

## Her Uighur Parents Were Model Chinese Citizens. It Didn't Matter.

When Zulhumar Isaac's parents disappeared amid a wave of detentions of ethnic minorities, she had to play a perilous game with the state to get them back.

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Behind Zulhumar Isaac's grandmother's house, there was a large mulberry tree, so vast the branches covered the roof of the garage like a second ceiling. For a week each spring, the tree burst with dark, sweet mulberries, and Humar and her whole family gathered to pick them, the purple juices staining everyone's fingers for days. Clustered around her grandmother's outdoor oven, the matrons of the family made nan bread and other dishes traditional to their community, the Uighurs, a predominantly Muslim Turkic group that called an immense territory of deserts and oases home long before it became the northwestern part of China. Humar loved to watch the women knead and turn the dough, their hands and forearms covered in patterns of oil and flour.

Humar's grandmother lived in a farming town that had once been outside Hami city, but as the city stretched out, subsuming the countryside, town and city merged. Over her grandmother's lifetime, the Chinese state encouraged wave upon wave of migration of the ethnic Han majority to Xinjiang, which means "new frontier" in Mandarin, partly to dilute the Uighur presence while also cementing Communist Party rule in the natural-resource-rich region. By 1996, when Humar was 8, the proportion of Han in Xinjiang had risen to about 40 percent, up from 6.7 percent at the founding of the Communist Chinese state in 1949 — one of the largest demographic changes in China's modern era.

As a child, Humar was precocious and stubborn — "big headed," the clan collectively called her. At the time, most Uighurs attended school in their own Turkic language, with Mandarin taught as a foreign language. As family lore has it, Humar herself demanded to attend a Mandarin school, so she could watch more channels on TV. Her parents, perhaps thinking more about their daughters' future, endorsed the decision, enrolling Humar and her younger sister, Zumret. Before Humar's first day of class, her parents sat her down to explain that she would be one of only a few Uighur students in her school. She would have to be especially careful about what she ate: There would be pork, which they, as mostly secular Muslims but Muslims nonetheless, could not eat. "Watch out," her parents cautioned. "Pay attention to everything you put in your mouth." Humar and Zumret would be the first in their extended family to attempt this integration, and their parents the first to navigate what it meant for their traditions.

Despite the influx of Han settlers to Xinjiang, the two communities remained mostly apart, keeping to their own neighborhoods and social circles. The Communist Party had made superficial overtures toward Uighur inclusion — not only to prove the party's benevolence but also to project a picture of a unified country. Before coming to power, Mao Zedong promised minorities self-determination, but that would exist in name only.

The Uighurs' territory was officially called the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, but in reality, the Uighurs existed in a parallel system over which the Han maintained control in both official and unofficial ways. The Xinjiang chairman, the nominal head of the region, was always a Uighur, but the

real power rested with the regional party secretary, who for decades was always Han. The party at times allowed ethnic minorities some outward expression of cultural distinctions, but territorial integrity and party supremacy were the red line. In Xinjiang, the state privileged Han for employment, loans and contracts, causing Uighur resentment to simmer, sporadically erupting into larger protests for ethnic rights. Some privately called for independence and the establishment of an East Turkestan Republic, which existed briefly in the early 20th century, suggesting they could do more for their own community than the Han had ever done. Tensions were rarely far from the surface, and violent suppression of intermittent ethnic activism was the norm. But Humar's mother, Zohre Talip, was a member of the Communist Party, and in their stridently loyal family, the topic of Uighur independence never came up.

Zohre and Humar's father, Isaq Peyzul, worked at the Hami city newspaper. When Zohre took her daughter to the office, Humar watched Uighur staff carefully typeset the Uighur alphabet, a modified Arabic script, to produce the Uighur edition, which carried mostly translations of articles written by Han journalists. It was the mid-1990s, and while the Han edition's office had computers, the Uighurs still used a printing press. Zohre corrected the proofs by hand with a red pencil. At the time, Humar didn't quite grasp the inequality represented by the clanky, nifty machine.

When they were young, Humar and Zumret were bullied constantly, in all the small ways that stay with children long into adulthood. Humar was followed home by one of her classmates, who shouted, using her full name, "Zulhumar eats pork every day!" until she burst into tears. Another day, Zumret, four years younger, came home from school crying; a group of students had refused to let her play with them, forming a circle around her as one girl taunted: "My dad said not to play with Uighur kids, because they all have scarlet fever. And when they grow up, it turns into leukemia, and they die! If we play with them, they will infect us, and we'll die!" Both girls asked on different occasions to be transferred to Uighur schools, but Zohre and Isaq forbade it. Their daughters would have to adapt to life's injustices, however large or small. The sisters' journey would mark a generational shift in the community and in their family, with all the new discomfort and confusion that went with it.

**Zohre had a plan** for her daughters. She gave them both names with the same first letter as her own name — not exactly in honor of herself, but to mark the three of them as a unit. They would be bound together as strong women in a society in which their options were limited, first by their minority status and second by the patriarchal nature of their own community. Zohre had charted an improbable course from a rural Uighur primary school in the Tian Shan mountains to college in Lanzhou, in Gansu province, where she studied journalism. It was unusual in general for a Uighur to leave Xinjiang for university, but for the eldest daughter of a shepherd, with six siblings, it was even more so.

When Zohre's own daughters were small, they would pal around with her in the family's two-bedroom apartment, laughing and hugging. She helped them with their homework, and when the Mandarin became too advanced, she solicited their Han neighbors for assistance. Zohre, who had been promoted to editor in chief of the Uighur newspaper, brought her work home and spent nights leafing through papers. Humar, too, studied late. She told her mother everything, and Zohre always found time to listen. After Humar read "Triple Door," a popular satirical novel about a Chinese high school student toiling through the rote education system, she announced she didn't want to go to college. Zohre patiently reasoned with her. She always treated her as an equal.

And in the end, Zohre was right. By middle school, the bullying mostly stopped. Humar was at the very top of her class, and in China, having excellent grades was one way to earn the respect of your classmates. Zumret had grown up to be beautiful, one of the girls in school who was cool by virtue of

looks and a cultivated haughty attitude. Her own marks weren't terrible either, just not good enough for her parents, who were used to her sister's gifts. Like many siblings raised in the shadows of prodigies, Zumret thought it would just be easier if she stopped trying, or at least stopped looking as if she were.



*Zumret Isaac, Humar's younger sister, in her bedroom in Philadelphia. Credit...Danna Singer for The New York Times*

Large riots in the name of greater autonomy and religious freedom rocked Xinjiang in the 1990s, and the government responded with brute military force. After Sept. 11, the Chinese government purposely conflated Uighur-rights activists with jihadists, lobbying the Bush administration to designate the little-known East Turkestan Islamic Movement as a terrorist organization, laying the foundation for the state narrative that Uighurs were Muslim extremists. The United States agreed, possibly in exchange for China's support of the war in Afghanistan. Later, it would be questioned whether the group existed at all.

After the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the party decided that inculcating children with nationalism and focusing on foreign enemies would make students less likely to rebel against the state. By the time Humar entered high school in 2004, the party's patriotic indoctrination had kicked into high gear. She and her classmates were taught that they were the heirs to the Middle Kingdom — a 5,000-year-old civilization responsible for the invention of gunpowder, paper, printing and the compass. Though party propaganda took care to assert that the country's 56 ethnicities lived together in happy unity, it was also understood that this great nation was Han. Students learned about the Century of National Humiliation that followed China's defeat in the Opium Wars and lasted through Japan's occupation in the 1930s and '40s. Humar watched her Han classmates absorb the dictates while she herself sat on the sidelines. This Han-centric nationalist vision had little to do with her as a Uighur.

At home at night, Humar also grew alienated from her own community. She was frustrated with aspects of her own culture. Men were always served first at meals, and girls were told to walk behind even young boys. Then there was the domestic abuse and alcoholism, which afflicted Isaq too. At the time, the family argued nightly about what to watch on TV. Uighur variety shows were popular with her parents' generation, but as a teenager, Humar found them slow and boring, the dancing women somehow symbols of oppression — always subservient, mimicking picking grapes for men and dancing around them. It would be years before she appreciated that her culture was one forged under occupation, and began to admire the beauty of Uighur poetry, music and

literature. In many ways, she was on the outside of Han and Uighur cultures looking in. A teenager in opposition to both, she felt weirdly free, but often incredibly lonely.

The problem with Zohre's plan for her daughters, in the end, was that it worked too well. Both girls began speaking Mandarin better than they spoke Uighur. They had only Han peers, and so they had only Han friends. In middle school, Humar started developing crushes on boys in her class. Since they were all Han, she reasoned it would be more likely than not that her future husband would be Han. She spent hours imagining their wedding. Though the logic seemed obvious, interethnic marriage was a rarity and something her community disapproved of. When she brought it up with Zohre, there was no reasoning, no discussion of the kind Humar was accustomed to. "We won't allow it!" Zohre told her. "I would rather you die!" It was the first time Humar could remember her mother speaking to her that way.

Zohre began to watch Humar closely, forbidding her to spend time with Han boys. For her part, Humar became more secretive. She started lying to her mother, hiding her social life. It was confusing: She loved her mother deeply, the kind of love between mother and daughter that can drive one or the other to madness. Theirs was a dance without clear steps; neither knew who should lead, or how.

When Humar was admitted to Peking University as a journalism major in 2007, Zohre was thrilled. Her daughter was going to the best school in the country. Humar couldn't wait to leave for Beijing. By then, she was spending much of her time online. The Great Firewall had yet to be fully deployed, and the web was a place of message boards and idea exchange. Chinese netizens began to push for transparency, accountability and the rule of law. Influential microbloggers and journalists started investigating crimes and corruption. China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 and was preparing to host the 2008 Olympic Games. Many debated whether this might put the country on the path to democratic reform; optimists predicted the system's opening. State control of the economy had been relaxed, and political changes followed. Authority was devolved from central to local officials; civil society was allowed to develop. By the end of the decade, hundreds of millions would lift themselves out of poverty, but the transformation came with significant strains. Citizens started protesting local grievances — faulty products, pollution, lax safety standards.

Humar began to identify as liberal. To her that meant democracy, human rights and critical thinking. She started criticizing the Communist Party at family dinners, but Isaq told her to be quiet. "This government and this Communist Party have helped us a lot," he told her. "Everything we have, it's because the government allowed us to have it, so you can't criticize it." Humar rolled her eyes. She thought her parents were only saying that because they worked for state media. In the history books she had pored over, she read that in turbulent times, whenever a dynasty fell, another rose. There was a saying: *Luan shi chu yingxiong* — heroes rise out of chaos. In this new China, she thought, there would be opportunity for ordinary people to be heroes.

**Beijing, in 2007**, felt as if it was at the center of all the possible changes to come. A few Chinese publications with private funding were pushing boundaries. While some topics were eternal redlines — the military, religion, ethnic disputes and the inner machinations of the state — others were anyone's guess. In lectures, Humar was enthralled as she listened to Zhu Yu, an investigative reporter, explain the logistics of going undercover. Zhu had to get in and get out of towns before the local government found out she was there; officials could kill a story by attacking her, taking away her recordings and notes.

In the spring of 2009, Zohre was sent to attend a five-month party-cadre training seminar in the southern city of Guangzhou. Zohre, who was then director of the bureau of language and script as a

midlevel official, invited Humar to come. At the time, party corruption was so pervasive that the trip promised to be a luxurious affair, more than a week of decadent banquets and sightseeing. Hoping to reset their relationship, Humar agreed to join her.

The weather was hot and humid as they poked around markets and museums. Zohre went shopping for colorful dresses cut slightly shorter than her usual style, while Humar bought tiny shorts. Humar noticed Zohre was more relaxed away from Xinjiang, less concerned about her reputation. Sensing she was opening up, Humar decided to approach the marriage question again. “What kind of son-in-law are you expecting?”

“It would be best if you could find a Uighur,” Zohre told her. “A peaceful, nice boy who had some college education.”

“I am attending the best school. You’re not expecting someone from that level?”

“Well . . . if not, you can find someone foreign — maybe someone from America,” Zohre allowed. But she continued to insist that a Han match would be totally unacceptable.

While they were in Guangzhou, an anonymous internet post claimed that a group of six Uighur men had raped two Han women in Shaoguan, a city in the north of the same province, where a labor-transfer program was sending young Uighurs. A police investigation later found that the claim was unfounded, but the rumor sparked a violent brawl between Uighur and Han factory workers there that lasted for four hours. Men bashed each other with fire extinguishers, stones and steel rods from bed frames. Two Uighurs were fatally wounded and 120 were injured. Footage of the fight, showing Han workers beating bloodied Uighur bodies lying on the ground, went viral.

As a journalism student, Humar wanted to go see Shaoguan with her own eyes. Zohre helped her organize the trip. While Humar found nothing unusual poking around the town, she noticed that there were no halal restaurants for her to eat in. Humar figured the Uighur men must have felt unwelcome, forced to work long hours with nowhere to go in their off time. It revealed a new facet of the plight of her community, and to an aspiring investigative reporter, it was something.

The morning she returned to Guangzhou, Humar and her mother learned that there had been protests overnight in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. After seeing the videos of the factory violence, Uighur students staged a demonstration that turned into a riot. The Communist Party said the rioters were directed by an exiled Uighur activist in the United States, though no evidence was provided to support those claims. The government reported that 197 people, most of them Han, were killed by rampaging Uighurs, while Uighur activists maintained the death toll of Uighurs was far higher. Rumors of revenge killings spiraled.

Online, information was flowing rapidly but chaotically. As Humar scoured the web, Zohre sat on the bed at the hotel, confused and concerned. “It was already an issue for us minorities to get trust,” she said. “Now that this happened, they won’t trust us anymore.”

It was the first time Zohre spoke openly to her daughter about the difficulties Uighurs faced in the system. She told Humar they would both have to be careful; they could not express sadness, confusion or anger in front of her party colleagues. If they did, she would be categorized as having *minzu qingxu*, an emotional attachment to your ethnic group, a mark of political unreliability for a non-Han minority.

Humar had known about her mother's quandary but never really understood its depth. How many times had Zohre felt like a second-class citizen in front of the Han? How often was the only power her mother had the one she wielded over her daughters? The party often tested the loyalty of minority members. Communist cadres were not allowed to be religious. During Ramadan, Han officials took their Uighur colleagues out to lunch, and kept a list of those who abstained from eating. One Ramadan, Isaq was instructed to wear a red armband and carry an electric baton, with orders to monitor the mosque to check whether anyone was plotting anything.

For 10 months after the riots, the government largely shut down the internet in Xinjiang. Facebook and Twitter were blocked nationwide. The state raided Uighur neighborhoods in Urumqi, detaining men and disappearing them. In Hami, fear took over the streets. Residents stopped going outside after dark. Zumret heard rumors that mobs were gathering to kill anyone who walked by. She noticed new bulletproof vehicles and police officers with guns. Checkpoints and bag searches became common. Humar's best friend, who was Han, asked her if they were still allowed to be friends.

**After the Urumqi riots**, Humar decided the new security measures made a career as an investigative reporter impossible. It would be difficult for her to go undercover as Zhu had. Outside Xinjiang, as soon as Uighurs checked into a hotel, the police paid them a visit, checking their identification and asking questions. As she puzzled through what this meant for her future, she saw no famous Uighur journalists whom she could emulate.

In some ways, Humar knew she was lucky. Her features were "Han-passing"; people did not know she was Uighur until she told them, and many didn't believe her when she did. But as soon as she showed her ID, she would be relegated to Uighur status and all the bigotry that came with it. On long rides between Hami and Beijing, Humar encountered passengers who, thinking she was also Han, complained about how dirty and uncivilized Uighurs were.

The web remained her solace. She spent a lot of time on Douban, a site dedicated to discussion of books, movies and music. At an in-person dinner for frequent commenters, she met Wang Tonghe, a Han from Yuanshi, in Hebei Province. Tonghe was curious about her immediately. He had gone to university in Inner Mongolia, where he cultivated a passion for languages, majoring in English and minoring in French, studying Mongolian and Korean; he had even taught himself Na'vi — the language in "Avatar" — for fun. Tonghe was intrigued by Uighur culture; he'd read a bit of Uighur literature in translation and admired the music. Like many liberal Han, he did not know what to make of the reports on the Urumqi riots, and he wanted badly to ask Humar what had really gone on there, but sensed it was inappropriate.

A year after the dinner, they started dating. When Humar explained to Tonghe that she could not tell her parents about their relationship, it didn't bother him much. They were young, and any excuse for kicking adult questions down the line was welcome.

In her senior year, Humar started an internship at Tencent, an online messaging company that was branching out into curating news. She proved herself valuable enough to be offered a job upon graduation. Zohre told everyone — Tencent is one of the most famous companies in the country, and in 2017 would become the first Chinese tech firm to join companies like Apple and Facebook in being valued at over \$500 billion. China was clamping down on print outlets, but there was still some freedom online — though that space, too, was contracting in more subtle ways. In addition to blocking websites, government censors were increasingly using filters to block keywords. Some were always banned: "Tiananmen incident," "June 4" (the date of the Tiananmen Square massacre), "Dalai Lama" and "Taiwan independence." Other dictates changed daily, which set off cat-and-

mouse games involving coded terms or homonyms — “eye field” for freedom, “crotch central committee” for Communist Party Central Committee, “govern-rot” as a jab at corrupt government. The state deployed its own nationalist bloggers — nicknamed the “50-cent party,” because the job supposedly paid 50 cents per post — to steer conversations online and overwhelm the narrative.

In late 2012, Xi Jinping became the general secretary of the Communist Party. Average citizens were frustrated with the endemic corruption of party officials, and some welcomed his vision of tackling malfeasance. But Xi began amassing authority, flouting unspoken conventions on power sharing within the party. Humar watched as the nightly news from Xinhua, the country’s official news agency, which previously tended to feature multiple high-ranking figures — not just the premier but also the party chairman and others — now became about Xi alone. Xi continued reversing the political, social and economic openings of recent decades.

Humar, still a fervent believer in the power of free information, applied for a job at a website called Zhihu, similar to America’s Quora, where users curate questions and answers. At Zhihu, she found a niche in her Uighur identity, and she used it to act as a bridge between communities. After the riots, many Han were genuinely curious about Uighurs. Some had bought the government propaganda that Uighurs were villains, but on Zhihu, Humar could tell her personal story, explaining what it was like to be a Uighur in China, and many responded with sympathy. China had not blossomed into the country Humar had hoped it would become, but she reasoned that if she could change one person’s mind about Uighurs, that would be something.

To her, the truth was complicated, even in situations that seemed simple. She threw herself into the discussion of *soqmaq*, a traditional dessert that Uighur migrants sell throughout China. It was a notorious scam: Uighur vendors would ask how much a customer wanted and then cut off a much larger piece. Han customers assumed it was cake, but because it was actually nut-filled candy, the total cost of the weighed portion was astronomical. It was hard to argue with the vendors, who would gesture they didn’t understand Mandarin.

Humar came out in the middle: “It’s just that heavy by nature because it’s candy. It’s not bad. But the way people are selling it is horrible.” It was not complicated, but it was not simple. “On the Han side, they had a misunderstanding, but on the Uighur side, it is not right for Uighurs to sell things that way. So we can blame both sides. We are wrong and you are wrong. But we can discuss this thing. We can get to some conclusion.”



*Isaq Peyzul and Zohre Talip in Beijing in 2017. Credit...From Humar Isaac*

**Four years into their relationship**, Humar decided to introduce Tonghe to her parents as her fiancé. She was tired of living “in the closet,” as she put it. She plotted everything down to the last detail. The whole family would meet in Guangzhou, the place where her mother had seemed less guarded and where they had happy memories. Her parents would fly in from Xinjiang, and Zumret would take the train from her college in Xiamen in southeastern China. Tonghe had been studying Uighur and had written a three-page letter introducing himself.

In the hotel, Tonghe nervously read his letter. He explained that his parents were both teachers and that he did translating and editing for the Mandarin version of The New York Times. When he stumbled on the word “editing,” Zohre prompted him. After he finished, Isaq spoke: “It’s good to learn a minority language, and it’s very nice of you. Good for you. But no, we won’t marry our daughter to you. That’s not going to happen.”

The next day, Isaq and Zohre announced that Humar’s life in Beijing was over. They would march her to her apartment to collect her things, quit her job for her and take her home. Humar didn’t try to argue. She decided she had no choice but run away. That evening, at a dinner with her mother’s former classmates, when Zohre was distracted by a dress one of them had given her, Humar excused herself to the bathroom. She left the restaurant and started running. When Zohre texted and called, Humar refused to pick up her phone. Zohre begged Humar to return, by turns threatening her and

cajoling her with tears. Humar sent back messages not to look for her. She vowed they would never see her again.

Humar was also receiving a narration from Zumret, who was with their parents at the hotel. At midnight, she got a message from Zohre saying, “I can’t take it, come back.” Zumret texted: “They’re in the hotel arguing about the air-conditioning.” When Zohre wrote, “Your dad is sick, please come back,” Zumret texted: “No, don’t worry, he’s just asleep. Mom is trying on the new dress.”

Zumret convinced her parents that it would be futile to chase Humar to the capital — if Humar didn’t want to be found, they would never track her down in a city of more than 10 million. Once Humar was back in Beijing, the troubles continued. Zohre shouted and wept. Sometimes she cursed Humar; other times she cursed Tonghe. It hung over them. It grew ugly. In the back of her mind, Humar hoped that her parents might benefit from these struggles — that marrying their daughter to a Han could make them seem even more loyal to their Han superiors.

At work, Humar worried about what was happening on the internet. Islamophobia was growing worse. She gave a presentation on what constituted hate speech to the Zhihu content-monitoring team. The team was already busy: Xi had intensified what could be called the privatization of censorship, in which companies themselves were charged with taking down posts the government might deem problematic or risk fines or closure. New dictates from the Communist Party arrived daily concerning what was or wasn’t palatable. Humar categorized comments in a spreadsheet, marking things that might appear innocuous but were actually dog whistles — like references to Zuo Zongtang, a general who reconquered Xinjiang during the Qing dynasty. Zhihu had tried to keep the site civil while opening up to new users, but as questions became less sophisticated, there was less room for nuanced conversation. Humar stopped posting. No one person could change China. The time for everyday heroes had passed.

**It was impossible** for Humar and her mother to know just how radical a shift was taking place inside the party. After Xi assumed control, China escalated security spending in Xinjiang. A string of violent incidents involving Uighurs, mostly concentrated in Xinjiang, added to the community’s woes. Foreign experts believed they were most likely a result of local grievances, but the state portrayed them as Islamist terror plots. Journalists, local and international, could not investigate, so it remained unclear what was truly going on.

Then in October 2013, a car plowed through a group of pedestrians near Tiananmen Square, killing two tourists and injuring 40 more people. The government claimed that the perpetrators, who died in the collision, were Uighur extremists, though the attack’s lack of sophistication called this into question. In March 2014, a group of Uighurs dressed in black stormed a train station in Kunming and went on a stabbing spree that left 31 dead and 141 people wounded. After the attack, Xi called for “walls made of copper and steel” and “nets spread from the earth to the sky” to capture these “terrorists.” In internal party communications, obtained late last year by The New York Times, he went further. “The weapons of the people’s democratic dictatorship must be wielded without any hesitation or wavering,” he declared.

The state launched the Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism in May 2014, pressuring the police in Xinjiang to increase their arrest quotas. Authorities hunted for those with “abnormal” thoughts, which meant anyone in the thrall of the “three evil forces”: separatism, terrorism and extremism. They opened small indoctrination centers, holding sessions for dozens or hundreds of detainees, in an attempt to persuade them to give up their religion and embrace the party. Uighurs who wanted to travel outside their hometowns were required to carry a special “convenience contact card,” listing phone numbers for their landlords and local police stations. The government

installed video cameras over mosque doorways to monitor worshipers. The state banned baby names considered to be too Islamic.

The government publicized a list of “75 behavioral indications of religious extremism.” Some were as vague as people who “store large amounts of food in their homes,” “those who smoke and drink but quit doing so quite suddenly” or “those who buy or store equipment such as dumbbells . . . without obvious reasons.” Human Rights Watch reported that the government put together a list of 26 “sensitive countries” with supposed connections to terrorism, including Egypt, Thailand and Malaysia. Those who were in contact with relatives in any of those countries came under increased suspicion. The community seethed.

At the same time, the government was also silencing leading moderates. In 2014, the police arrested [Ilham Tohti](#), a scholar who founded a popular bilingual website aimed at encouraging interethnic dialogue — a critic of the Communist Party, but one who had consistently opposed violence and never advocated independence. He was charged with separatism and sentenced to life in prison.

In 2016, Chen Quanguo — then the party secretary in Tibet, where he had suppressed ethnic unrest with intense security — was sent to assume leadership of Xinjiang. The government claimed Uighurs were traveling to fight with ISIS, though it provided no proof of this assertion. Under Chen’s direction, Strike Hard went into overdrive. Based on their behavior, job and family networks, Uighurs were given ratings of their trustworthiness, and those considered “untrustworthy” were then subjected to more surveillance. The state began razing mosques and historical quarters.

One program initiated under Strike Hard was known as Visit, Benefit, Unite. From 2014 to 2017, 200,000 party cadres, including Zohre, were stationed in villages across Xinjiang to surveil people and preach party propaganda. (A later effort, called Becoming Family, dispatched more than one million party cadres to live in the homes of Xinjiang residents for at least five days every two months, primarily in rural areas, to report on them.) Zohre was assigned to Tugmenboyi, a small village an hour from Hami. During her time there, she helped the community build a bridge, which they named in her honor. She told Humar she had managed to change people’s minds, to really help the community raise their living standards while making them more trusting of the party.



*Humar with her mother in 2017 .Credit...From Humar Isaac*

In January 2017, Humar and Zumret accompanied Zohre to Tugmenboyi. The family Zohre took them to visit that day had three daughters, and the mother was pregnant. During their visit, Zohre tried to persuade the woman not to wear an austere head scarf, offering her a colorful cloth to casually cover her hair with instead. The family's daughters didn't go to school; the father did not think it necessary. To Humar, the whole picture looked wrong. *We Uighur people don't cover our faces*, she thought. *Black robes are not Uighur. Uighurs, we dance, we sing and we wear beautiful, colorful dresses.*

That spring, Tonghe was accepted to a master's program in Uppsala, Sweden, and he and Humar set about trying to pack up their lives. When Humar returned to Xinjiang for her final visit that summer, she noticed that new police posts calling themselves "convenience stations" had cropped up everywhere. Every 200 meters there was a police station or a camera. She and her parents went back to Tugmenboyi and found the father of the family was missing. He had been taken to "study." At the time, Humar didn't find this particularly unusual. Across China, party members and government employees were always studying one thing or another: political doctrine, teacher training, official training. Her mother had gone to "study." Nobody liked it, but it was a part of their lives.

Zohre told Humar she had been asked to give a talk at one of these educational facilities. "I did so well in my previous village work, and my opinion is welcomed among these village people — they even asked me to do a lecture!" Humar thought Zohre was a nice person who really cared about her own community, with a record of successful outreach. If she and others like her talked to people, maybe they would listen. But when Humar heard that a grandmother from Tugmenboyi had been sent to "study," it gave her pause. A man who needed to be persuaded to educate his daughters, sure. But an old grandmother who had nothing to do with anything?

Before they left Beijing, Humar and Tonghe had a traditional Muslim wedding for Zohre and Isaq's benefit. At the mosque that day, her parents seemed relieved. Immediately afterward, it was as if a switch had flipped: Zohre and Isaq started treating Tonghe like a son-in-law, addressing him by his name, offering him a seat at the table, asking about him, greeting him on the phone. Humar finally had the relationship with her family she'd fought for all those years. Once they moved to Sweden, her calls with her mother started lasting longer and longer. The farther apart they were, the closer they became.

Humar liked Sweden. It resembled Zohre's ancestral mountain village, with its trees, hills, pastures and vast sky of rolling clouds. Soon after they arrived in Uppsala, Humar started a folder on her computer called "free writing." Nothing she wrote would ever be censored or deleted again.

One day in the fall of 2017, Zohre called her with a strange request. She needed Humar to take photos of herself in and around landmarks in Uppsala to show their neighborhood authorities that Humar was studying there. Humar was packing for a vacation to Berlin and asked if she could do it later. "No," Zohre said. She sounded as if she was about to cry. "Send me the photos as soon as possible," she pleaded. Humar rushed to take them. When she didn't hear anything about it again, she brushed it off.

Meanwhile, life for Zumret as a Uighur in Beijing, where she now lived, was becoming harder and harder. Landlords refused to rent her apartments. She moved six times in three months. Humar suggested she quit her job at an advertising company to study English full time, so she could apply for overseas master's programs the following year. Zumret agreed to the plan.

Humar started seeing reports that Uighurs had begun blocking their foreign relatives on WeChat. Stories of “re-education facilities” were slowly trickling out, but what went on inside them was hard to understand. Humar knew better than to ask her parents over WeChat about the situation. Theirs was the model Uighur family anyway.

## II.

**With Humar in Sweden,** Zumret in Beijing and Zohre and Isaq in Hami, messages among them on their family WeChat group vaulted through time zones. In October 2018, Zumret was writing them with her plan to take the English exam on Dec. 8. She had thrown herself into studying as she had never applied herself to anything before. Zohre sent a thumbs-up GIF. A few hours later, Zohre sent a picture of a beverage promising to cleanse the body of all toxins. Should she buy it? she asked.

In her Uppsala apartment, Humar, exasperated, messaged: “Nutritional shake. It isn’t even remotely health-related!” She switched over to her direct chat with Zumret. “I am completely going to die on the spot,” Humar wrote. “How is there another one every day? It never stops!”

“Poor you,” Zumret replied. Zohre often fell for the scams that circulated on WeChat. “Don’t trust this detox crap,” Humar typed in the family chat, while scrolling through an online retailer. She ordered Metamucil and sent a screen shot that it was coming in the mail. “Thank you! And thank you for your money!” Zohre joked back in a voice message.

The next morning, Zohre messaged Humar: “How are you? Are you working?” Humar responded normally; everything was O.K. She reminded her mom to take calcium. “Please take it on time, O.K.?” she said.

“Yes, sweet girl, I will do that,” Zohre responded. “Thank you!”

When Zohre didn’t write again, Humar didn’t think anything was amiss. The chat could go silent for a few days without much incident. Four days later, Humar messaged the group, asking if they could have a video call. The next day, when no one answered, she sent an emoji, a little yellow face with furrowed eyebrows, expressing concern. Zumret sent a photo of a beef stew she was cooking. Neither parent responded.

Humar messaged Zumret directly to ask if she’d called home recently.

“No, what’s up?” Zumret responded.

“No one in this group is answering me,” Humar said. “What’s everyone doing?”

“Let me call them and ask,” Zumret wrote. They chatted about other things: pictures of cats, the Thor movie. Then Zumret wrote that she had reached their father, who said their mother had left her phone at home. “Could she be at school?” Humar wondered.

“???” Zumret wrote.

Humar explained that she had read about re-education schools, from which detainees were allowed to go home at night. “Maybe I’m just thinking too much,” Humar said.

“Yeah me too,” Zumret told her. “Last night I was reading ‘1984’ before falling asleep. It gave me nightmares.”

Humar wrote out the sound of a sigh, but her insides had started burning. She recorded a voice message and sent it into the chat. Her voice was a little unsteady. She asked whether the Metamucil she had ordered for Zohre had arrived. Online tracking showed that it had, but still there was no response.

By Nov. 5, the parents had been silent for nearly a week. Humar knew that as a Uighur abroad, she should not be the one calling Isaq. Zumret continued trying to reach their father. He kept telling her that he was busy, that her mother was busy, that she should also be busy, take care of her own life.

“What is wrong with this old man?” Zumret messaged Humar.

“Don’t be afraid, don’t freak out,” Humar wrote back immediately. “Freaking out won’t help.” She repeated it like a mantra. “You need to carry on normally and stick to our plan.”

Later that day Zumret messaged that she’d called Isaq. The Metamucil had arrived. The online retailer Taobao was having its annual sale, during which Humar usually bought her mother makeup. Humar sent another message to the chat: “The discount is coming, so I’ll buy some foundation, is that O.K.?”

By now it felt as if she were begging the universe: I’m being nice. I’m trying. The next day, Isaq responded: “Don’t buy it.” A few minutes later he must have realized how that sounded — as if they didn’t need it anymore, as if Zohre were dead. “Don’t buy it for now.”

“What is Mom so busy with?” Humar wrote.

Isaq didn’t respond. An hour later Humar tried again: “Do you need money?”

“It’s not about money,” he replied. To Humar, this was an unspoken confirmation of her fears. If her mother had been sick, if she were in the hospital, there would be a bill to pay. Maybe Zohre was caught up in Xi’s anticorruption drive. Maybe she made some “mistake” during her years of working for the party. If your crime was financial, it was within the system. Zohre would have been sentenced — they would know what to expect. But if her crime was being Uighur, and she was sent to a concentration camp, what did that even mean? It was outside everything they had ever known.

“Yeah, it looks like Mom is going to school,” Humar messaged Zumret. She sent a yellow face with no mouth and big eyes. “Let’s stop asking. It won’t help. It will just make Dad feel worse.” Humar ordered the makeup. She had to do it; the alternative was to accept this reality. “There’s nothing we can do,” Humar typed. “We just have to stick to the plan and carry on normally.”

“I’m freaking out a little,” Zumret messaged. “Will they try to come for me?”

“If you don’t go back” — to Xinjiang — “it will be O.K.”

“But why her?” Zumret asked. “She’s retired already.”

“Maybe it’s because of me,” Humar said. “Don’t think about that too much. It’s also best we don’t say too much in WeChat.” Humar sent an emoji of a big character holding a small character, petting his shoulder and head.

Humar believed that if she stayed calm, she could calm her sister. From Beijing, Zumret could tell that her sister was terrified, but she didn’t want Humar to know that she knew. Each told the other

not to panic. Each told the other to just hold on. Humar had been thinking about the Holocaust. “The last survivors were never heroes,” Humar told Zumret. “They were just normal people who managed to hold on. For now, holding on is the only way to resist.”

Zumret kept calling Isaq. Sometimes he answered; other times he let the calls go. One day in mid-November, he picked up and started crying. He was trying to hide it, but Zumret could tell.

“Don’t worry about us,” she told him. “Take care of yourself.”

“You, too,” he said. “Don’t come back.”

Zumret never told Humar about the call. In Beijing, she had started dating an American. In response to the Uighur situation, his mother, a Guatemalan immigrant, had joked that he should just marry Zumret and take her to the United States. “Isn’t that funny?” Zumret asked Humar. The sisters laughed at the thought of a hasty elopement. It was all funny until Humar started thinking about it. The next day she wrote: “Maybe you really should get married. I mean a real marriage license.”

“Huh?” Zumret wrote.

Since Zumret was in China, Humar figured she didn’t know much about the recent news. Everything was changing so quickly. If something happened to Zumret, Humar figured at least an American citizen would be looking for his wife. Zumret and her boyfriend set a date: Dec. 10, International Human Rights Day.

On Nov. 18, Zumret’s cousin called. After they hung up, Zumret messaged Humar: “Isaq too.”



*Isaq Peyzul in 2017. Credit...From Humar Isaac*

**Since 2016, China** had spent millions of dollars constructing facilities for “transformation through education,” which in reality was a system of internment camps — buildings with guard-tower turrets and barbed-wire fences. The concept of “transformation through education” has its roots in the “re-education through labor” employed by Mao with disastrous consequences during the Cultural Revolution. It took China watchers a long time to realize that the camps themselves were something unique, rather than a continuation of the larger securitization of the region, the strict surveillance

and the increase in arbitrary detention that had occurred since the Urumqi riots. In May 2018, a German researcher named [Adrian Zenz](#), after analyzing government procurement and construction notices in over 40 localities, published a paper that showed the scope of the internment network; he estimated that perhaps more than one million people were in “political education” camps, around 10 percent of Xinjiang’s Uighur population.

Most of what is known about what goes on inside the camp system comes from former detainees who have fled China, mostly to Kazakhstan. Very few of them have spoken publicly. In Almaty, I interviewed seven former detainees, who told similar stories. One man was caged underground in a police station, beaten until he lost the hearing in one ear; I heard about others who were shackled and strung up as if crucified. People were interrogated in “tiger chairs” — metal chairs with shackles, handcuffs and leg irons attached to the frame — and deprived of sleep. They were moved between facilities in black hoods and chains. I spoke to people who saw other detainees compelled to renounce religion and give self-criticism in “struggle sessions.” One was forced to thank Xi every night for the opportunity to be so enlightened. There have been media reports of sexual violence and family separations. When parents are detained, their children are often sent to state-run institutions and taught Mandarin — another attempt to “sinocize” the population.

In classrooms, scores of detainees were forced to undergo two or three hours of Mandarin lessons each morning and more in the afternoon. Some were told they had to memorize 3,000 characters to be allowed to leave, while others were told nothing at all. Before the students stood a metal gate, on the other side of which there was the teacher, flanked by two guards with electric batons. When they weren’t in class, the detainees were confined to their dorm rooms, where they were not allowed to speak. The doors to the dorm rooms resembled those of a maximum-security prison, with multiple locks and a slot for food. There were cameras inside the cells, detainees believed.

They had virtually no personal belongings, a man told me. The men passed around one electric razor every two days, and sometimes were given a nail-clipper, though it was quickly taken back after use. Women combed their hair with their fingers and were given one pad per day of their periods, and one more at night. One woman told me she was given only two minutes to use the toilet. If she took longer, she was hit with an electric baton. They showered once a week. Each inmate was issued a toothbrush without a handle. Sometimes they were forced to stand still or sit in their rooms; other times they were supposed to do calisthenics in close quarters. Some told me of being forced to memorize and recite rules. Some described abysmal sleeping conditions — packed 50 people to a room or forced to sleep in shifts. Outside in the hall, auxiliary guards paced. They were Uighurs and Kazakhs, ordered to patrol and discipline their own people.

Even after the detainees were released, surveillance was everywhere. People were afraid of one another. It splintered the order of things. Some “graduated” into forced-labor programs working for factories — another kind of sentence without end. Across the board, everyone’s crime seemed to be his or her ethnicity.

In May 2018, Shawn Zhang, then a law student in Canada, began identifying a list of what is now 94 likely re-education camps in Xinjiang, checking addresses for government notices against recent satellite imagery. Humar believed Zohre and Isaq had been taken to one of these centers, a camp on the outskirts of Hami, set in a former disease-control center built during the SARS outbreak: four large buildings with tall wire-mesh fences. Sitting at her laptop in Uppsala, Humar could see it on Google Earth.

**The waiting did** not feel real. Humar felt herself veering further and further into her terrified imaginings. She continued to try to collect information about her parents, but kept hitting dead

ends. With her sister still in China, she felt she couldn't speak out publicly about what was happening to her family. Her silence meant she had nowhere to put her anger. She missed her online life. Tonghe was at school all day, so she talked to the neighbor's cat, who came to visit her regularly. She binged on Netflix. She watched "Mr. Robot" and then all of Rami Malek's YouTube videos. She went to see "Bohemian Rhapsody" by herself. When the lights turned back on, her reality flashed back to her, and it was horrible, but she was grateful that the movie helped her to escape for two hours. She became obsessed with Freddie Mercury. She watched videos of Queen performances on repeat. It didn't matter that Mercury had AIDS and had been through so much in his life; when he was onstage, he was so alive. It meant something to her to see that, because she was dying there.

How could Humar sleep in a bed, knowing her mother wasn't sleeping? How could she use a blanket, when her mother was probably cold? The worst were the dreams. The few times she dreamed about her parents were the hardest, because they weren't nightmares — they were *good* dreams, respites from the heavy feeling. Humar would be home with all her relatives around her. In one dream, Zohre appeared in a wheelchair, injured but alive, free. When Humar woke up, hazily, she'd be content. But then it would come back to her: They were gone.

Zumret asked Humar often whether her parents could take it. "Will this be too much for the old man to handle?" she wondered.

"Do you remember that time when I was missing, when I was maybe committing suicide or something?" Humar said. "He fell asleep, so he'll be fine." Humar thought about the night that she and Tonghe "came out" often. In retrospect, she almost cherished it. It showed her that her parents were strong. She baked to soothe her nerves. She tried making nan, but she'd never done it before, and when she worried she'd missed a step, she couldn't ask Zohre for guidance. She looked down and recognized her mother's hands in her own: The way they looked covered in patterns of oil and flour was identical. The nan she made was misshapen and laced with tears.

She read everything she could find online and grew angrier and angrier. No Uighur family was untouched by this tragedy, but it seemed to her that too many people were politicizing the crisis. She thought Uighur groups in exile were talking too much about religious freedom and independence. She didn't see any expression of human pain. The humanity of the story, it seemed to her, was crucial for exerting pressure on the government. She began to weigh her assets. She thought her family's experience would resonate: She had the background, profile and skills to reach both Western audiences and Han Chinese. She thought she might be able to talk to the press in their own language. Her family could be any cosmopolitan family. They didn't look like the stock images of sad refugees that people had become so numb to. Perhaps if people saw her sister's beautiful face, they would not look away.

She had no idea whether it would work or backfire. Would her parents be treated worse or better in the camps with the spotlight on them? Would they be tortured? Killed? She burned inside until she couldn't take it anymore.

On Jan. 9, she registered a new anonymous Twitter account, which she called Under Pressure, and sent out a series of tweets in Mandarin: "I have to pretend that life goes on as usual," she began. "To others, I pretend that everything's O.K.; to myself, I pretend I can keep holding on. I can't bear to talk about the future. What [expletive] future? My parents are inside, and I don't even know if they're still alive or if any second I'm going to get a phone call saying one of them's dead. . . . I've grown layer upon layer of shells — between myself and the outside world, between myself and my emotions. If I don't feel, I won't cry. If I don't think about it, I won't cry. It's so hard that I've thought

about dying. But I can't now — I have to keep holding on until this is over. But holding on has gotten so hard.”

In a later tweet, she tagged an editor at [Foreign Policy](#) whom she admired. She thought he would do something to amplify her message. He retweeted an English translation of her tweets. The thread prompted some inquiries from journalists, which she ignored. She'd been able to say something, and for now that was enough.

After Zumret and her boyfriend married, she applied for a tourist visa to the United States. They had decided it would be the easiest and fastest route out of China. Once Zumret got to America, she could apply for asylum, but Humar wasn't sure Zumret would make it out — it felt as if Uighurs were being hunted, as if anything could happen before the plane took off. So Humar threw herself into planning every aspect of her sister's departure. She told Zumret not to tell anyone she wasn't coming back, to say she was going to America for her “honeymoon.” On WeChat, they left bread crumbs of newlywed enthusiasm. They took care to plan things for when Zumret returned to China, in case someone checked her phone on her way out. Humar shopped online for gifts for Zumret's husband's family. She bought him a onesie that said, “I'm here and I understand,” which she thought might cheer her sister up. She ordered six pairs of pale blue fuzzy socks with cute animals on them, sleeping sheep with little horns. Airport security personnel would be nervous about a Uighur, she figured, so when Zumret took off her shoes going through the security line, maybe the supercute socks would ease the tension.

In early February 2019, after Zumret's flight took off from Beijing, Humar packed to get to the airport herself. She quickly wrote the message she had been waiting months to post, on Facebook and the Twitter account under her real name. “Friends, I'm coming out as a family of the victims of China's ethnic-cleansing concentration camps,” she wrote. “My younger sister and I lost contact with our mother in the first week of November, and we got the news of our father's disappearance a week later. We never heard from them since then, and we don't even know if they are alive at this point. If you find me acting weird lately, now you know why. My sister and her husband finally left Beijing this morning, got on the plane to the US. She's finally safe and free, that's why I'm posting this now. My parents included, at least 1 million people are suffering in China's concentration camps, please help us. . . . I couldn't say anything before my sister left China, past 3 months are full of pressure, anger and pain. Now my sister is safe, I'll meet her in the US tomorrow. I have my tears ready.”

When Humar met Zumret at Kennedy International Airport, she could scarcely believe her sister was really there. The scene at the airport was just like the emoji she'd sent, of the big character patting the small one as they both cried. That emoji had become their motto — every time one of them got upset, the other patted and hugged.

They began to settle Zumret into her new American life. Humar's declaration had been retweeted 3,000 times, and one morning while they were in their Airbnb in New Jersey, Zumret received a message from an acquaintance. Someone who worked as a doctor in the camps had met their mother. “Your mom introduced herself,” the acquaintance said. “She said she couldn't sleep from headaches, so the doctor gave your mom some medicine.” It sounded so much like Zohre. She was proud, good at networking and passing information. If it was true, it meant that Zohre had been alive recently. Humar so badly wanted to believe it.

Toward the end of Humar's trip, the sisters met with a journalist from The South China Morning Post who wanted to make a video about them, and they [agreed](#). With Zumret safe, and no word from her parents, Humar felt she had nothing to lose anymore. Perhaps speaking out would create pressure

on local authorities to at least offer proof that her parents were alive. Maybe they would grant them a phone call as an attempt to bargain for her silence. *Let's see how big I can be*, she thought.

Back in Sweden, she made a spreadsheet of all the journalists who contacted her after she first went public. Soon she was tweeting daily, posting photos of her parents, amplifying their stories. She posted in Mandarin, explaining what she thought ordinary Han Chinese could do to help. She posted on Douban, usually in code. Sometimes Douban would censor and remove her posts; other times, they left them up. "The sky is falling" remained, but "Please survive," with an old university photo of her parents, was deleted.

A journalist from Radio Free Asia asked Humar if she had tried calling her parents' office. Humar realized that though it would endanger an individual in Xinjiang to get a call from a Uighur living abroad, an office landline couldn't be thrown in a camp. She had been meaning to make a video testimonial, so she decided she would call and record whatever happened. Maybe, in a panic, the voice on the other end would do something stupid, and it would make for a good video that could go viral. Before she dialed, she fluffed up their couch cushions. Tonghe started recording her.

A woman picked up the phone, and Humar asked for her father.

"Errr, he's busy."

"So where should I call to find him now?"

"For personal stuff or work?"

"Personal affairs — I am his daughter."

"Oh, you are his daughter? Which daughter are you?"

"I am Mira," Humar lied. "I am in Beijing."

"Are you Zulimire? The older one?"

"I am the second one, I am in Beijing. The older one, my sister, she is in Sweden."

"Oh, let me ask."

"Ah, so do you know where he is?"

"I am not quite sure."

"Doesn't he work in the editorial office?"

"Yes, yes, yes," the woman said. "That's correct. I am going to have a meeting soon. I have to go now. Goodbye."

Humar raised her eyebrows. Tonghe cut the recording. They translated the video and put it up online and went to sleep.

The next morning, Humar woke up to four missed calls from her father's office.

**Humar waited to** call back until the early hours of the morning in Sweden, when the working day in China began. At 3:40 a.m. she called again, as Tonghe recorded video. She asked for the woman she'd spoken with the night before. The man who answered said she was out.

"Who are you?" Humar asked.

"I'm just somebody at the office."

Humar kept asking about the woman. She added: "I'm trying to find out where my dad is. I'm having a hard time reaching him."

"He's in a meeting now on the second floor," the man told her. *O.K., great, nice*, Humar thought. *He's definitely faking it.* She decided to call his bluff.

"A meeting on the second floor?" Humar asked. "He's not answering when I call him on his cellphone."

"When he comes down, I can ask him to call you back."

"I'm afraid if he calls me later, I will miss it," Humar said. "So, maybe I can call you back in 20 minutes?" The man agreed.

"Thank you, then," she said. Humar was annoyed. *That was bad acting. This is a fake story. Let's see how far they can go with this fake story.* Mostly she just wanted to reach that woman. Why had the office called so many times?

Exactly 20 minutes later, Humar dialed again. *Lies, lies, lies, lies* — the word swam in her head. She called back and immediately asked for the woman. When the man said she was not in, he reminded Humar he'd promised her Isaq. "I can go get him."

"O.K., do you mind calling him?" Humar turned to the camera and mouthed: "What the [expletive]?"

"Hello." It was Isaq. Humar was shocked.

"Where are you now?" she asked. "Are you at work right now?"

"I'm working, busy," he told her. He asked about her studies.

"Where's my mom?"

"Your mom is at the hospital."

Humar decided to play along. "Are you visiting my mom at the hospital? Or let me know when you're going to go visit her. So maybe I can call and talk to you and Mom at once."

"Your mom is busy in the hospital," Isaq said. "I'm not visiting her because I'm too busy. This afternoon, I will visit her and we can message you." He hung up.

Humar threw the phone onto the couch as if it had burned her. She started hurling cushions and screamed. She messaged Zumret and sent her the video. She was sure the exchange was staged, her father in a room with officials monitoring him. Isaq had sounded so uncertain — first he wouldn't

see Zohre, then he would — as if someone had given him a signal. Still, she knew that at least one of her parents was alive. It was nearly 5 a.m. in Sweden. Exhausted and happy, Humar fell asleep.

The next day Isaq sent Humar a voice memo. When she played it, she heard Zohre's voice. "Hi, my sweet girl. Are you safe there? Are you doing O.K.? What are you doing?" Her mother sounded happy, like herself — as if nothing had happened, as if they had just talked yesterday. Humar asked for a video call right away. Zohre agreed.

They were in the living room. Zohre's hair was cut short, and Isaq's was shaved. They had both lost weight. Humar avoided asking many questions; she wasn't sure if they were being monitored. "Your hair is long right now," Zohre marveled. She asked about Tonghe. "Are you guys doing all right?"

"Yeah, everything is good. We were just a bit worried about you."

"As you know, I have a nose and throat allergy," Zohre said, "so I was hospitalized."

"Ask your sister if she can contact us," Isaq told Humar.



Image



Humar Isaac.Credit...Asa Sjostrom for The New York Times

They hung up. Humar was confused. After that, she called them every day. Each time, they acted as if they had never been missing, but to Humar, it felt as if they could disappear again at any minute. Watching her mother, Humar became self-conscious about her own hair. She knew Zohre hadn't cut hers of her own will, so in solidarity, Humar cut off her own long shiny locks and tweeted photos. "Cut my hair to match Mama's new style," she wrote. "It seems that a lot of camp survivors come out like this. Mama loved her hair, I loved mine. I'm happy that at least in this tiny little part of everything, I'm with her."

One day, Zohre messaged Humar a photo of the Metamucil, asking her how to take it, before a meal or after. The makeup had arrived as well. Humar made nan, and with Zohre watching, she asked her if she had missed a step. She hadn't.

There was only one time when her parents slipped up. Humar was asking about her father's dental problems. "It's a bit of a mess," Isaq told her. Humar asked why. "Because that kind of stuff, the doctor said it needed to be cleaned every day, carefully," he said, turning to Zohre.

"We couldn't — " Zohre began, before cutting herself off. "Yeah, so it went bad."

**The Communist Party** had been preparing for children like Humar, young Uighurs who had studied outside Xinjiang and had social networks in the rest of China. Officials in Turpan, a city in eastern Xinjiang, had even fashioned a script for "answering questions asked by the children of concentrated education-and-training-school students," when they returned home for summer vacation and found their parents missing. "The moment they issue incorrect opinions on WeChat, Weibo and other social media platforms, the impact is widespread and difficult to eradicate," a directive that was leaked to The Times explained. "Students must undergo ideological re-education so that soon after they return, they understand the true significance of why their family members are undergoing concentrated education." It included a script anticipating questions like: "Where are my family members?" "Why do my family members have to take part in studying?" "Since it's just training, why can't they come home?" "Did they commit a crime?"

(A Chinese Embassy spokeswoman did not respond to requests for comment on this article. A spokesman for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has previously responded to The Times's reporting on the detention of Uighurs in re-education facilities by dismissing it as an effort to "smear and discredit China's antiterrorism and de-extremism capabilities in Xinjiang." In a statement last year to The South China Morning Post, the Xinjiang government insisted that "Isak Pezul and Zohre Talip are living a normal life in Hami" and had not been taken to a re-education camp.)

Humar had always wondered why she had never received a call from any officials threatening her, or even trying to persuade her to be quiet. While she was in New Jersey, she got a message from a friend in China: "You're very famous here." Her tweets in Mandarin had been screenshot and passed around in WeChat groups of influential Chinese netizens. People were arguing about her word choices: "ethnic cleansing," "concentration camp." But more than anything, her friend told her, people were shocked this was

happening to someone they actually knew — a graduate of Peking University whose mother was a midlevel party member. A model Uighur family.

One day, Humar played a voice message her mother left her on WeChat. “How are you? I just talked with my older one, and she sent me some pictures. I showed that to my siblings, and I finished talking to her. And now I’m telling this to you. Thank you.” Humar had assumed everything that passed between them might be monitored, but she didn’t realize Zohre had to leave reports of their conversations. Much of the party’s Xinjiang policy, while largely created in Beijing, was implemented at the local level with varying degrees of zeal. Humar thought and yet didn’t think much about the foe she faced. It wasn’t as if she were up against the whole of China; she knew the locality carried out the orders. Officials like these were responsible for deciding Zohre’s day-to-day fate. She never brought it up with Zohre.

On May 14, Zohre called Humar. “Your dad was just saying — apparently they published a film with Zumret in The South China Morning Post. Who was responsible for this?” She asked.

“That was when you had disappeared,” Humar told her.

“Well, since we’ve told you we were being treated for medical issues, would it not be possible to delete it? Your father saw the video and got so angry that his blood pressure got really high. We wondered what our daughters had done. It didn’t matter that we told you how it was. They published the thing, and now what’s going to become of us?” Zohre started crying. “We’re living well. Your father is working. He has his salary, and every month I’m getting mine. I’ve even sent money to Zumret. The government is, you know, treating us so well. Not a single thing has gone wrong. We told you that we were ill. Can you please just do it? Just think about it.” Her voice grew faint. “What have you done to us?”

“We don’t want you to disappear again. Mom, there’s nothing else for us to do.” Humar kept her voice even. “You just disappeared with absolutely no word, no news. What were we supposed to do?”

“Delete it immediately. Please delete it. If you don’t. . . . What do you think you’re going to do by parading us around the world? The party is taking such good care of us. Our salary is not even a cent less than it should be. We’re doing so well, so how can you do this? Can you please just think of us?”

“Well, we’ll have nothing else to say if you continue doing so well.”

“Why would you do this if you care about us?” Zohre said. “You will end up having thrown us right into the center of hell by doing this.”

“We did the throwing?” Humar’s voice rose. “What happened to you in four months at the hospital? There was absolutely no news from you. Do you think we were living happily here knowing that our parents had disappeared? We were just trying to live our lives here, but we were having such a hard time. You were obviously suffering, too. It was so obvious. So obvious. Do you think we couldn’t see it? Are we insane? Do we not have eyes? Where did

Dad's hair go? And your hair? And your face? You lost so much weight that we didn't recognize you, and so we didn't believe you when you said that you'd been in the hospital, that you were healthy. And what happens if you disappear again? Do you know why it is you got out of the 'hospital'? Did you really study so well inside there?"

"Stop!" Zohre cried harder.

"Is the government going to keep caring for you? We met with journalists and wrote things online and complained because our parents had disappeared — and you got out. The first time I called Dad's workplace, they told me I wouldn't be able to find him. They said, 'He's not here, you can't find him.' When I called the next day, they told me he was in a meeting. Then, when I talked with Dad on the phone, he told me you were in the hospital, and he didn't know when he was going to be able to see you."

"Stop. Don't say too much. Stop. Don't say too much."

"I'm not going to delete it. If I delete it, you're still going to disappear. You're going to go into the 'hospital' again. That's what I'm afraid of." Humar was sobbing now, too.

"No, it's not going to be like that. It won't be like that at all. Look: We're talking with each other on the internet. You can trust this. You can trust it. Look," Zohre panned the phone around their apartment. "We're talking online every day. Our family is seeing each other every single day. We have fish at home now. We've planted flowers. We have great food — meat pies, dumplings — to eat. We're doing well. We're going to keep going like this. It's just not possible that. . . ."

"May God keep you every day," Humar cried. "We've tried to live life peacefully. We tried sending photos. We tried sending photos we took at school. Where were you? You disappeared. For four months you were gone. It's all for nothing."

"Don't cry," Zohre pleaded, her voice breaking. "Don't cry."



Image



Humar Isaac at home in Uppsala, Sweden, where she lives with her husband, Wang Tonghe. Credit...Asa Sjostrom for The New York Times

**By the time** I met Humar this summer, a tacit peace had taken hold between her and her mother. Since the South China Morning Post video, Zohre was not speaking to Zumret, but

she would answer the phone when Humar called. When she got her parents back, Humar thought she'd lost her anger, but she hadn't. Estimates are that around one million to three million people remain in "political education" camps. There are no reliable figures for the detention centers. The dragnet caught other minorities living in Xinjiang — Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Hui — and not just Muslims, but Christians and Buddhists of these ethnicities too. "It's not about my family anymore," Humar told me. "It's not only about my family."

There was no way I could safely interview Zohre and Isaq, or ask for their version of some of the stories Humar told me. Their family's story is at best an incomplete one — for Humar as well. She had no idea why her parents were freed. The time between when she posted the video of herself calling her father's office and when he got on the phone had been a full working day in China. She believed that her activism had played a role. But it was only an assumption. There is no safety this magazine could offer to her parents. Humar and I spent a long time discussing it. I asked for advice from other journalists, human rights researchers and China experts to try to figure out the risk that publicizing Humar's story would pose to her parents. No one knew.

I did get a refracted glimpse of the terror Zohre and Isaq must feel when I was in Kazakhstan. I met a pair of retired civil servants in their 60s who were so afraid to talk to me about their experiences in a camp that they asked me to turn over my phone to a family member. The couple checked that it was turned off and stored it outside the room where we spoke. They told me that the Chinese government had recorded their voices, and they were afraid the authorities would somehow find their story stored in my phone.

It wasn't just former detainees. In Almaty, I met a young man who had recently fled Xinjiang. He had never been through the camps, but all of Xinjiang felt like one gigantic detention center. There were cameras everywhere: in front of houses, on the corners, down the block. They were said to have 360-degree vision; people believed they could map even the scars of teenage acne, perhaps plugging images into a vast facial-recognition-and-analytics database — though it is unclear just how functional the system is. He said the newly recruited auxiliary police were either undereducated, drunk on power or worried about being found wanting in their duties and being sent to the camps themselves. Society had fallen apart.

"Everybody is really terrified," the man said. "Sometimes when you wake up in the morning, you are afraid, like, O.K., so what kind of thing is waiting for me today?" People had to evaluate every movement they made: Some stopped praying, others stopped performing Islamic charity. He told me people were so scared they started burning their own religious books at home. Those who didn't drink started drinking. Those who grew beards shaved them off. "Personally, I prefer to stay at home, because you can actually feel a little freedom," he said. "Because if you go outside of your home, then it starts."

I once asked Humar how it felt to have taken on this system and won. "It was not the system — it was just one guy in Kumul who decided," she corrected me, using the Uighur name for Hami. "I didn't 'win.' I just — now I know that they are alive. That's all I got. When fighting with this system, it doesn't count as a win."

“Never again” was just something people said who weren’t affected by it — but soon, Humar believed, the whole world would be. Omniscient technology was available to governments everywhere, and populism was rising. In America, migrant children were being put in detention facilities, separated from their parents, living in soiled clothes for weeks. In Myanmar, the Rohingya were living in fenced stockades. In India, Muslims were effectively losing their citizenship, and the government was constructing its own detention camps.

This fall, Tonghe’s parents went to Hami to visit Zohre and Isaq. Together, they held another wedding party for them in absentia. They invited 100 guests and slaughtered a cow. Rumors of forced marriages between Uighur and Han people were making the rounds, but in Humar’s case, this was a real marriage — a real relationship that everyone struggled for. She hoped this spectacle would help keep them safe.

Humar had found a mulberry tree growing in Uppsala’s botanical gardens. After she discovered it, she visited every week to make sure she didn’t miss it blooming. By the time she brought me to see it, the only ripe berries that remained were on the highest branches. “You asked me, ‘Do you feel at home here?’ ” she said. “I don’t feel at home a lot anyway, but these tiny pieces, tiny memories from my childhood — it’s really nice to have them in Uppsala.” We walked around the tree in silence, Humar examining it closely, as if it were a friend whose health she was checking on. She took a photograph and sent it to her mother.

Sarah A. Topol is a writer at large for the magazine. [She last wrote about the Rohingya genocide.](#)

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