

**Land, People and Faith: Wang Meng's  
Narrative of Uyghur Life in *Zhe bian  
fengjing***

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# Land, People and Faith: Wang Meng's Narrative of Uyghur Life in *Zhe bian fengjing*\*

## Abstract

*Zhe bian fengjing* (Landscape) is one of the early writings of Wang Meng on the background of Xinjiang but the complete version of the novel saw the light of the day as late as 2013. The plot of the novel is based on the socio-political life of a Uyghur dominated people's commune in Ili prefecture between 1962 and 1965. It was the most uncertain period in the history of Xinjiang when the region was going through the phase of revolutionary integration as well as coping with the consequences of Sino-Soviet rivalry. The paper throws light on the author's life in the region as well as the narrative of the novel. It attempts to understand the relevance of the novel in the present form at a time when the Muslim minorities of Xinjiang are experiencing ruthless coercion, surveillance and repressive re-education campaign under President Xi Jinping.

**Keywords:** Ili, Sino-Soviet Rivalry, Mao Zedong, siqing movement, Bayandai, Xi Jinping

## Introduction

Xinjiang underwent huge transformation in terms of economic development and inter-ethnic relations between the completion of the novel *Zhe bian fengjing* (literary 'Landscape in this side', henceforth *Landscape*) in 1978 and its publication in 2013. Wang Meng wrote this seven hundred thousand character novel in two volumes during the last years of the Cultural Revolution and the initial phase of the post-Mao era. The story depicted the rural life of a Uyghur dominated people's commune in Yili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture of Xinjiang in the 1960s. A few chapters of *Landscape* appeared in two issues of the literary journal *Xinjiang wenyi* in 1978. In 1981, a portion of it was published in *Dongfang* in the name of 'Yili fengqing' and in 1984 the main content of the novel was published as a series of stories in *Zai Yili* (Xia 2002: 58; Gao 2015). Finally, the original version of the novel in its present form was published in 2013.

At the time of publication of the novel in the second decade of the 21st century, Uyghur separatist violence as well as international terrorism emerged as China's main threat in Xinjiang. In order to fight against these threats, the Chinese central leadership unleashed a series of "strike hard" campaigns in the mid-1990s but failed to ensure long-cherished objective of national security or social stability in the region. The coercive state policies and intra-regional economic inequalities in ethnic line seriously damaged relations between the Uyghur and Han citizens settled in the region. The Urumqi riots in 2009 and subsequent violence is a

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continuous reminder of the potential threat of inter-ethnic tensions between the two communities.

After assuming power, Xi Jinping vowed to fulfil the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, consolidate national unity, undertake regional development strategy through trans-continental “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) program, and maintain political stability and enhance Party discipline by adopting mass line of struggle against corruption. The present CPC leadership could not come up with fresh ideas on how to deal with the current crisis in the region. Instead it continued the on-going coercive measures across Xinjiang. Publication of *Landscape* in this political backdrop raises the question why now?

No clear explanation is available. After postponing the publication of the novel for about thirty years, why did Wang Meng think the time was ripe for its publication? We can only surmise that the author possibly had doubts about the relevance of this Mao era literature in the early reform period when various modernist styles with dominating theme of “scar literature”, and root-seeking, and avant-garde literature captivated Chinese readers. In contrast to the deep rooted mistrust and inter-ethnic tensions in today’s Xinjiang, the *Landscape* offers unequivocal message of inter-ethnic unity, ardent love for *zuguo* (country where one has his/her ancestral home; motherland)<sup>1</sup>, and faith in socialism and Mao’s leadership in the face of betrayal by the Soviet Union. While the paper focuses on the background of the novel, the author’s attachment to Xinjiang and the narrative of Uyghur life in the novel, it also examines if the book gives any clue on improving inter-ethnic relations in Xinjiang.

### Across time and space

Ili was one of the most important centres of pro-independence East Turkestan movement in the 1940s, described as “three district rebellion” in official parlance, suggesting that the movements in Xinjiang were merely an extension of the Chinese revolution. Due to geographical proximity, Ili had been under the political, economic and cultural influence of Tsarist Russia, later the Soviet Union. In order to maintain dominance in the region, the Soviet Union supported the nationalistic aspirations of Uyghur, Kazakh and other minorities until the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

The 30-year Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was signed by the two Communist neighbours in 1950. The treaty allowed Soviet Russia to maintain its influence in Xinjiang and was allowed to explore for minerals in the region. This arrangement continued until the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations following the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956 when

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<sup>1</sup>祖籍所在的国家 and 自己的国家 are two meanings available in *Xiandai hanyu guifan cidian* (现代汉语规范词典).

President Nikita Khrushchev denounced the personality cult and dictatorship of Joseph Stalin. Khrushchev's anti-Stalin crusade prolonged ideological disputes between the two Communist neighbours. The relations between the two countries further worsened after the Soviet Union rolled up its economic assistance in opposition to Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward (GLF) policy for rapid industrialisation. Simultaneously, Moscow conspired to create tension in Ili and other bordering areas of Xinjiang.

China's design to control and transform local Uyghur society led to tension. As a result the political atmosphere of Xinjiang remained tense throughout the Mao era. The fallout from back-to-back radical political campaigns since early 1950s - namely, land reform, anti-imperialist campaign (in support of North Korea against the USA); 'anti-three campaigns' against corruption, waste and bureaucracy; anti-rightist movement; large scale collectivisation and introduction of the commune system; campaigns against Soviet revisionism; socialist education movement; "four clean-ups" movement (*siqingyundong*)<sup>2</sup>; rectification campaigns; and the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution - made the situation in Xinjiang unpredictable.

In order to instigate anti-China activities and separatist sentiments among the Uyghur and Kazakh minorities in Ili and Tacheng prefectures, Soviet agents in 1962, issued residential permits to the common people in this part of Xinjiang. The Russians helped locals to cross the border and settle in the Central Asian Soviet Republics.<sup>3</sup> The story about the fictional Patriotic Production Brigade of Leap Forward Commune (*Yuejin gongshe aiguo dadui*, henceforth referred to as PPB and LFC) in *Landscape* unfolds in this background when some members of the PPB were lured to go to the Soviet Union for a better life.

Trans-border movement of the local Uyghur and nomadic Kazakh population of Ili was a regular phenomenon until the Sino-Soviet rivalry took a serious turn. The physical restriction on the border was weak at the time of the incident and

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<sup>2</sup>A major part of novel covers the struggle during the "four clean-up" movement in Xinjiang. The Tenth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee of the CPC in September 1962 decided to launch socialist education movement (*shehuizhuyi jiaoyu yundong*) in the cities and the countryside. Initially aim of the movement was to solve the economic problems that surfaced after the people's communes were set up in 1958 by cleaning up work points, account books, warehouses and assets at the commune level. Later the clean-up movement developed into a political purge. The goal of the campaign was to fight against the people within the party who took the 'capitalist road' and opposed 'building socialism in the communes'. At the lower level the target of the movement was 'landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, and other bad elements' as well as other anti-people elements. In December 1964, the Central Political Bureau adopted a document titled "Some Current Problems Raised in the Socialist Education Movement in the Rural Areas". This document ruled that "the Socialist Education Movement" in the urban and rural areas would be known as the Four Clean-ups Movement (*siqing yundong*) - cleaning up politics, economy, ideology and the organization (Schram 1969: 323-5; Kwok-sing Li 1995: 429-30). In the face opposition within the party in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) tragedy, Mao relied on old tactics of class struggle and justified its requirement so that Chinese revolution could avert the Soviet path of 'revisionism'. This campaign helped Mao to strengthen his position to fight his main opponents, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping within the party and Nikita Khrushchev in the ranks of international socialist movement.

<sup>3</sup> The crisis in the Ili and Tacheng prefectures in 1962 is often referred to as I-Ta incident.

majority of the people who crossed over to the other side realised later that they were victims of Soviet conspiracy. In the novel, there were reports of people returning to Ili in order to escape hardship in the Soviet Central Asia. At the local level these returnees were mostly welcomed and not treated as political pariahs. Inner goodness of the common people and egalitarian simplicity were largely valued in the Leninist authoritarian polity in China during that time. Devotion to socialism and moral rectitude of large number of Party cadres at various levels was the main source of their confidence on the broad masses of people of various minorities.

There was a general belief that China would never deviate from the path of socialism and the masses would become worthy citizens of the socialist nation. The author tells us in the concluding section of the novel that 'there was a very nice term, called groping (*musuo*) and there was excellent objective know as socialism'. The gradualist approach was valued by the Party leadership until the ambitious program of GLF was introduced. No one knew how to achieve that goal and a large section of the masses were accustomed to believe that Mao Zedong would lead the country into the path of socialism. The political excesses during the entire Mao era were still considered as a mistake.

This was possibly the reason why people in China including national minorities could look forward to a fresh start in the reform period despite their bitter experience due to incessant revolutionary activities, economic disaster, social disorder and religious repression between 1958 and 1976. The 'scar' in the social and individual life of Chinese people soon began to heal in a relatively open political atmosphere under the post-Mao leadership and people whole heartedly joined in the modernization process.

For most of the people, it was not important whether purity of socialism would be ensured under Deng Xiaoping. The main concern of the masses was better life, social mobility, opportunities for self-realisation and rights to express genuine grievances. The central leadership in the initial stage of reform started taking small and hesitant steps towards economic transition, which was vividly described in Deng's famous quotation 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' (*mo zhe shitou guo he*). The Party was grounded and there was confidence among the masses.

As the leadership began to make ambitious plans for economic development, they became increasing paranoid in dealing with legitimate demands of ordinary people. The violent closure of the Tian'anmen fiasco in 1989 was the first major breach of faith of the people who believed that the Communist leadership would never use force to suppress student protests. The incident also reflected lack of self-confidence of the party leadership.



The new conservative leadership of technocrats exploited market forces for overall growth of national economy and made China one of the most unequal societies in the world. The country achieved economic affluence at the expense of marginalised sections of the society including minority population in Xinjiang and other parts of China. At the same time the Party relied more on majoritarian nationalistic upsurge which received further fillip from Xi Jinping's China Dream and global ambition in the recent years. In the age of growing status of the country in the international arena, the Party leadership of China evidently regained their confidence on the basis of newly acquired comprehensive national wealth and power rather than the trust of the people.

Interethnic fissure among various ethnic groups grew in Xinjiang in the 1990s due to economic inequality coupled with state coercion. Without much understanding of the ground situation, the Party leadership broadened the scope of definition of separatism and callously linked violence in Xinjiang with the trans-border terrorism. After the 9-11 incidents, China intensified all-out attacks against "three evil forces" i.e. ethnic separatism, religious fundamentalism and international terrorism and the highest leadership time and again pledged to start "people's war" in the region. Over two decades large sections of the Uyghur population in the region received the signals that they were culturally and economically backward and untrustworthy for their social customs and religious belief.

In this backdrop, Wang Meng published long-abandoned manuscript<sup>4</sup> of *Landscape* that portrayed socio-political life of Ili during least studied phase of the Xinjiang history.<sup>5</sup> It was a time when this Muslim dominated borderland of China were experiencing increasingly radical phase of Chinese rule under Mao Zedong and tension due to the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations. With the consolidation of power in the hands of Xi Jinping, in the recent years China has been experiencing extreme form of social control mechanism and in name of 'de-extremisation' authorities in Xinjiang has taken drastic measures to eradicate Uyghur culture. In contrast to the Mao era, the Uyghur and other minorities in today's China have not only lost hope for alternative arrangement within the Chinese political system but also faith on the present leadership.

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<sup>4</sup>Wang Meng's son and daughter-in-law came across the manuscript while they were cleaning their old residence after the death of his first love and lifelong companion Cui Ruifang in 2012 (Zhang 2013).

<sup>5</sup> There was an upsurge of interest in the history of Chinese state socialism and local experiences of collectivization movements in the reform period, but such study has hardly been conducted in the context of Xinjiang, especially with reference to its minority population. Ildikó Bellér-Hann somehow filled the gap by publishing a chapter on Uyghur peasants' memory of collectivization in southern Xinjiang. This study is based on the data gathered during her fieldwork in 1996. She deliberately withheld publication of the some of her findings for fear that such a publication could have severe consequences for her interlocutors. Another difficulty she faced during the fieldwork was that the people had deep rooted suspicion about the motive the researchers (Bellér-Hann 2016: 15-16).

## Background of the novel

Traditionally, the vast land beyond the border posts of Jiayu Guan, Yumen Guan and Yang Guan in the western extremities of Gansu corridor was considered to be outside the realm of Chinese civilization. The geographically harsh terrain of Xinjiang was seen as an uncivilized world of wilderness. This image of Xinjiang began to fade as people from China proper started travelling to the region since the Qing conquest in 1750s. Various forms of literature, anecdotal texts and historical works on this Turkic Muslim dominated region played a significant role in the discourse of inalienability of Xinjiang from China. The age old image of a harsh and difficult terrain however lingered throughout the republican period. Along with physical remoteness, psychologically the region remained outside the immediate concern of many Chinese because of *de facto* independent administration in the region under three Han warlords between 1911 and 1944. The Communist Party was more successful than the nationalist party in terms of establishing political control over Xinjiang and penetrating into the life of Uyghur and other national minorities in the region.

In 1937, the Chinese Communists, on the invitation of the last warlord in the region, Sheng Shicai first entered Xinjiang and tried to establish their political base. CPC's attempt at establishing its base in Xinjiang suffered serious setback in 1942 when Sheng adopted an anti-Soviet and anti-Communist policy. During this time several CPC members were arrested and some of the leading cadres including Mao Zemin, younger brother of Mao Zedong, were executed in prison. It was only after the Communist victory in the rest of the country that the Party got hold of the political power in the region.

In the early stages of bonhomie between the CPC and the Sheng administration, one of China's renowned authors of modern period, Mao Dun stayed in Urumqi for a brief period of time and taught at Xinjiang College. The author lived in a protected environment in the city which already had dietary and recreational facilities favourable to the taste of Han Chinese (Mao 2006: 13-14). In Mao's China, a host of intellectuals and creative personalities were branded as rightist and their contribution in various fields of knowledge and creative works were denied, since the anti-rightist movement spread across China in 1957. Many writers and artists were banished to remote areas including minority regions. Besides the author of *Landscape*, the greatest poet of modern Chinese literature, Ai Qing also took refuge to Xinjiang around the same time.

Living in the minority areas was a blessing in disguise for many Han intellectuals as they recuperated from the political hostility in their place of origin. The new region helped to keep their creative energy intact. Ai Qing and his family lived a

relaxed life in a *bingtuan*<sup>6</sup> farm in Shihezi city until the high tide of Cultural Revolution swept Xinjiang. The poet and his family were forced to leave Shihezi and to go through extreme hardship in a farmland at the fringes of the desert after being attacked by the Red Guards in 1967. The physical torture and mental agony during this time permanently damaged health of the elderly poet (Cai 2005). Wang Meng's life in Xinjiang, on the contrary was more peaceful even during the Cultural Revolution.

In 1963, Wang Meng chose self-exile in Xinjiang to escape a dull campus life in Beijing Normal Institute, where he was teaching after partial lifting of restrictions on him as “big rightist” in 1958<sup>7</sup>. It was easier for him to take the decision to go to remote Xinjiang because his wife as always accepted the difficult choice he made<sup>8</sup> (Chen and Hu 1984: 20; Wang 2006: 218-22). The Xinjiang writer's association arranged his “training in physical labour” (*laodong duanlian*) at Bayandai<sup>9</sup> Red Flag People's Commune in Yining County of Yili prefecture in 1965. Wang Meng lived a peasant's life in this Uyghur dominated commune. While living among villagers in Yili he began to learn Uyghur language and communicate with the locals in their language (Chen and Hu 1984: 16, 18-22). He also developed an interest in history, literature, culture and art of the minorities of the region. He witnessed the revolutionary campaigns and socialist construction in the Muslim dominated rural areas in China's western borderland.

Wang Meng embraced socialist ideology as a young Bolshevik at the age of fourteen and retained deep faith in the revolution despite years' of hardship during the radical politics under Mao Zedong. He earnestly followed Mao's dictum to the intellectuals for ideological and emotional transformation through physical labour and learn life lessons from the toiling masses. Since he began to live as a farmhand in Bayandai, the author sought enrichment of soul and sublimation of spirit through physical hardship (China News Service website 2014, 25 February). In spite of suffering vengeance of radical politics, he neither lost his ideals nor abandoned loyalty to the party, and in fact learnt to cherish the time spent in the remote province.

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<sup>6</sup>Xinjiang Production and Construction Corp (*Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan*, XPCC or *bingtuan* in short) is a militia cum production organization. It was set up in the early 1950s to accommodate large labour force comprised of retrenched PLA men, former soldiers of Xinjiang garrisons under the GMD rule and unorganized Han migrants.

<sup>7</sup>In the very early phase his literary career he created ripples in communist establishment in the People's Republic of China after the publication of his novel *The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department* (*Zuzhibu xin lai de qingnianren*) and he was later labelled as rightist during the Anti-Rightist Movement.

<sup>8</sup>Wang Meng dedicated the book in memory of Cui Ruifang. She was all along with the author during the time of writing the book and persistently encouraged him to complete this work.

<sup>9</sup>In order to enliven the tangible value of Wang Meng's experience of living in Bayandai, the administration has transformed the local culture and ethnic custom into a cultural product of the region. Bayandai has long been projected as a site of ethnic unity and tourist destination. In 2015, under the auspices of propaganda departments and Yining city administration and regional office of China News Agency, Beijing Nanhai Film Company made a film on Wang Meng's life in Bayandai (Lu 2017: 141).

The remoteness and obscurity of Bayandai Red Flag People's Commune saved him from being a target during the Cultural Revolution. The villagers, aware of his tainted political designation as a "big rightist" treated him like a family member and made every effort to protect him.

In the beginning he got accommodation in a four-by-four meter store room in the house of Abudurehman Nur, an elderly commune member and his wife Heliqimu<sup>10</sup> (Wang 2006: 241). In his auto-biography, Wang Meng narrated a beautiful incident. In the beginning of his stay in this house, a pair of sparrows made a nest in his room. Over a few months a number of young chicks were born. Wang Meng gained trust of the villagers after this incident because people believed that sparrows could identify a good man.

The people in the commune felt deep affection for the young author, who was hardworking, ready to share their joy and sorrow as his own, curious to learn their language and determined to take root (*lizhi zhagen*) in the minority village (Wang 2006: 241-2). Despite worries about his wife and two young sons and pain at being deprived of creative work, he showed keen interest in the life of mostly uneducated or half-educated villagers.

It was a great experience for Wang Meng to see things from the perspective of rural masses in the minority region. In his autobiography, he describes his feelings while working with a team repairing highway near the commune, where he often witnessed long distance buses with passengers travelling between Urumqi and Yili. From the appearance it was clear that passengers were mostly cadres and people from cities. This is a very common experience for any educated urban residence travelling by bus or train to see villagers of all ages ignorantly and curiously looking at them. For Wang Meng, this role reversal (*jiaose diaohuan*) was an amazing experience. He felt like passing through a wonderland (*manyougan*) and was not in a mood to miss the opportunity of enjoying the abundance of life and cherishing every ordinary but critical time of those days (Wang 2006: 246). Wang Meng's creative urge was nourished in course of reversal of roles at different stages of his life.

He was practically an abandoned child after separation of his parents followed by the death of his father. In the formative years during his teens he grew up as a 'young Bolshevik' under the guidance of loving and open-minded party cadres. It was at this time that he embraced the party as his family. In his early youth, he was orphaned again after he was labelled as 'anti-party and anti-socialist rightist element'. Along with hardship, youthful enthusiasm, experience of colourful life, fresh knowledge, and insight and creative aspiration drawn from culture and custom of various nationalities, Wang Meng found parental love from a Uyghur

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<sup>10</sup>Her name is mentioned as Heliqianmu (赫里倩姆) and Heliqihan (赫里其汗) in two different places in Wang Meng's writing.

elderly couple in a far-flung village of Bayandai (Lü 1999: 98). The author referred to Abudureheman and his wife as *laodie* and *laomama* or *apa* (mother in Uyghur language) in his writings. Wang Meng never forgot the affection of these elderly Uyghur couple and treated them as his own parents. He felt miserable for not being able to see Heliqimu when she died in 1979. After two years of her death, Wang Meng specially visited Bayandai to pay homage to her and meet Abudureheman (Wang 2006a: 23-4).

In sweet turns of life Wang Meng ended up playing several roles including deputy head of production brigade in Bayandai commune. It is not difficult to presume that the fictional Patriotic Production Brigade of Leap Forward Commune in *Landscape* and the characters in the novel were taken from the people he met and interacted with at the commune. Wang Meng's attachment with Xinjiang and ordinary Uyghur people in general and residence of Bayandai in particular are so deep that he revisited the region several times. He regarded Bayandai as his second birthplace (*di 'er ge guxiang*).

### Storyline

In May 1962, Yilihamu, the central character of *Landscape* returned to his village to join his production team after gaining experience as an industrial labour in a machine tool factory in Urumqi for three years. He was a thirty year-old party member and peasant of No. 7 production team of PPB. He sensed something amiss as the normally bustling Yining city depot was unusually quiet, as he alighted from a long distance passenger bus. Before he realised that people were tense and suspicious because of open anti-China activities in the prefecture by the Soviet Consulate and Soviet Overseas Association, he heard a sad and shrill howling of a woman passenger who just returned from a border town of Huocheng county where she lost her six years old son while jostling to board a bus plying to the Soviet side. Yilihamu recognised the woman in grief. She was Wu'erhan, a resident of his village and wife of the storekeeper of No. 7 production team.

The storekeeper, Yisamudong, was son of an upper-middle peasant<sup>11</sup>, not a progressive section of Chinese society in class hierarchy of that time. He was considered to be useful member of the commune for his education and assigned in the village cooperative for keeping records, and eventually he was appointed as storekeeper of the production team. As his social standing improved in the commune, he hankered for acceptance of Kutukuzha'er, the party secretary of the PPB and some of his accomplices who exploited his venal nature, weakness for pleasure and status. A few days before Yilihamu came back to his village, a huge amount of wheat was stolen from the store and the storekeeper fled the village,

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<sup>11</sup> Land lords, rich peasants, counter revolutionaries and bad elements were categorized as *si lei fenzi* or *hei si lei* (four sinister elements) at the time of land reform in early 1950s. Anti-socialist rightist elements were also included in this category following the Anti-rightist Movement in 1957.

presumably crossed over to the Soviet side. Kutukuzha'er declared the storekeeper and his wife as the culprit behind the theft, treachery and treason.

It was during the "four clean-ups" movement that Kutukuzha'er was exposed and his direct involvement in the theft was proved when Yisamudong came back to the commune in search of his wife and son after three years. He lived in disguise with a production team of a commune situated on the bank of Lop Nor Lake in Qiemo County<sup>12</sup>, located in the remote corner of south Xinjiang. He confessed his crime in front of a *siqing* team that was inspecting the commune. On the basis his confession it was clear how he was roped into the sinister design of Kutukuzha'er who assisted the Soviet agents to hoard grain and other provisions needed for smooth transit of greater number of ordinary Uyghur and Kazakh people to the Soviet side.

### Characterisation and Narratives

Ili was famous for its scenic beauty, moderate weather and abundance of resources. The story opened with a long-winding discussion about its natural endowment by a chatty fellow passenger of Yilihamu on the way back from Urumqi. In contrast to friendly geographical terrine and natural beauty, life of Ili often devastated by deadly storm but unity among various nationalities triumphed after every natural and man-made calamity. The author nicely used this literary allusion to narrate harmony between natural and the human world, between the treasured land of *zuguo* and its people, as well as between the struggling masses against sinister elements, imperialist forces, and Soviet revisionists. The author also produced various sorts of personal narratives that consciously challenge stereotype images of exotic borderland, backward minority people and cultural inferiority.

The *Landscape* celebrates the beauty, glory, ideological purity and unswerving faith on socialism, strength, and national unity of the *zuguo* under the gifted leadership of Mao Zedong. Yilihamu reflected upon the painful struggle of the people of his native place in the face of external and internal enemies at different historical phases. In 1962, it was even more shocking for the people of Ili because the enemy was no other than China's old and trusted nation, the great Soviet Union, and the struggle was not only for defending the motherland but also for forging ahead courageously with the banner of Leninism.

The enemies within the PPB, comprised of former landlords, gentries and their progeny, village cadres (*cungan*) like Kutukuzha'er, nationalist and separatist forces driven by the aspiration of establishing Islamic state as well as opportunists like Maisumu, a former county level cadre. These people were small in number but shamelessly obdurate in pursuing their ominous activities against socialist China.

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<sup>12</sup>Distance between Yining (Gulja) and Qiemo (Qarqan) is more than 1200 km (approximate).

The author depicted these villainous characters with classic touch, but neither demonized them nor exaggerated their capacity of destroying China.

The author re-contextualised standard official communist historiographic discourse of China's claim of sovereignty on Xinjiang, collective narrative of patriotism among national minorities, unity and amicable inter-ethnic relations in the multi-ethnic society under socialism, and Mao, the saviour of all ethnic groups of China. These narratives play complementary role in depicting a beautiful landscape in the Chinese side of the border (*zhebian*). The strength of *zuguo* is primarily the strength of an integrated moral community comprising of the party dedicated to the cause of socialism and unified Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*) of all nationalities.

Yisamudong's story testifies Mao era political narrative of socialist and patriotic morality of the broad masses in Xinjiang. He was projected as a man who did not lose faith on the greatness of socialist motherland and kindness of the party leadership even in the face of danger of his personal and family life. He was misled and encouraged by his associates to go to the Soviet side to meet his wife and son who would be waiting for him. While standing in the queue at the border post for his turn, he observed the crude and inhuman way immigrants were being sterilised as they entered the Soviet side. He saw green field on this side and barren land on the other. At that moment he realised how difficult it was to leave his ancestral land (*zuguo*), native village, friends and relatives, his past, the five starred red flag and the tune of *Dongfanghong*<sup>13</sup>. He turned his back and left in search of a safe place. When he came back to Ili after three years, the reader would see a completely reformed man in him, an embodiment of socialist patriotism.

The grand narrative in the text extolled Mao Zedong, the perfect hero and saviour of Chinese people of all nationalities. The general narrative of Chinese revolution asserted that nothing else could have been possible without the party and its gifted leader. *Landscape* exalts the faith that the Uyghur and other nationalities could live a better and peaceful life because of the liberation of Xinjiang, revolutionary campaigns and socialist reconstructions under Mao. Here reality, ideology, and propaganda are coalesced together in the narrative.

The story of Ku'erbantulumu, a poor old Uyghur peasant from Khotan, who, claimed to have travelled a number of times to Beijing on donkey to meet Mao Zedong, was employed in order to build the image of Mao as the great helmsman whose guiding hand was always with the people. In the 1960s, this story was popular among the minorities of Xinjiang and a photograph of Mao shaking hands with Ku'erbantulumu was considered to be a prized possession to minority cadres in Xinjiang. When Yilihamu displayed a framed newspaper picture of this photograph that he brought from Urumqi to his neighbours everyone stood up in

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<sup>13</sup>*Dongfanghong* (the East is red) was the most popular song of 1960s attributed to Mao Zedong.

reverence. It was considered to be a great achievement of Ku'erbantulumu that he was able to meet Mao. The great leader tightly holding hands of the Uyghur peasant was seen as his concern for the community. Yilihamu talked about the greatness of Mao Zedong who shouldered responsibility of international proletariat revolution after Marx and Lenin. Yilihamu's maternal grandmother, who took care of him since his parents died of torture and exploitation by the local landlord before liberation, was also affected by Mao fever. In her death bed she wanted to see the photograph for the last time and she passed away with the hope that one day her grandson would meet the great saviour.

The narrator chose Wu'erhan to suffer for the crime of other people including her husband. The old members of commune including Yilihamu however remembered her during the maiden days when she was the most graceful performer of the local cultural troop that was engaged in inculcating patriotic feelings among the masses in the entire locality. She developed ardent love for *zuguo* and faith in the leadership of Mao Zedong as she learnt singing, dancing and acting under a female comrade of land reform work team and actor of art troupe of the army during the Korean War.

Wu'erhan vehemently pursued Yisamudong not to indulge the thought of leaving China and in name of Mao she admonished her husband for his corrupt practices. Though she was misled by the associates of her husband to go to the Soviet side in search of her husband, she suffered from pangs of guilt and agony at being trapped by others to leave the motherland. She realised that she and her husband were deceived but in her heart, she knew that she had betrayed her socialist motherland and was unworthy of the grace of the beloved leader.

The revolutionary narrative of the Mao era did not have place for opposition or rejection. Faith, more precisely, blind faith in Mao's leadership was the only tolerable expression. Yilihamu was completely guided by the faith in Chinese revolution, socialist ideals of the party, generosity of Han cadres and the great helmsman. Wang Meng in his autobiography tells us that the first generation youth of the PRC were inclined to 'believe in beauty, ideals, principles, ethnic unity, and solidarity among fellow human being. They used to have faith in work, official documents, meetings, editorial in the official daily, and leadership. They even more trusted people, had faith on youthfulness, faint smile, spring and flowers, and always honoured red flag and military bugles. They never doubted Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong and even the Spanish Communist Party leader Dolores Ibárruri. They had strong desire to build a new life, and they believed in history, historical changes and progress...' Wang Meng admits that the mistake of his generation was that they were ready to believe and never suspected anything (Wang 2006: 246). Wang Meng of Bayandai and Yilihamu of Leap Forward Commune - creator and creation were destined to be believer of the same faith - socialism of the CPC and its leader Mao.



The author recalled his own experience in physical labour in Ili while describing the mental agony of Yilihamu for three years since he came back to his village especially during the early phase of *siqing* movement. This Uyghur village cadre had to confront with contradictions among the people, contradictions between ourselves and the enemy, and subversive elements active inside Xinjiang as well as across the border. While writing about the tastes and trials that his hero had gone through, the narrator remembered Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin of the Soviet Union and paid tribute to persons like them.

The narrative of naive faith and spirit of suffering would remain incomplete without the story of Lixiti, head of the PPB. Though he and Kutukuzha'er came from the same class background and generation, they belonged to two different worlds. In terms of attitude towards fellow members of the commune, work ethics, ideological integrity, devotion to the motherland, and loyalty to the party and its leadership, Lixiti's only contender was his protégé Yilihamu. His enthusiasm however surpassed that of the former in participating in class struggles and carrying out revolutionary campaigns (*gao yundong*).

Due to economic crisis following the GLF, politics was forced to take a back seat for a few years. According to Mao Zedong, absence of political campaigns during this period gave opportunity to 'forces of evil' (*niugui-sheshen*) to enter into the Party ranks at the village level and in 1964 he issued fresh order for class struggle. Lixiti was anxiously waiting for the day to fight against corruption and malpractices that was going on in PPB under Kutukuzha'er's leadership since 1962. He welcomed '*siqing*' movement not realising that the emotionally charged populist movement could be misappropriated by Kutukuzha'er and his accomplices to tarnish the image of Yilihamu in front of *siqing* team and try to punish him for challenging their activities. Wang Meng recorded the story to justify the sufferings of those who remained loyal to their faith and not for empty sentimentalism.

Kutukuzha'er consolidated his position when *siqing* movement began in the PPB under leadership of Zhang Yang whose stereotypical attitude towards minorities was shaped by the writings of some Han authors who depicted all ethnic minorities as ignorant and childish. For Zhang, Yilihamu's righteous and straight forward attitude, dedication to work and sharp-wittedness were entirely uncalled for in a rural minority cadre in the remote borderland. He disliked Yilihamu from the beginning and summoned him to appear in a session of "surprise attacks" (*xiaotuji*) for exposing his so-called crime of hurting the interests of poor and helpless members of his production team and disrupting activities of *siqing* work team. The author showed how Zhang Yang's skewed view of class struggle was exposed in course of the movement and in this context he carefully sketched Yin Zhongxin, the head of *siqing* team, a man with rational mind.

Alongside these dominant narratives, Wang Meng made conscious effort to depict powerful local narratives that enriched *Landscape* to be an unique literary creation

as well as a potential chronicle of socio-political history of Xinjiang during the Mao era, a the least known phase of regional history. For example, the episode on Lao Wang was the reflection of the ground reality of how rumours sowed the germs of suspicions, mistrust and fear in the age of revolutionary integration of Xinjiang. Lao Wang's family lived in Xinjiang for a few generations and he was brought up amidst Uyghur culture. Lixiti knew him when both worked for the same landlord. They fought side by side during the time of liberation and land reform. The narrator quoted from Omar Khayam to describe Lao Wang's feelings for the fellow Uyghurs. There were wide spread rumour about possible Uyghur assault on the Han population in Ili during the crisis in 1962. Lao Wang became scared of possible physical attacks on him and his family after the theft in the PPB, but he was also afraid that his sentiment might hurt his Uyghur neighbours. His plan of quietly leaving the Uyghur dominated commune reveals how cracks began to grow between the two dominant communities before the foundation of ethnic unity was laid properly at the grassroots.

Initial perception of centre's policy and behaviour towards the region and its indigenous population, and the Han community began to change when population influx from other provinces increased during the famine following the GLF disaster. A large majority of the new entrants were drifters who were misinformed about the minority Muslim population, their culture and religious customs. The religious sentiments of the Uyghur members of the commune was hurt when Bao Tinggui started raising pig and set them free to go all over the village and drink from water bodies for the common use. In order to curry favour from the Han, Kutukuzha'er supported such wanton anti-religious practices at the cost of sentiments of devout Muslims. Rumour of arrest of Taiwaiku, the coachman of No. 7 production team in charge of killing Bao Tinggui's piglet that entered his courtyard was spread in order to instigate people to protest against the authority and Han members.

Taiwaiku was undoubtedly the most complex personage in the novel. He grew up on his own as an orphan and in his youth he was deprived of love from his wife, another orphan, forcefully married to him by her foster parents. He was uneducated but intelligent and contemplative, unhappy youthful loaner but honest and dutiful, short tempered but respectful and generous, observant but not uncritical, as well as helpful and steadfast in friendship. The author painstakingly described the psychological make-up of Taiwaiku and attributed him with the qualities referred to as manliness (*nanren qigai*) in Uyghur language. He had natural ability of asking piercing questions and conveying deeper meaning through figurative language. He intended to verify situations regarding the influx of Han by asking some direct and uncomfortable questions to Yilihamu. He was concerned about unrestrained entry of Han people with questionable background but refused to believe the rumour that some of the new entrants had cannibalistic (*chiren de*) instinct.

Taiwaiku indirectly helped to carry the stolen grain from the commune by lending his horse-driven cart to a newly acquainted person whom he considered a friend. He had a strong conviction that a person like him who spent a bitter childhood as an orphan and nursed deep hatred for the old society would not be suspected by the masses as well as the party leaders. But life taught him valuable lessons as he experienced cruelty of some ordinary members of the commune and duplicity of a section of party cadres. He was accused of intentionally killing Bao Tinggui's piglet and some people instigated interethnic tension by spreading the news about his arrest in charge of the alleged crime. He was even suspected for beating his estranged wife. When he willingly divorced his wife in order to make it easier for her to marry her long time fiancé, he was ridiculed for his alleged impotency. Taiwaiku also became object of mockery and dereliction when everyone came to know that he proposed a lady doctor from the same village by writing a letter in direct and unsophisticated language. Zhang Yang, Kutukuzha'er and likeminded people tried to vitiate his mind against Yilihamu. It was not political awareness (*zhengzhijuewu*) but his faith on the fellow members of the commune, the party and its leadership that stopped Taiwaiku from accusing Yilihamu in the public meeting. It was his innate goodness that helped him at the verge of complete alienation.

The author also observed qualities of inner goodness in the elderly religious personnel and people with "old" mind set<sup>14</sup> in PPB. They believed the promise made by Mao Zedong and contributed in the socialist reconstruction while pursuing their religious life and social norms according to Islamic values. It was not these people but the party secretary of PPB, Kutukuzha'er who indulged the thought that eventually the Communist rule in Xinjiang would be replaced by some other political regime, most probably he dreamt of an Islamic state.

In the last few pages of the novel, the narrator informed what happened later in the life of main protagonists. This however does not give any clue how they handled political upheavals during the Cultural Revolution and rapid economic transformation in the age of socialist market economy in the reform decades since late 1970s. The only exception was narrator's comment on Zhang Yang, which is evidently a latest addition. This Han cadre of *siqing* work team, who was also a believer of some sort, remained confused throughout the Cultural Revolution, during the reform and opening up and the period of market economy. In 2012, on the verge of death he tried to convey what he realised at long last in a feeble voice. One of his grandchildren tried to record grandpa's last words in iPad3. Characterization of Zhang Yang reminds of humour<sup>15</sup> in Wang Meng's writings, an important aspect of his literary genius for which he is indebted to the Uyghur

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<sup>14</sup> The "four olds" (*sijiu*) indicating old ideas, old cultures, old customs and old habits were considered to be detrimental to the progress of socialism during the Mao era.

<sup>15</sup> Wang Meng often quotes a pithy Uyghur expression which means 'other than death, everything in life is fun (*tamasha* تاماشا)'.

people. The author also shared a few pages from Yin Zhongxin's diary which ends with a vital question - what exactly did we offer to the rural population?

The figurative death of Zhang Yang illustrated heartfelt wish of the people who experienced excesses of radical politics under Mao's leadership. This is also a reminder that the mass line approach to fight against corruption, crime and separatism by the present leadership can further complicate relations among various nationalities and marginalised sections of the Chinese society.

## Conclusion

Wang Meng's faith neither led him to the path of revolutionary realism akin to revolutionary romanticism nor shroud his vision to critically assess social reality, not even disillusioned him after living sixteen stormy years in the remotest part of the country. He did not take the path of complete rejection of the system well-trodden by some Chinese dissidents but remained a critique of it from within<sup>16</sup>. Wang is a 'cautiously optimistic rationalist' (Lin and Galikowski 1999: 85) and his faith is not laid on weak foundation. Over two decades of China's struggle against 'three evil forces' and exaggeration of terrorist threats in Xinjiang did not shake his faith on the Uyghur people which has been reflected in his book *How are you, Xinjiang* (Ni hao, Xinjiang) published in 2011. He acknowledges the danger of terrorism and genuine fear of the ordinary citizens, but condemns the practice of labelling entire Uyghur community as terrorist and creating panic about their religion (Wang 2016).

In the core of his heart he knows something went wrong in the process of Chinese modernization. All these years so many times he confronted with touching moments at the time of meeting with his friends, acquaintances and strangers belonging to various nationalities during his several visits to Xinjiang. In the year of Urumqi riot, he visited Bayandai village along with a team of writers for collecting

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<sup>16</sup>In the preface of *Zhongguo tianji* (God knows China) Wang Meng reveals his conviction of his role as a creative author in the following language: 'I am the earnest pursuer, anchor, participant, experiencer, beneficiary, victim, chronicler, truth seeker and witness of Chinese history, revolution, and creation of People's Republic of China and its evolution. I love to reflect, muse and deliberate upon Chinese politics. It is my duty to speak out the truth. I just cannot believe thoughtless and malign commentaries but to give away some secrets'(China News Service website2012). In a series of articles titled 'What secrets did Wang Meng reveal (*Wang Meng xielu le na xie tianji*)', Hu Ping, a Chinese dissident living in the USA criticised Wang for what he did not reveal in the book and questioned his sincerity for not mentioning the 1989 protests (Hu 2013). Hu just looks at the compromises Wang Meng made between his political believes and his chosen role as a creative thinker and professional writer. It is unfair to condemn an author like Wang Meng who was entangled in disputes with the political authority both in the Mao era as well as in the reform period for his writings. *The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department* destroyed his career as young author and he was barred from writing after being labelled as rightist in 1958. He was again accused of hinting futility of reform process without making efforts for fundamental change in his short story 'Hard Porridge' (Jianying de xizhou) (Lin and Galikowski 1999: 71-3). It needs to be remembered that directly attacking and exposing the party leadership might be an act of political dissent but not a suitable option for a person like Wang Meng.

local cultural materials. When they saw Wang Meng, old villagers came up to him and embraced. Some of them cried bitterly, some burst into tears (Xin 2015). It was possibly these moments when he thought of revisiting fictional Patriotic Production Brigade where Han cadres like woman technician Yang Hui, head of Leap Forward Commune Zhao Zhiheng, and Lao Wang lived, toiled and enjoyed life together with the Uyghur masses.

The village that provided shelter to the author and the villagers who protected him for many turbulent years are now under the gaze of surveillance. As a response to numerous violent incidents led by certain Uyghur factions between 2013 and 2014, the central authority sent 200,000 officials to various parts of Xinjiang to improve relations in the field. Twelve officials also came to Bayandai. Their task was to visit individual households, build unity, ensure material benefits and win the heart of the ethnic population. They were also assigned the responsibility of taking interviews, gather intelligence about economic status and attitude towards Islam, and create a vast community surveillance network. The villagers belonging to both Han and non-Han communities have mixed impressions of these outsiders. Many of them suspect if presence of these officials would cause more harm than heal the wounds in the society (Phillips 2014).

In this political atmosphere, Wang Meng's narrative in *Landscape* challenges the stereotypical depiction of ethnic minorities, and in multiple ways disapproves the habit of demonizing anti-China forces in the region and exaggerating their power of harming China's sovereignty and national interest in the remote province. The novel emphasises possibilities of more amicable solution of inter-ethnic disputes in Xinjiang rather than creating atmosphere of mistrust in the name of maintaining national security and social order in the region since the 1990s. The underlying message of the novel is - social harmony, amicable relations among various ethnic groups and national unity in Xinjiang cannot be achieved without mutual trust between the majoritarian Party-State and the ordinary Muslim population of the region.

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## GLOSSARY

|                                |          |
|--------------------------------|----------|
| <i>Bayandai</i>                | 巴彦岱      |
| <i>bingtuan</i>                | 兵团       |
| <i>chiren de</i>               | 吃人的      |
| <i>cungan</i>                  | 村干       |
| <i>Dongfanghong</i>            | 东方红      |
| <i>heisi lei</i>               | 黑四类      |
| <i>Jiaosediaohuan</i>          | 角色调换     |
| <i>Jianding de xizhou</i>      | 《坚硬的稀粥》  |
| <i>laodongduanlian</i>         | 劳动锻炼     |
| <i>Lizhizhagen</i>             | 立志扎根     |
| <i>Manyougan</i>               | 漫游感      |
| <i>Mosuo</i>                   | 摸索       |
| <i>Nanrenqigai</i>             | 男人气概     |
| <i>Ni hao, Xinjiang</i>        | 《你好，新疆》  |
| <i>niugui-sheshen</i>          | 牛鬼蛇神     |
| <i>siju</i>                    | 四旧       |
| <i>si lei fenzi</i>            | 四类分子     |
| <i>Siqingyundong</i>           | 四清运动     |
| <i>Xiaotuji</i>                | 小突击      |
| <i>Xinjiang wenyi</i>          | 新疆文艺     |
| <i>Yilifengqing</i>            | 《伊犁风情》   |
| <i>Yuejingongsheaiguodadui</i> | 跃进公社爱国大队 |
| <i>ZaiYili</i>                 | 《在伊犁》    |
| <i>Zhebianfengjing</i>         | 《这边风景》   |
| <i>Zhongguotianji</i>          | 《中国天机》   |
| <i>Zhonghuaminzu</i>           | 中华民族     |

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