

The Importance of Uyghur-Western Solidarity

Speech Draft for the November 20 Panel on The Future of Uyghur-Han Relations in China

David Yu

I first want to express my appreciation to the Laogai Foundation and the Uyghur American Association for the Uyghur Experience exhibit at the Laogai Museum. The exhibit gives the public an opportunity to learn about the plight of the Uyghurs over the past 60 years and can help people understand events such as the July 5th riots in Urumqi.

The past 60 years were disastrous not only for the Uyghurs, but for the Chinese as well. The suffering of the Uyghurs, however, has been much worse. First, the Communist regime has been a Chinese regime. In some sense, we can say that the Chinese chose the Communists over the Nationalists. If they suffered, then they suffered as a consequence of their own choice. The Uyghurs just had the regime imposed on them. Second, the Uyghurs had more causes for suffering. Like the Chinese, they suffered from the ruinous economic policies and insane political purges. Unlike the Chinese, however, the Uyghurs also had to endure severe restrictions to their religious practice and be subject to wholesale Sinicization programs. They borne the brunt of the nuclear tests at Lop Nor, which caused thousands of Uyghur deaths. They also fell into minority status in many parts of their own homeland. Third, the Uyghurs did not benefit much from the economic growth in recent years. As a result of incentives twisted in part by corruption, China's coastal areas boomed, while the great outback lagged far behind. The Uyghur areas are decidedly within this neglected outback. The vast oil and gas fields in Karamay and Tarim fueled China's economic rise, but brought little benefit to the Uyghurs. Moreover, the economic liberalization made the communist ideology irrelevant, and in its place the Chinese leaders promoted nationalism. Their version of nationalism is in essence Chinese chauvinism. It requires the denigration of the non-Chinese, especially the minority groups within the Chinese borders. It is therefore not surprising that the discontent among the Uyghurs kept growing, or that some Uyghurs took extreme actions on occasions such as the July 5th riots.

Faced with gross injustice, the mainstream Uyghur groups such as the Uyghur National Congress and Uyghur American Association nevertheless steadfastly adhere to the principle of nonviolence. I believe that this conscientious choice is a reflection of wisdom and moral courage, and I admire and applaud their position. I also condemn the attempts by the Chinese regime to portray the overseas Uyghurs as instigators of violence. The so-called evidence the Chinese regime produced makes no sense all, except as an insult to the soundness of mind of the Chinese people. As a Chinese dissident, I am familiar with the slander tactics of the Chinese leaders. When they slaughtered hundreds of peaceful protesters in Beijing in 1989, they also portrayed

groups outside of China as instigators of violence. It is startling that, after thirty years of reform and supposed progress, the regime is totally incapable of kicking the old habit of fabrication and slander.

I would like to say a few words about the Chinese regime's program to combat three so-called evil forces: separatism, religious extremism and terrorism. This program, like other ideas from the regime, cannot withstand scrutiny. Take separatism. Some people are in favor of the independence of East Turkestan, Tibet, or Taiwan, while others are opposed. Unless someone starts an armed insurrection or other kind of violence, advocacy of either position is just a matter of opinion, and the government has no business criminalizing opinions. Now take extremism. I find it fascinating that the godless Communists have the temerity to brand others as religious extremists. Isn't their own atheist position blatantly extreme? Again, as long as one does not try to impose his or her own beliefs on others by coercion, religious beliefs, even if they are extreme, should not be subject to criminalization. Finally, let's talking about terrorism. While there are indeed terror acts by individual Uyghurs, the mainstream Uyghur groups are clearly opposed to violence and terrorism. The problem is, the Chinese regime has been using terrorism as a convenient label to demonize its political enemies. These include not only the Uyghurs, but the Tibetans and Chinese dissidents as well. So my verdict of the combat against the three evil forces is: It is in fact an assault on freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the truth itself.

I am sorry to say that the Chinese propaganda has been effective. It appears that the average Chinese considers the Uyghurs a violent people hell-bent on gaining independence. Even many dissidents are affected. At Beijing Spring, for example, we are often asked about our position on the independence of East Turkestan, Tibet or Taiwan. The questioners seem to believe that, if we support independence of these areas, then the Chinese regime has every right to ban our publication, prevent us from returning to China and even jail our associates. As another example, after July 5th riots, our chief editor Hu Ping wrote an article suggesting that the riots were caused in part by the suppression of peaceful protests. The article caused a firestorm on the Internet, with even some veteran activists accusing Hu of justifying terrorism, something he patently did not do. Even Taiwan, which was for many years the hope of all freedom-loving Chinese, behaved discreditably when it refused Ms. Kadeer's visa application on alleged terrorist ties.

What can the Uyghurs do in this adverse environment? Besides continuing to adhere to the principle of nonviolence, my basic suggestion is for the Uyghurs to make a greater effort on reaching out to the Chinese. After all, the ten million Uyghurs are fated to live side by side with over a billion Chinese. In this regard, I think the Uyghurs can learn a great deal from the Tibetans. I attended the Sino-Tibetan Dialog conference in Geneva in August, and was once again amazed by the amount of effort the Tibetans put into explaining themselves to the Chinese. As a Chinese dissident, I sometimes find some of the Tibetans positions a little too soft. For example, the Dalai Lama supported China's Olympic efforts even after the violent crackdown on the protesting monks. He keeps talking about finding win-win solutions within PRC's legal framework. But I am at the same time deeply impressed by his humility, calmness and genuine

human compassion, and by the international support and sympathy the Tibetans enjoy. Even among many ordinary Chinese, the Dalai Lama is held in high regard. Among the dissidents he is a paragon and an inspiration. I encourage the Uyghur friends to emulate the example of the Tibetans, and pledge to do our part in promoting Sino-Uyghur understanding and friendship.

This brings me to the issue of Uyghur-Western solidarity. I believe that, in order to successfully reach out to the Chinese, the Uyghurs must maintain a Western orientation. Of course the Uyghurs need to keep close relations with Muslim groups, especially the Turkish peoples. But it is important for the Uyghurs to adhere to secularism and embrace the notion of individual rights, and to regard Western democracies as both allies and model societies. This orientation is a necessary basis for strong Sino-Uyghur relations. In upholding democratic values, the Uyghurs can find many soul mates within the Chinese society, especially among the intellectuals. In demanding religious freedom, for example, the Uyghurs have as their potential allies the rapidly growing ranks of Chinese believers. These include by some estimates some 50 million Buddhists, some 50 million Falun Gong practitioners, and some 100 million Christians. Furthermore, while China's democracy movement is not strong at the moment, it has deep roots going back to Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Revolution of 1911; it can quickly gather strength when opportunity arises. Democracy is a language that most Chinese can eventually understand. The same is not true of political aspirations based on Islam.

In addition, by allying with the West, the Uyghurs may be able to contribute to a grand alliance in an epic struggle, an alliance that stands on the right side of history. Let me begin to explain this by presenting the following statement: "If we liken the world capitalist system to a boxing platform, then our short and intermediate term goal is to defeat the boxing champ, and our ultimate goal is to smash the boxing platform." This sounds like what Mao Zedong might have said, but it is not. Here is another statement: "Wherever China's core economic interests lie, there should the forces of the Liberation Army cover." I think even Mao might not have the audacity to say something like this. Both quotes are from a book published earlier this year titled *China Is Displeased*. The book was a publication sensation in China. It sold some 600,000 copies in the first month. It was enthusiastically received, though at least one reader considered it the Chinese version of *Mein Kampf*. While more aggressive than official pronouncements, the book does reflect the sentiments of many in the establishment. These sentiments, briefly, are that China has been bullied and is still being bullied by the West, that China has better political and economic systems and better morals, that China can soon replace the U.S. as the world leader, and that China needs to get ready psychologically and militarily. Needless to say, these are dangerous ideas.

The way I see it, sixty four years after the defeat of the Nazis and twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the struggle between liberalism and authoritarianism still has no end in sight. One party of this struggle is the Western democracies, which are based on the notion of natural rights formulated by John Locke and other liberal thinkers of his time. The other party is the Chinese Communists together with Islamic fundamentalist groups such as the ruling mullahs of

Iran and the Taliban. This party's ideas have affinity to those of Thomas Hobbes; they demand absolute obedience to the state, the Leviathan. With the Western countries stumbling economically and pussyfooted in their security maneuvers, and with China rising fast, I am afraid the struggle between the free man (or woman) and the Leviathan may very well ratchet up again. A new cold war may be in the offing, in which the futures of the West, the Uyghurs and the freedom-loving Chinese are inexorable bound together. The Uyghurs may have a unique, vital strategic role to play in such a struggle. Whether the West can win this cold war depends on its will power. To safeguard freedom, it is important for the West to realize that support for groups such as the Uyghurs is not merely a humanitarian gesture. It is not even primarily about human rights. This support is a matter of national security. If the West is sufficiently determined, then I believe the free man can once again defeat the Leviathan, and both the Uyghurs and the Chinese will have a freer, brighter future.