he recites, and other details of the ceremony. The couple’s ignorance embarrasses everyone and, as the original title of the poem suggests, even makes the imam cry. Nevertheless, it is anger that dominates the poem. Anger is not only mentioned in the poem’s later title, but also several more times in the poem itself. Wapadarim emphasizes this anger by attaching a very significant meaning to it. Indeed, the poem mentions the anger of all the participants in the ceremony, but it is the anger of the imam, the main protagonist of the poem, that is emphasized in particular. Thus, anger gains a special meaning because of the religious role and authority of the imam. The implication of this anger is that in ‘abandoning’ or ‘forgetting’ (Uyghur: *unutmaq*) Uyghur, the *minkaohan* couple has also betrayed or desecrated Islam. In this way the Uyghur language is indirectly linked to Islam and gains a religious significance. This message becomes clear towards the end of the poem when the lyrics seem to imply that even God is angry with the *minkaohan* couple. The poem ends by suggesting that ‘forgetting’ the mother tongue is a ‘crime’ (Uyghur: *jinayet*) and will definitely lead to a ‘doomsday’ (Uyghur: *qiyamet*). At this point, it also becomes clear that this doomsday will affect not only the *minkaohan* couple, but also the entire Uyghur nation. This last point provides an additional explanation for the anger of the imam and the other participants in the wedding ceremony, who seem to represent Uyghur society at large. The implication is that Uyghur individuals who ‘abandon’ their mother tongue not only commit a religious crime, but also endanger their entire ethnic community:

⁸⁰See Rudelson, *Oasis identities*, pp. 90–91; Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *Community matters in Xinjiang, 1880–1949: Towards a historical anthropology of the Uyghur* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 242; Rune Steenberg, ‘Uyghur marriage in Kashgar. Muslim marriage in China’, PhD thesis, Free University of Berlin, 2013, pp. 128–131.

... 'Will you marry this girl?'/ The imam asked the groom./ The groom sat speechless./ Because he didn't quite understand the question./ ... He said to his groomsman: 'What does he say?' [(In Chinese: *ta shuo sha*)]./ 'Oh my', the elderly men said in anger./ ... The imam continued the *nikah*./ His eyes flashed with anger./ ... When someone gave the salted *nan*⁸¹ to the groom./ He said in surprise: 'What is this?' [(In Chinese: *zhe ge sha*)]/ ... 'Oh my', said the imam angrily./ 'Are they our children, ah!!!' / A catastrophe comes into mind./ ... It is an honor to be bilingual./ It is a crime to forget the mother tongue./ Without the mother tongue, the future of the nation, / Will inevitably be a red doomsday./⁸²

The expressions of anxiety, grief, and anger that late *ana til* poems and songs contain, combined with the depictions of anxious and frustrated Uyghur elders who are unable to communicate with the young members of their family and community because the latter are not proficient enough in Uyghur or, worse, are completely unable to communicate in it, provide important insights into the actual experience of language loss in the daily lives of Uyghurs and the multifaceted nature of this experience. Although these expressions and depictions are not very developed in the poems, they nevertheless provide important evidence that supports the findings of numerous studies that focus on the link between language loss and the general wellbeing of individuals and communities, especially among indigenous populations. Indeed, like these studies, *ana til* poems and songs highlight the negative effects of language loss not only on people's sense of identity, but also on their social, emotional, psychological, and even physical wellbeing.⁸³ Moreover, although *ana til* works focus on the experience of Uyghur adults and provide little information about the impact of language loss and the intergenerational linguistic rift on the wellbeing of Uyghur children, based on the abovementioned studies, one can assume with a great deal of certainty that this loss and rift will have, and is already having, devastating consequences for these children. This loss and rift damages the sense of identity of these children and distances them from those who are supposed to provide them with crucial emotional and mental support, and serve as important role models and sources of cultural knowledge.

⁸¹*Nan* is the most common Uyghur bread, and serving the bride and groom a small piece of it dipped in salty water constitutes a central part of the *nikah* ceremony. According to several of my Uyghur informants, the salted *nan* symbolizes wishes for the happiness of the new couple, as well as for their true love and loyalty. For more information, see Bellér-Hann, *Community matters in Xinjiang*, p. 242; Steenberg, 'Uyghur marriage in Kashgar', pp. 131, 260–262; see also Jay Dautcher, *Down a narrow road: Identity and masculinity in a Uyghur community in Xinjiang China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), pp. 118–119.

⁸²Wapadarim, 'Axunumni yighlatqan nikah' [The nikah that made the imam cry], published online in 2008, available at <https://www.uyghur-archive.com/izdinix/izdinish33598.html>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

⁸³See Darcy Hallett, Michael J. Chandler and Christopher E. Lalonde, 'Aboriginal language knowledge and youth suicide', *Cognitive Development*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2007, pp. 392–399; Malcolm King, Alexandra Smith and Michael Gracey, 'Indigenous health part 2: The underlying causes of the health gap', *Lancet*, vol. 374, no. 9683, 2009, pp. 76–85; Nicholas Biddle and Hannah Swee, 'The relationship between wellbeing and indigenous land, language and culture in Australia', *Australian Geographer*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2012, pp. 215–232.

Criticism, shaming, and threats

Most *ana til* poems and songs try to persuade Uyghurs to cherish their native language and not to ‘abandon’ it by using positive rhetoric. This strategy is best illustrated in the works that praise the language and those that convey the message that Uyghur is key to the survival of Uyghur culture and collective identity. However, some works try to persuade Uyghurs not to ‘abandon’ their native language by using criticism, as some of the works already mentioned illustrate, as well as a less positive discourse such as shaming and sometimes even threats. Criticism, shaming, and threats often come together and constitute another major motif, particularly in later *ana til* works. Significantly, with very few exceptions, *ana til* poems and songs avoid criticizing the Chinese government. As I noted earlier with regard to Abduréhim Héyt’s decision not to set certain lines from Abdulla Ne’imi’s poem to music, this decision derives from the fear of the writers and musicians who created these works that criticizing the government could lead to censorship of their works and even to their persecution. Thus, almost all of the criticism and negative rhetoric in these works are directed at Uyghurs themselves.

Some *ana til* works mock Uyghurs who are not proficient in their mother tongue. This approach is most conspicuous in Wapadarim’s poem, ‘The Nikah that Made the Imam Cry’, which contains a heavy dose of mockery that focuses on the *minkaohan* couple. An example of this mockery is found in the lines, some of which were quoted earlier, depicting the part in the *nikah* ceremony in which the salted *nan* bread is handed to the groom. In reaction, the groom asks in the most colloquial Chinese: ‘What is this?’ [(Chinese: *zhe ge sha*)], revealing his complete ignorance about the meaning of this symbolic act and the whole ceremony. The mockery continues when the bride, who is in the other room, screams, also in Chinese: ‘This steamed bun is very un-tasty’ [(Chinese: *zhe ge momo feichang nanchi le*)].⁸⁴ Both the groom’s question and the bride’s statement ridicule the couple and present them not only as ignorant about traditional Uyghur culture, but also as simpleminded and vulgar. The mockery continues later in the poem, when, referring to the imam, the bride asks in Chinese: ‘This long bearded old man is the director of which department?’ and the ‘foolish’ (Uyghur: *sadda*, also means naive or simple) groom answers her: ‘This grandpa is the school principal of the mosque.’⁸⁵

Besides mockery and the more serious message that the poem conveys, namely, that lack of proficiency in the Uyghur language inevitably leads to a lack of the most basic cultural knowledge that defines Uyghurness, ‘The Nikah that Made the Imam Cry’ also implies that sinicization comes with superficial and materialistic thinking, which prevents sinicized Uyghurs from grasping and appreciating the depth and spiritual richness of traditional Uyghur culture, especially religion. Furthermore, the poem also communicates the well-documented popular notion, which I mentioned earlier, that *minkaohan* Uyghurs, or any Uyghurs who are not competent in their mother tongue, are not real Uyghurs. This point is conveyed in the short statement that I quoted earlier, ‘Are they our children, ah!!!’, which the imam makes in anger after realizing the ignorance of the *minkaohan* couple.

⁸⁴Wapadarim, ‘Axunumni yighlatqan nikah’.

⁸⁵Ibid.

While the general negative attitude towards *minkaohan* Uyghurs is not new, 'The Nikah that Made the Imam Cry' nevertheless introduces some new elements. One is that while, historically, this negative view has usually been expressed only in private conversations,⁸⁶ Wapadarim's poem conveys it openly in the most general public sphere. Another new element is the poem's extremely derogatory representation of its *minkaohan* protagonists and its strong hostility towards them, which go far beyond the usual 'othering'. Considering that the poem was published in 2008, these new elements seem to reflect the intensified anxiety and sense of threat that many Uyghurs felt not only about the growing number of *minkaohan* Uyghurs,⁸⁷ but also about the rapid deterioration that took place during this period in the general condition of their native language and the implications of this decline for Uyghur collective identity at large.

The antagonistic attitude towards Uyghurs who do not use or value their mother tongue was already evident in Ne'imi's poem from the 1930s. At the beginning of his poem, after stating that he wants to 'respect the person who knows their mother tongue', Ne'imi complains that, 'the mother tongue is a valueless thing today in our homeland'. He then suggests that the purpose of his poem is to 'let the people who are unaware of the value of the mother tongue know its value', and thus most of his poem is dedicated to praising the mother tongue and to asserting its value. However, Ne'imi apparently felt that celebrating Uyghur was not enough to persuade his fellows to respect and use it. Therefore, in the second part of his poem his tone changes dramatically as he starts to use threats of shaming and violence against those Uyghurs who 'abandoned' their mother tongue:

... I want to hit with my very hard sole shoe,/ The mouth of the foul-mouthed person who has abandoned their own language./ I want to use a rake to scratch several times,/ The tongue of the people who look for another language rather than their own./ ... The one who abandons this language is not a friend of the homeland,/ I want to tell you that this person is a stranger everywhere./ ...⁸⁸

Given his earlier statement that those who 'abandon' their language, ancestors, religion, and homeland are all alike, which means that 'abandoning' one is like 'abandoning' all four, Ne'imi clearly suggests that Uyghurs who prefer languages other than Uyghur are disloyal not just to their mother tongue, but also to their ancestors, religion, and homeland. This accusation implies that these Uyghurs are traitors, and therefore deserve harsh, even violent, punishment.

Earlier I suggested that the praise of Uyghur in Ne'imi's old poem probably inspired many of the more recent *ana til* works; in a similar vein, it is equally possible that the latter may have also been influenced by this poem's strong antagonism towards, contempt for, and threats against Uyghurs who have 'abandoned' their mother tongue or treat it without respect. Indeed, as Wapadarim's poem 'The Nikah that Made the Imam Cry' illustrates, some *ana til* works suggest that it is 'a crime' for Uyghurs not to know Uyghur or to disrespect it. Similarly, in their song 'Mother Tongue', the hip-hop group

⁸⁶Smith Finley, "'Ethnic anomaly' or modern Uyghur survivor?", p. 229.

⁸⁷Taynen, 'Interpreters, arbiters or outsiders', p. 59; Smith Finley, "'Ethnic anomaly' or modern Uyghur survivor?", p. 219; Ma, 'The development of minority education', pp. 217–219.

⁸⁸Ne'imi, 'Ana til'.

Eros even suggests that those who use the mother tongue in an inappropriate way are not just committing a crime but are also losing their basic humanity. This message is communicated in the following line: ‘... those who use the mother tongue to argue with their own mother are not human ...’.⁸⁹

In addition to these strong accusations, late *ana til* works also contain threats. Although none of these works threatens Uyghurs who ‘abandon’ their mother tongue with physical violence, as Ne’imi’s poem does, several still make harsh threats and use verbal violence. For example, in Eros’s ‘Mother Tongue’, after making the above-mentioned statement about Uyghurs who argue with their mothers in Uyghur, the members of the group continue to rap:

... Forgetting the mother tongue is shameful/ ... No one is more fool than the person who destroyed the mother tongue/ ... Those who are destroying the mother tongue must be warned with this rap song/ We will scold with vulgar words those who did not stop destroying it/ ...⁹⁰

An even more serious threat is found in Eli Kroran’s pop song, where the musician warns that those who ‘forget’ (Uyghur: *unutmaq*) and ‘disparage’ (Uyghur: *xar qilmaq*) the mother tongue will be ‘cursed by God’ (Uyghur: *xuda urmaq*), because they have committed a ‘sin’ (Uyghur: *gunah*): ‘... Do not disparage the mother tongue, man/ ... If you forget the mother tongue, you are a sinner/ If you forget your identity, may God curse you/ ...’.⁹¹ This last threat is consistent with the implicit message found in ‘The Nikah that Made the Imam Cry’, namely, that ‘forgetting’ Uyghur is equivalent to violating Islam and will result in punishment by God.

Like the other new features that characterize late *ana til* works, the belligerent tone and threats discussed above seem to be part of the Uyghur response to the more aggressive implementation of China’s assimilative language policy in Xinjiang since the late 2000s. Moreover, like these other features, the belligerent tone and threats also reflect the fact that the policy change led increasing numbers of Uyghurs to become more anxious and even to feel that their native language and collective identity were facing an existential threat. This increased anxiety, however, prompted various responses. While some writers and artists started to lament their native language and chose to express grief, as illustrated in the previous section, others, by contrast, clearly became more aggressive and declared war, as the examples in this section demonstrate. Nonetheless, like the criticism that many late *ana til* works contain, the examples above show that the anger and threats were also directed mainly at the Uyghurs themselves rather than at the Chinese government. This approach was probably partly because of the fear of censorship and official retaliation, which I mentioned earlier, and which made Uyghurs an easier and safer target for venting their anger. But another possible reason is probably that few artists and writers believed that they could make the Chinese government reverse its language policy. If we accept this explanation, then these writers and artists apparently felt that undoing the language policy was only possible through pressuring their own fellows to resist it by

⁸⁹Eros, ‘Ana til’.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Kroran, ‘Ana til’.

remaining loyal to their mother tongue, continuing to use it, and avoiding shifting to Chinese.

Calls for concrete action

Most *ana til* poems and songs aim to mobilize Uyghurs to protect their mother tongue and keep it alive, but for many years this effort was usually done in indirect and very abstract ways, mainly through highlighting the value of Uyghur. However, some works, especially late ones, contain explicit calls for very concrete action. Like the enhanced expressions of linguistic anxiety and the belligerent rhetoric against Uyghurs who ‘abandoned’ or ‘forgot’ their mother tongue, these calls have intensified since the late 2000s and early 2010s. ‘I Am a Translator between My Father and Child’ (Uyghur: *Men terjiman dadam bilen balamgha*), another online poem by Wapadarim, which was uploaded to the internet in 2011, offers a vivid example of this late feature. Like Wapadarim’s other poem from 2011, ‘Grandchildren’, this poem, too, depicts the inability of the speaker’s father to communicate with his grandchild, because the grandfather can speak only Uyghur, whereas the grandchild can speak only Chinese. However, this poem differs from ‘Grandchildren’ in its vivid depiction of how the inability of the two to communicate leads to a bizarre situation in which the speaker is forced to function as a translator between his father and his child. Another difference is that ‘I Am a Translator between My Father and Child’ contains an explicit call for concrete action. Towards the end of the poem the frustrated grandfather proclaims dramatically: ‘We are Uyghurs! Let’s love the Uyghur language/ Let’s not abandon it, let’s use it, let’s admire it,/ Let’s speak the mother tongue even if we have to die [for speaking it],/...’⁹² Then, following this statement, the grandfather reprimands his son, the speaker in the poem, for not teaching his child the mother tongue. The poem ends with the speaker promising his father that he will teach Uyghur to his child, and calls on the readers to do the same:

... I will teach my child the thirty-two letters [of the Uyghur alphabet]/ ... I promised my father while weeping/ I thought a lot, all of this is my fault/ My eyes shone when I said ‘Uyghur’/ My brother, if you believe me/ Be sure to teach the mother tongue to your kid!⁹³

Like some of the abovementioned late *ana til* works, this poem reflects the general fact that in 2011 and the years just before that, government pressure to promote its assimilative language policy increased dramatically. However, it also reflects a reaction against a very specific recent development in this general shift, which is the new focus on young children. Indeed, since the late 2000s and early 2010s, parallel to the dramatic acceleration and expansion of ‘bilingual education’ in high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools, the shift from Uyghur-medium to Chinese-medium

⁹²Wapadarim, ‘Men terjiman dadam bilen balamgha’ [I am a translator between my father and my child], published online in 2011, available at <https://Uyghur-archive.com/misranim/thread-76338-3-1.html>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

⁹³Ibid.

teaching in Xinjiang's local education system has been implemented in full force in kindergartens as well.⁹⁴

Moreover, several reports suggest that in addition to the new aggressive promotion of 'bilingual education' in kindergartens, during this period the government also began to expand the duration of preschool programmes and started to implement a compulsory two-year, and later three-year, preschool education programme, at least in the rural areas of southern Xinjiang.⁹⁵ As a result, young Uyghur children aged three or four were now essentially separated from their mother tongue at a very early age, and thus were prevented from acquiring even the most basic proficiency in it. Several reports and conversations that I had with Uyghur informants suggest that this new development was directly related to the 2009 Urumchi riots. As noted earlier, following this bloody incident, the explicit official linguicism against Uyghur that developed in the 1990s intensified, as Uyghur became associated with terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism.⁹⁶ This association meant that Uyghur was practically criminalized, which in turn led to the acceleration and expansion of the aggressive shift to Chinese in the formal education of young Uyghur children. The logic was clear, although for many years it was usually not stated explicitly—Uyghur is dangerous and therefore Uyghur children should be immersed in a Chinese-speaking environment from the earliest possible age.⁹⁷ A recent report citing a leaked Chinese government document from 2017 offers direct evidence, even if belated, of the existence of such logic.⁹⁸

I would argue that after many years of linguicism against Uyghur, the shift to 'bilingual education' in Uyghur kindergartens, and the compulsory expansion of the duration of the formal preschool period marked the beginning of a covert linguicide against this language. It stands to reason that if Uyghur children are not able to acquire basic competence in their mother tongue, it will most likely disappear within several decades as nobody will speak it anymore. Indeed, in recent years more and more oral accounts from my Uyghur informants have claimed that Uyghur children in Xinjiang, even in its southern part where Uyghurs still dominate demographically, were communicating in the early and mid-2010s in Chinese, even among themselves and in their

⁹⁴*China Daily*, 'Govt investment doubles'; *China Daily*, 'Xinjiang increases support for preschool education', published online on 18 February 2014, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-02/18/content_17289668.htm, [accessed 23 June 2023]; Sonika Gupta and R. Veena, 'Bilingual education in Xinjiang in the post-2009 period', *China Report*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2016, pp. 311–315. For a brief discussion of the history of 'bilingual education' in kindergartens, see Ma, 'The development of minority education', pp. 211–213, 220–222.

⁹⁵*China Daily*, 'Xinjiang increases support for preschool education'; Michael Martina, 'China to expand bilingual schooling in Xinjiang: Xinhua', *Reuters*, published online on 6 May 2016, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang/china-to-expand-bilingual-schooling-in-xinjiang-xinhua-idUSKCN0XX1INT>, [accessed 23 June 2023]; Radio Free Asia, 'China bans Uyghur language in schools'.

⁹⁶*China Daily*, 'Govt investment doubles'; Cui, 'Mandarin lessons in Xinjiang'; Liu, 'A multiple view', p. 20.

⁹⁷*China Daily*, 'Govt investment doubles'.

⁹⁸Qin, 'In China's crackdown on Muslims'; see also Kuo, 'Chinese detention "leaving thousands of Uighur children without parents"'; Feng, 'Uyghur kids recall physical and mental torment'.

free time.⁹⁹ Furthermore, some of my informants suggested that Uyghur children were even reluctant to talk in Uyghur at home with their siblings, parents, and grandparents because they felt uncomfortable with the language. These new developments sounded an alarm among many of my Uyghur informants, including the most optimistic among them, who now felt that the death of Uyghur in the not-so-distant future was a very real possibility.

In 2011, these new developments led a group of three young Uyghur intellectuals to challenge the language policy in Xinjiang in the most overt way. The three—Abduweli Ayup, Muhemmet Sidiq, and Dilyar Obul—launched the Uyghur Mother-Tongue-Based Education Movement, the goal of which was to promote Uyghur-medium education for Uyghur children. The three activists promoted their movement through the internet. They published essays, founded a commercial company, raised money from the Uyghur public to finance their movement, arranged conferences, and in the second half of 2011 established a private mother tongue-based multilingual kindergarten and school in Kashgar. Encouraged by their success in the southern city, starting from autumn 2012 the three also tried to open a similar kindergarten and school in Xinjiang's capital Urumchi.¹⁰⁰ An online forum that they launched in late 2012 where they discussed their past experience and future plans received 500,000 views in just a few months.¹⁰¹ And a few months later, a new website for their planned new school in Urumchi received over 1.5 million visits in just a few weeks.¹⁰² These numbers clearly indicated the extreme popularity of their movement. However, the movement ended in August 2013 when the authorities arrested the three activists and later sentenced and imprisoned them on charges of illegal fundraising.¹⁰³

It seems most likely that the new developments in Xinjiang's language policy, which triggered the Uyghur Mother-Tongue-Based Education Movement, also inspired Wapadarim to publish his 'I Am a Translator between My Father and Child' and 'Grandchildren', both of which deal with Uyghur children who are unable to communicate with their grandparents, or have difficulty doing so, because of their poor level of Uyghur. This situation is very different from the one that Wapadarim described in his earlier poem from 2008, 'The Nikah that Made the Imam Cry'. Whereas the young couple in the latter poem were *minkaohan*, meaning that they chose (or were sent by their parents) to attend a Chinese school and receive their formal education in

⁹⁹During the long period in which I conducted the research on which this article is based, the majority of my informants lived in Urumchi (in northern Xinjiang), Beijing, or outside China. However, most of them were born and raised in southern Xinjiang and, at least until the mid- and late 2010s, they continued to visit their families who still lived there on a regular basis, so they had first-hand knowledge about the situation in this region.

¹⁰⁰World Uyghur Congress, 'Movement for Uyghur mother language based education'; Shir, 'Resisting Chinese linguistic imperialism', pp. 81–98.

¹⁰¹Shir, 'Resisting Chinese linguistic imperialism', pp. 86–87.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, pp. 27–28, 98; Rustem Shir, 'China's effort to silence the sound of Uyghur: A key part of China's campaign against Uyghur identity is a crackdown on the Uyghur language', *The Diplomat*, published online on 16 May 2019, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/chinas-effort-to-silence-the-sound-of-uyghur/>, [accessed 23 June 2023]. Abduweli Ayup spent 15 months in prison and was released in November 2014, while his two associates were released in 2015. See Shir, 'Resisting Chinese linguistic imperialism', p. 28; Shir, 'China's effort to silence the sound of Uyghur'.

Chinese, the later poems from the early 2010s describe the new reality in Xinjiang in which all Uyghur children were practically forced to become *minkaohan*, because the Uyghur-medium education system that existed in Xinjiang for decades had ceased to exist.

It was also in this context that the speaker in 'I Am a Translator between My Father and Child' tearfully promises his father to teach the Uyghur alphabet to his child and urges his fellows to do the same. Just like the movement that Abduweli Ayup and his associates initiated, this call was part of a general trend in Uyghur society that started in the early and mid-2010s. It reflected the fact that from this period onwards the Uyghur ethno-linguistic struggle focused mainly on how to transmit Uyghur, spoken and written, to the next generation of Uyghurs outside of the formal education system, where it was now relegated to the status of a second language, at best. Indeed, besides triggering the initiative of Ayup and his two associates, the fact that Chinese became the main, and in many cases the only, medium of instruction in Xinjiang's formal education system, including kindergartens, also led several Uyghur intellectuals in the early and mid-2010s to start promoting the idea that Uyghur parents should teach Uyghur, both spoken and written, to their children at home.

One notable example of this effort is an academic article that was published in Uyghur in 2014 by a prominent Uyghur linguist named Létip Toxti (sometimes written 'Tohti'). In this article, Toxti discusses several reasons why the Uyghur language should be protected and maintained. The main part of his article, however, is dedicated to a detailed discussion of why children should learn their mother tongue in the earliest stages of their life and before learning any other language. The discussion highlights the crucial impact of the early acquisition of the mother tongue on children's ability to acquire fluency not only in this language but also in other languages. Based on the linguistic theories of Noam Chomsky and other prominent Western scholars, Toxti suggests that forcing children in the earliest stages of their life to learn other languages instead of their own mother tongue is 'unreasonable' (Uyghur: *eqilghe sighmaydighan*), 'ignorant' (Uyghur: *nadanliq*), and a 'crime' (Uyghur: *jinayet*).¹⁰⁴ He then urges Uyghur parents to start teaching Uyghur to their children at home as early as possible, including reading and writing, as the new education system in Xinjiang clearly prevents them from learning it during the most critical period of language acquisition. Toxti also makes it clear that Uyghur parents should follow his advice in order to save Uyghur, because if two or three generations of Uyghur children lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue, the Uyghur language will 'face the end' (Uyghur: *zawalliqqa yüz tutmaq*).¹⁰⁵ Against this background, Wapadarim's online poem provides important evidence that the effort to promote the idea that Uyghur parents should teach Uyghur to their children at home from the earliest age possible was not confined to Uyghur academics and academic journals, but became quite popular in Uyghur society more broadly and was also advocated in popular venues and vernacular language.

¹⁰⁴Létip Toxti, 'Balilarning til özleshtürüshidiki achquchluq mezgil we ata-anilarning mejburiyiti' [The critical period of language acquisition and the responsibility of parents], *Xinjiang shifan daxue xuebao*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2014, p. 28.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

Another concrete action that several late *ana til* poems and songs call for is to avoid using ‘mixed’ (Uyghur: *arlash* or *shalghut*¹⁰⁶) language in which Uyghur words are replaced with Chinese loanwords. This call appears in works from the late 2000s and early and mid-2010s and reflects the growing influence of Chinese during this period.¹⁰⁷ Like the switch to instruction in Chinese in Uyghur kindergartens and elementary schools, this new development also sounded an alarm among many Uyghur intellectuals, who felt that Uyghur was being weakened not just in the formal education system but also in the everyday life and discourse of the general Uyghur adult population, and that in the long run this process could lead to the displacement of Uyghur by Chinese.

In addition to criticizing and lamenting the use of mixed language, several late *ana til* works contain explicit calls to get rid of it altogether. In ‘Farewell, My Uyghur Language’, for example, the speaker urges his readers to stop using Chinese loanwords and use Uyghur words instead: ‘... Let’s say “üzchat” [(“switch” in Uyghur)] instead of “keygün” [(from Chinese “kaiguan”)],/ ... Let’s say “inistitut” [(“institute” in Uyghur)] instead of “shöyü’en” [(from Chinese “xueyuan”)],/...’¹⁰⁸ Following these statements, Wapadarim declares: ‘... Our language became mixed,/ ... Let’s protect the mother tongue,/ Let’s protect the tradition,/ Let’s correct the mixed language,/...’¹⁰⁹ Another example of the call to stop using Chinese loanwords is found in ‘The Uyghur Language Cries in Urumchi’. After describing and problematizing the hybrid linguistic reality in sinicized Urumchi through several examples of Chinese loanwords, the speaker urges readers to act. The first suggestion is that they should follow the example of ‘my ancestor’ Mahmud Kashgari, who, according to the speaker, ‘purified’ (Uyghur: *saplashturmaq*) Uyghur from the influence of Arabic and Persian. Then, the poem gives voice to the personified language, which starts to talk in the first person and begs the readers to protect it:

[The Uyghur language] says: ‘Do I have any descendants to protect me?’/ ... It says: ‘Where are my rights of autonomy?’/ ... It says: ‘Where is my freedom?’/ The Uyghur language cries in Urumchi./ It says longingly: ‘When will I be purified?’/ It remembers clearly its past prosperity./ It says: ‘Please protect me with determination’,/ The Uyghur language cries in Urumchi./¹¹⁰

In addition to these messages, which are similar to those found in ‘Farewell, My Uyghur Language’, ‘The Uyghur Language Cries in Urumchi’ also describes the actual process

¹⁰⁶Some *ana til* works use the word ‘*arlash*’, which is more neutral, while others use the word ‘*shalghut*’, which actually means ‘crossbreed’, or ‘hybrid’, and in this context clearly evokes negative, derogatory connotations.

¹⁰⁷Thompson, ‘Our “messy” mother tongue’; Cabras, ‘Language ideologies in a Uyghur comedy sketch’.

¹⁰⁸Wapadarim, ‘Uyghur tilim elwida’. As noted earlier, in this poem Wapadarim clearly uses hyperbole to enhance the effect of his poem, as some of the Chinese loanwords that he mentions were rarely used in 2008 and are rarely used even today, with the possible exception of sinicized Urumchi. This hyperbole is also illustrated in the stanza from which I quoted above. For example, in a line that I did not quote, Wapadarim calls on his readers to use the Uyghur word ‘*samsaq*’ for garlic instead of the Chinese loanword ‘*dasü’en*’ (from the Chinese ‘*dasuan*’) despite the fact that ‘*dasü’en*’ is rarely used by Uyghurs even today.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Anonymous, ‘Ürümchide Uyghur tili yighlaydu’.

in which the mixed language gradually expands and starts to endanger the integrity of the borrowing language without anyone noticing the danger. Although the speaker avoids mentioning Chinese by name, and refers instead to ‘other language/s’, it is obvious that the danger is associated specifically with Chinese because all of the examples that appear in the poem are Chinese loanwords:

... Other languages are praised and prosper,/ They take root and sprout./ They seep unwittingly like drinking water... / The Uyghur language cries in Urumchi./ ... Even babies say ‘baba’ [(‘father’ in Chinese)] when they start to talk,/ The lid will be called ‘geyzi’ [(from Chinese ‘gaizi’)] when the time comes./ ... They [(the people who use mixed language)] twist the language into another language,/ Who will defend us in this situation,/ The Uyghur language cries in Urumchi./ ... The people of the [provincial] capital are *minkaohan*,/ As well as those who work in companies, the government, the bank, and the post office./ If it is so, I’m afraid their mourning will come,/ The Uyghur language cries in Urumchi./¹¹¹

The ‘unwitting seeping’ (Uyghur: *tuydurmastin singmek*) of Chinese into Uyghur is depicted in the poem as an action that can ‘twist’ (Uyghur: *qaydurmaq*) the mother tongue into an entirely different language. The implication is that what may appear to be a very minor influence at present may in the long run not just damage the integrity of the mother tongue, or its ‘purity’, but actually take over it, destroy it completely, and make it disappear. Given that the mixed language is the danger, when at the very end of the poem the Uyghur language begs Uyghurs to ‘protect [itself] with determination’, the message is clearly that Uyghurs should avoid using mixed language—in other words, avoid using Chinese loanwords when they speak Uyghur.

Calls for action similar to that just mentioned also appear in the hip-hop song by Eros. At the very beginning of their song the group rap: ‘... put your right hands up and speak in your mother tongue ...’. Then, they state ‘... I do not speak in a mixed language ...’. Later in the song, as noted earlier, Chinese is described as a ‘virus’ that ‘destroys’ the mother tongue, and the group urges its audience to fight and ‘destroy’ the ‘virus’. In the closing part of their song the group suggests how this fight can be won: ‘The language that I am speaking is the pure Uyghur language’, a line implying that victory over the ‘virus’ can be achieved if Uyghurs speak ‘pure Uyghur’ (Uyghur: *sap Uyghur*) and stop using mixed language.

Eros’s ‘Mother Tongue’ and ‘The Uyghur Language Cries in Urumchi’ are part of another general major trend that emerged in Uyghur society in the early 2010s, the focus of which was to ‘purify’ Uyghur from Chinese influences. As noted in the introduction, this trend has been discussed in several recent studies, which have documented how it was manifested in the language practices, attitudes, and discourse of Uyghur individuals, as well as in certain domains of Uyghur culture and mass media.¹¹² As these studies suggest, the main agenda of the effort to ‘purify’ Uyghur was to resist

¹¹¹*Ibid.*

¹¹²Official Uyghur TV in Thompson, ‘Our “messy” mother tongue’; and one comedy sketch in Cabras, ‘Language ideologies in a Uyghur comedy sketch’. See also Cabras, ‘Between resistance and adaptation’, pp. 44, 46.

the linguistic hegemony of Chinese and to protect Uyghur from linguistic assimilation by the dominant language. Against this background, the *ana til* works discussed above show that Uyghur poets and pop musicians played an active role in this collective effort. Moreover, these poems and songs conveyed their ethno-linguistic messages in a much more explicit and belligerent form compared with the other cultural domains discussed in previous studies. This difference apparently derived from the fact that most of these works, especially from the late 2000s and early 2010s, were published or released online, where censorship has always tended to be looser.

Ana til songs for children

Contemporary *ana til* songs and poems have also targeted children. The song ‘My Mother Tongue—Children’s Song’ (Uyghur: *ana tilim—balilar naxshisi*), whose lyrics and music were created by the famous song writer Xaris Ashuruf, is the best-known and probably one of the earliest children’s *ana til* songs from the period on which this study focuses. According to a recent online article, it was performed, probably for the first time, in 1996 by the female singer Xatime Ablimit.¹¹³ Below are several lines from the lyrics of this song:

My mother tongue, my sweet language,/ You give me limitless power./ With your kindness,/ You grow a good smelling flower in my heart./ I learnt about my homeland and the world through you,/ You are my endless treasure,/ You are always with me./¹¹⁴

I was able to find recordings of two later performances of this song, with slightly different lyrics and musical arrangement, one from around 2000 by a young female singer called Hörigül, and another one from the late 2000s by a young female singer called Almir Qurban.¹¹⁵ The two performances shared important features that were representative of the way in which other children’s *ana til* songs have often been disseminated in recent decades. Both were part of a children’s TV show in Uyghur that was broadcast on Xinjiang’s regional television station, and both celebrated the 1 June Chinese Children’s Day. Like similar children’s shows that are broadcast on that day in other local and national TV stations and channels throughout China, these televised events were intended for children and featured mainly young performers and anchors. However, this similarity notwithstanding, the programmes in which the abovementioned two performances and numerous similar ones were shown also celebrated Uyghur culture and identity. Indeed, in addition to the celebration of the Uyghur mother tongue in the lyrics of the songs and the fact that all of the participants talked in Uyghur, the celebration of Uyghurness was also evident in the traditional costumes worn by most of the children on stage, as well as many in the audience. These included

¹¹³See *Ulnux.com.*, ‘Senet béghidiki bir jüp: Eset Dilmurat and Xatime Ablimit’ [The couple in the garden of art: Eset Dilmurat and Xatime Ablimit], published online on 24 January 2016. No valid link is available.

¹¹⁴Xaris Ashuruf, ‘Ana tilim—balilar naxshisi’ [My mother tongue—children song]. Released in 1996[?].

¹¹⁵For a video clip of Hörigül’s performance, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxYAbOBSEqU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxYAbOBSEqU;); for a video clip of Almir Qurban’s performance, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWZcVzkQTg4>, [both accessed 23 June 2023].

colourful *doppas*, *etles* dresses, and the *kanway konglek* (shirts) with their typical Uyghur embroidery. Clearly, the organizers of these TV shows felt that in addition to the general celebration of childhood and children, China's Children's Day also provided them with an opportunity to raise the ethnic awareness of their young audience.

Whereas the majority of *ana til* works for adults are poems, those that target children are mainly songs, apparently because children, especially young ones, are more attracted and responsive to words delivered through music. Moreover, as one would expect, children's *ana til* songs, like the one quoted above, have simple lyrics and melodies. Yet, despite these features, the main messages conveyed in children's *ana til* songs are often quite similar to some of those in the *ana til* works that are intended for adults, especially the earlier ones. The song quoted above, for example, praises the mother tongue and clearly aims to persuade Uyghur children to respect and love it. It also contains the ethno-nationalist message found in many works for adults about the Uyghur 'homeland' and the important role of the mother tongue in learning about the 'homeland'. These similarities suggest that the creation of this song was probably the result of the same forces that led to the beginning of the massive production of *ana til* works for adults in the mid-1990s: the intensification of Uyghur ethno-nationalism and linguistic nationalism, the growing influence of Chinese in Xinjiang due to the intensified pressures to integrate the region with the rest of China, the new surge of Han Chinese in-migration, and the emergence of explicit official linguisticism against Uyghur combined with the early experiments with 'bilingual education'.

In addition to these characteristics, another very obvious feature of *ana til* works for children is their dramatic increase, beginning in the early 2010s. Indeed, whereas my search for children's *ana til* works yielded only one song from the 1990s and 2000s (the one mentioned above in its different variants), and a reference to another song by Xaris Ashuruf that I could not find (see below), I was able to find no less than six songs from the following decade, all of which (with the exception of one I could not date accurately) were released within a four-year period between 2013 and 2017. In addition to the increase in the number of children's *ana til* songs, unlike the above-mentioned song by Xaris Ashuruf from which I quoted earlier, most of the new songs were alphabet songs, which not only encouraged Uyghur children to cherish and learn their mother tongue, as the song by Xaris Ashuruf does, but also taught them the basics of the Uyghur alphabet. This new focus clearly reflected the new understanding of many Uyghurs, especially intellectuals, that Uyghur children should be taught Uyghur, including the writing system, in new creative ways outside of the formal education system where Uyghur has become increasingly marginalized.

The Uyghur alphabet songs of the mid-2010s were not the first of their kind. According to Abduweli Ayup, several Uyghur alphabet songs existed in the past but they were forgotten and never became popular. One reason for this discontinuity and lack of popularity was probably the frequent changes in the Uyghur script, from an Arabic-based script before the mid-1950s, to a Cyrillic-based script in the second half of the 1950s, to a Latin-based script from the late 1950s and early 1960s to the late 1970s and early 1980s, and then back to the old Arabic-based script again.¹¹⁶ Ayup remembers

¹¹⁶See Ildikó Bellér-Hann, 'Script changes in Xinjiang', in *Cultural change and continuity in Central Asia*, (ed.) Shirin Akiner (London: Kegan Paul International, 1991), pp. 71–83; Linda Benson, 'Education and social mobility among minority populations in Xinjiang', in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim borderland*, (ed.)

that when the Uyghur education system in Xinjiang returned to the Arabic-based script in the early 1980s, he was attending elementary school and his school textbook included a new alphabet song in this script (referred to in Uyghur as the ‘old script’; Uyghur: *kona yéziq*). However, he also recalls that this song (the lyrics and the music of which were also written by Xaris Ashuruf) was never sung, despite the fact that its lyrics were accompanied in the textbook by musical notes. In any case, according to Ayup, the song never became popular and remained what he called an ‘official’ alphabet song.¹¹⁷

This situation is probably the reason why several young Uyghur informants in their thirties and forties suggested to me in the mid-2010s that historically Uyghurs did not have any alphabet songs and that the new alphabet songs that were created during that period were the first Uyghur alphabet songs. This information was inaccurate, but it did indicate that until the 2010s Uyghur alphabet songs were both rare and unpopular. Another possible reason for the lack of popularity of previous Uyghur alphabet songs, in addition to the ‘orthographic chaos’¹¹⁸ that the Uyghur language experienced between the mid-1950s and early 1980s, was probably that transmitting the Uyghur alphabet (be it Arabic-based, Cyrillic-based, or Latin-based) to the next generation of Uyghur children was never considered an issue until the late 2000s and early 2010s. The one conspicuous exception that I mentioned earlier was the Cultural Revolution, during which Uyghur, like other minority languages, was suppressed.¹¹⁹

With this information in mind, the popularity of the most recent alphabet songs was most likely linked to the intense linguistic anxiety that many Uyghurs felt during this period, as well as the fact that some of the new songs were created and performed by some of Xinjiang’s most famous Uyghur musicians. In fact, the involvement of these musicians in the effort to encourage Uyghur children to learn the Uyghur alphabet was in itself evidence of the strong sense of urgency and crisis that overtook an increasing number of Uyghurs during this period. In addition to these factors, the popularity of the new songs must have also derived from the fact that they were disseminated to a larger audience than ever before, thanks to new forms of mass media that did not exist in the past, including television, and, most importantly, the internet, social media, personal computers, and smartphones.

The ‘Uyghur Alphabet Song’ (Uyghur: *Uyghur élipbe naxshisi*), a children’s song released in 2013, offers a representative example of the new body of children’s *ana til* songs that were created and popularized in Xinjiang in the mid-2010s. It was performed by the famous pop musician Ablajan Awut Ayup, who also wrote the lyrics and the music. Ablajan (as he is called in Xinjiang) was inspired by Western pop stars

S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 194–195; Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict*, pp. 16–25. Dwyer characterizes the language policy during this period as ‘chaotic’ and suggests that the frequent script changes led to ‘orthographic chaos’. However, she also maintains that this ‘chaos’ was deliberate and politically motivated. See *ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

¹¹⁷Abduweli Ayup, personal communication, October 2021.

¹¹⁸Dwyer, *The Xinjiang conflict*, pp. 18–19.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 8, 36; Smith Finley, “‘Ethnic anomaly’ or modern Uyghur survivor?”, p. 219; Smith Finley, *The art of symbolic resistance*, p. 37; Hann, ‘Harmonious or homogenous?’, p. 193.

like Michael Jackson,¹²⁰ and he was considered an idol among Uyghur children and youth until he was detained in early 2018, after which he was not seen again, as part of the ongoing ‘re-education’ campaign in Xinjiang.¹²¹ Unlike Abduréhim Héyt, who performed his songs exclusively in Uyghur and in traditional folk style, Ablajan presented a very modern, global, ‘cool’ image, and performed many of his songs in Chinese in a clear attempt to cater to the general Chinese audience and celebrate modernity. In his ‘Uyghur Alphabet Song’, however, Ablajan mixes his usual global hip-hop style with a powerful assertion of Uyghurness. Singing in Uyghur, he not only encourages his young audience to love and master their native language, but also teaches them the basics of the Uyghur alphabet:

Let’s start! Come, let’s learn the alphabet!/ Let’s master the mother tongue!/ Let’s all of us speak freely and fluently/ In the beautiful mother tongue!/ Go ahead!/ A, E, B, P .../Eight vowels / Twenty two consonants/ The mother tongue is truly beautiful / Learn well and know it completely!¹²²

As the title of the song suggests, the Uyghur alphabet is both at the centre of the song and celebrated in its refrain, which is repeated no less than four times. In this refrain Ablajan and his co-singers half sing, half recite the 32 letters of the Uyghur alphabet one by one in a much slower pace compared with the rest of the song, clearly so the young audience will be able to hear the sound of each letter. Moreover, this part is sung twice by a young female singer (Shérinay Ghulam) in a childish voice, in what seems to be an attempt to make the song more appealing to young children. The Uyghur alphabet is also represented visually in the simple video clip that accompanies the song. Several shots show a colourful image that looks like many tree leaves or drops of water, each of which has one Uyghur letter in a different colour.

However, parallel to this celebration of the Uyghur language and Uyghur identity in general, the song also celebrates a global, up-to-date, hip-hop mood and is performed in a cheerful, bouncy style to a typical electronic accompaniment with the most trendy sound effects. Likewise, global ‘hip’ and Uyghurness are also combined in the song’s video clip. In this clip, Ablajan wears a trendy Western hairstyle, high-top basketball shoes with untied laces, and a stylish modern watch, and uses various hip-hop body postures. At the same time, he also wears the Uyghur *kanway konglek* (shirt) with its typical colourful embroidery decorations, and his young female co-singer, Shérinay Ghulam, wears a colourful *etles* dress and a *doppa*.

The celebration of Uyghurness in a modern, global, ‘hip’ framework seems to be part of an effort to cater to the younger generation of Uyghurs, especially those who live in urban areas, who, like urban youth in many other parts of the world, look

¹²⁰Darren Byler, ‘Ablajan and the subtle politics of Uyghur pop’, *The Art of Life in Chinese Central Asia*, published online on 14 July 2017, available at <https://livingotherwise.com/2017/07/14/ablajan-subtle-politics-uyghur-pop/>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

¹²¹Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa Elkun, ‘Uyghur pop star detained in China’, *Freemuse*, published online on 11 June 2018, available at <https://freemuse.org/news/uyghur-pop-star-detained-in-china/>, [last accessed 27 December 2021].

¹²²Ablajan Awut Ayup, ‘Uyghur élipbe naxshisi’ [Uyghur alphabet song], released in 2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra2QGx3OLS4>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

for modern, global, trendy cultural products. The effort to cater to Uyghur children is also evident in the ironic fact that, despite the severe crisis that led to their creation, and in sharp contrast to the melancholic, serious, or sometimes militant mood that dominates many late *ana til* works for adults, *ana til* works for children are joyful and upbeat. This positive, light-hearted mood is clearly aimed at creating a fun atmosphere as an additional strategy to encourage Uyghur children to learn their native language. However, this mood should not mislead and distract from the deeper context and meaning of the songs. The ‘Uyghur Alphabet Song’ and other children’s *ana til* songs were part of a very serious struggle to ensure that the next generation of Uyghurs would become competent in their mother tongue in order to keep Uyghur alive.¹²³

As implied above, I suggest that the increase in Uyghur alphabet songs and other *ana til* songs for children was part of a general reaction to the new linguistic policy of the post-2009 period, which clearly intended to prevent young Uyghur children from gaining proficiency in their mother tongue. Moreover, it is quite reasonable that this surge was also inspired by other responses to this policy, such as the Uyghur Mother-Tongue-Based Education Movement that Abduweli Ayup and his two associates initiated in the early 2010s. Significantly, Ayup himself, who fled China in 2015, going into exile,¹²⁴ wrote the lyrics for one of the new alphabet songs that were disseminated in Xinjiang in the mid-2010s. He wrote the lyrics for this song while in exile, and included them in a Uyghur alphabet textbook that he published in Turkey in 2017. Called the ‘Alphabet Song’ (Uyghur: *élipbe naxshisi*, or elsewhere *Uyghur tili herip naxshisi*),¹²⁵ the song was composed by Nuri Mexmut and performed on Xinjiang Uyghur TV in 2017 as part of a children’s show.¹²⁶ This performance was one of the last manifestations of the *ana til* ‘fever’ that took over Xinjiang between the late 2000s and the mid-2010s. Indeed, as the ‘re-education’ campaign that was launched in 2017 gathered momentum, similar to many other markers of Uyghur ethnicity, celebrating the Uyghur mother tongue became increasingly dangerous.

Conclusions

Ana til poems and songs offer important and fascinating insights into the Uyghur response to the worsening marginalization of their native language in Xinjiang. They contain powerful expressions of diverse sentiments, perceptions, and discourses that relate to the experience of language loss, and provide vivid evidence of various efforts

¹²³For another discussion of Ablajan Awut Ayup and another children’s *ana til* song that he created and performed, called ‘Dear teacher’ [Uyghur: *Söyümlük mu’ellim*], see Byler, ‘Ablajan and the subtle politics of Uyghur pop’; see also Harris and Isa Elkun, ‘Uyghur pop star detained in China’. ‘Dear teacher’ was released in 2015. For the video clip of this song, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPmdkB8Ww3Y>, [accessed 27 June 2023].

¹²⁴Shir, ‘China’s effort to silence the sound of Uyghur’.

¹²⁵Abduweli Ayup, ‘Élipbe naxshisi’ [Alphabet song], in *Élipbe* [Alphabet] (Istanbul: Siyret çocuk yayinlari, 2017), pp. 29–30.

¹²⁶The song was performed by a young female singer called Firuze Zahir. In the subtitles that accompanied the performance the lyrics were attributed to Ayding, Ayup’s pen name. The link to this performance is not valid anymore, but a cartoon clip of the song is available on YouTube. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30EmO6arzw>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

that Uyghurs have made to protect their native language and ensure its survival. These efforts include attempts to persuade fellow Uyghurs to cherish their native language, increase their awareness about the language crisis and its consequences, and mobilize them to adopt certain behaviour and actions. The works also contain important information about the impact that the language loss, especially among Uyghur children, has had on Uyghur society. In addition to this information, *ana til* works also contain important evidence, albeit less direct, about the development of the language policy in Xinjiang and how it changed over time. They reflect the process that started in explicit official linguisticism against Uyghur in the 1990s, and eventually led, from the late 2000s and early 2010s, to covert linguisticide, manifested in a new policy that prevented Uyghur children from gaining even basic competence in their mother tongue.

One dominant, recurring theme in the works that I analysed in this article is the powerful link between the Uyghur language and Uyghur collective identity, and the strong sense expressed in many of these works that the Uyghur language is a crucial component of Uyghur ethno-national identity and necessary for the latter's survival and continuity. Indeed, beyond the many ideas and messages that *ana til* poems and songs communicate, these works demonstrate the force and intensity of Uyghur linguistic ethno-nationalism and general ethno-nationalism. Moreover, it is also obvious that these works not only reflected Uyghur linguistic and general ethno-nationalism, but also helped shape and strengthen both. In addition, although most *ana til* works do not contain direct criticism of the Chinese government and its language policy in Xinjiang because of the reasons mentioned earlier, there is little doubt that the intense linguistic and general anxiety and grievances that are expressed in these works contributed significantly to ethnic tension in Xinjiang, and to Uyghur resentment towards the Chinese state and probably also towards Han Chinese immigrant settlers. In this regard, this article provides some support, even if indirectly, to the claim made in several previous studies, that Uyghur discontent over Xinjiang's language policy was one of the causes of the bloody riots that erupted in Urumchi on 5 July 2009.¹²⁷

Ana til works also demonstrate that the intensity of Uyghur linguistic ethno-nationalism increased as the efforts of the Chinese government to marginalize Uyghur intensified. Indeed, the article has shown how the intensity of Uyghur linguistic ethno-nationalism grew as a result of the implementation of a more assimilative language policy in Xinjiang. This increase in intensity was clearly a response to what many Uyghur writers and artists regarded as a serious and even existential threat to the survival of their language and ethno-national identity. At the same time, however, the growing intensity of Uyghur linguistic and general ethno-nationalism can also help explain China's determination to implement its assimilationist and repressive language policy in Xinjiang, and even to go as far as to commit covert linguisticide. From the point of view of the Chinese state, the Uyghur language, with all the rich meanings attached to it, has clearly been seen as a threat to China's national unity because it embodies and has helped perpetuate a sense of collective identity and history that is too different and separate from the unified and increasingly homogenous national

¹²⁷See Wilson, 'A tear in my eye but I cannot cry', pp. 9–10; Minglang Zhou, 'Historical review of the PRC's minority/indigenous language policy and practice: Nation-state building and identity construction', in *China's assimilationist language policy: The impact on indigenous/minority literacy and social harmony*, (eds) Gulbahar H. Beckett and Gerard A. Postiglione (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 18–30.

identity that the Chinese government has been promoting. Although the intensity of Uyghur linguistic ethno-nationalism and Chinese linguistic repression in Xinjiang is difficult to measure, the quantity and quality of the songs and poems that I analysed in this article provide a strong indication of the outstanding intensity of the former, and it is a fact that nowhere in China, at least so far, has the government implemented such a harsh language policy as in Xinjiang.¹²⁸ While it is hard, if not impossible, to identify the chicken and the egg in this cycle of resistance and oppression, I would nevertheless argue that there is not only an obvious correlation between the two, but also that the two have fed one another in a cycle of growing insecurity and intensity.¹²⁹

This explanation, however, certainly does not provide any justification for the brutal linguistic and general oppression that China has been implementing in Xinjiang. Indeed, the works that I analysed, combined with the numerous reports about the language policy in this region, offer very concrete evidence that supports the recent accusations that China is currently engaging in ‘cultural erasure’ and even ‘cultural genocide’ in Xinjiang.¹³⁰ The evidence is not confined to what *ana til* works tell us about the deteriorating condition of Uyghur in recent decades, and the anxiety of those who have experienced the loss of their language as the result of a state policy clearly aimed at weakening and even eliminating their native language. It also extends to the destiny of the works themselves, as well as the destiny of the writers and artists who produced them. Indeed, like the gradual deliberate disappearance of the Uyghur language from more and more domains of Uyghur life, in recent years most *ana til* works, too, have disappeared from the public sphere as a result of a deliberate and systematic effort by the Chinese government. Thus, it is impossible to find them any more, at least within China—not in print, not in digital media like CDs, and not on the internet. Likewise, several of the more famous writers and artists who created these works have been detained and have disappeared from public view, or been silenced in other ways. Among the writers and artists I mentioned, these include Abdurêhim

¹²⁸For linguistic repression and resistance elsewhere in China, especially in Tibet and Inner Mongolia, but also among the Han, see Françoise Robin, ‘Streets, slogans and screens: New paradigms for the defence of the Tibetan language’, in *On the fringes of the harmonious society: Tibetans and Uyghurs in socialist China*, (eds) Trine Brox and Ildikó Bellér-Hann (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2014), pp. 209–234; Gerald Roche, ‘Lexical necropolitics: The raciolinguistics of language oppression on the Tibetan margins of Chineseness’, *Language and Communication*, no. 76, 2021, pp. 111–120; Fang Xu, *Silencing Shanghai: Language and identity in urban China* (New York: Lexington Books, 2021); Gegentuul Baioud and Cholmon Khuunuud, ‘Linguistic purism as resistance to colonization’, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 2022, pp. 1–20, available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12548>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

¹²⁹For a similar argument in relation to Tibet, see Tsering Topgyal, ‘Insecurity dilemma and the Tibetan uprising in 2008’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 20, no. 69, 2011, pp. 183–203.

¹³⁰See Nathan Ruser, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro and Tilla Hoja, ‘Cultural erasure: Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang’. Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Brief Report No. 38/2020, published online in September 2020, available at https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2020-09/Cultural%20erasure_0.pdf?NIJYOaEV6DF3lfupGsdB73xtX0wCNokg, [accessed 23 June 2023]; Michael Clarke, ‘Settler colonialism and the path toward cultural genocide in Xinjiang’, *Global Responsibility to Protect*, no. 13, 2021, pp. 9–19; Sean R. Roberts, ‘The roots of cultural genocide in Xinjiang: China’s imperial past hangs over the Uyghurs’, *Foreign Affairs*, published online on 10 February 2021, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-02-10/roots-cultural-genocide-xinjiang>, [accessed 23 June 2023].

Héyt, Ablajan Awut Ayup, Perhat Tursun, and Abduqadir Jalalidin. Although no official body in China has ever linked the imprisonment of any of these people to any specific literary or musical work that they created, it is quite clear that they were detained, imprisoned, or silenced in other ways, at least in part, because of their role in the ethno-linguistic struggle that I discussed in this article.¹³¹ Thus, the Chinese state has not only been causing the Uyghur language to disappear, but also the people and cultural products that exposed and documented its disappearance, and tried to struggle against it.

Indeed, this article has also shown that *ana til* poems and songs have played an important role in an impressive effort by Uyghur writers and artists to resist and struggle against the assimilative language policy that China has been implementing in Xinjiang. Yet, the effects of this effort are far from clear. There is little doubt that *ana til* works helped increase awareness among the Uyghur population regarding the crisis that the Uyghur language has been facing and the negative consequences of this crisis. Nevertheless, as noted above, it is also possible that this intense resistance was one of the factors that contributed to the implementation of a more assimilative language policy. Moreover, if the aggressive language policy of the Chinese state persists, it is questionable if even the increased awareness among Uyghurs will be enough to prevent the further marginalization of Uyghur and perhaps even its death in the long run.

If that scenario comes about at some point in the future—a possibility that seems unlikely today, but one that an increasing number of Uyghur informants with whom I spoke in recent years consider quite realistic—then the *ana til* poems and songs will at least remain a vivid testimony, even if indirect, of how the Chinese government has promoted the elimination of Uyghur. Furthermore, these works will also remain a first-hand and real-time testimony of the Uyghurs' experience of cultural extinction in the making and their determined and creative struggle to try to save their mother tongue from disappearing. Last but not least, it seems quite likely that many of these works will continue to exist outside of China and play an important role among Uyghur exiles and other Uyghurs who live there. As the Uyghur language is being further marginalized and repressed in China, these Uyghurs already seem to understand that they are becoming the future guardians of much of Uyghur culture, unless the Chinese government once again adopts a more tolerant policy towards Uyghur. We already see some modest signs of such understanding in the fact that more and more *ana til* poems and songs and many other Uyghur cultural products are being preserved and published in printed books and journals, as well as on websites, outside of China by Uyghur exile publishers and other organizations. These efforts may not only help save a significant and unique body of Uyghur poems and songs from oblivion, but also enable these works, with their strong sense of ethnic identity, mission, and devotion, to continue to inspire contemporary and future generations of Uyghurs who live outside China to keep their mother tongue alive.

¹³¹For a similar observation that relates specifically to Ablajan Awut Ayup, see Harris and Isa Elkun, 'Uyghur pop star detained in China'.

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