

***The Land Drowned in Tears* by Söyün'gül janishif**

Reader's report by Raficq Abdulla and Rahima Mahmut

The world is in danger of disintegration, we teeter on the edge of catastrophes both public and private; each time we turn on the news, we are confronted with man-made and natural disasters. In the west the peril is not obvious or immediately threatening, collapse is not imminent – many of us believe that we are doomed, many deny it, and most are indifferent. These are ideas to be discussed, debated or denied. However, in the world described in *The Land Drowned in Tears*, they are existential realities which Söyün'gül Janishif describes in meticulous and often moving detail as they assailed her life and took over her world. Her land is indeed drowned in tears – *her* tears above all. This passionate and overwhelming book explores the life of the author, an ethnic Uyghur woman of modern day Xinjiang during the Cultural Revolution. Beginning in 1949, and focusing primarily on Söyün'gül's diary during her 18 years imprisonment between 1962 and 1980, this book portrays the effects of the Chinese invasion of Xinjiang province and the resultant repression that has laid the foundations of the current ethnic conflict in the region.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes on the first page of his great autobiographical novel, *The Gulag Archipelago*: 'The Universe has as many different centres as there are living beings in it. Each of us is a centre of the Universe, and that Universe is shattered when they hiss: *You are under arrest*'. Söyün'gül is arrested and her universe, *the* Universe, is torn apart, tortured into disintegration and almost destroyed. She spends almost her entire youth in harsh prison conditions, in dark cells without sanitation, suffering repeated beatings, enduring heavy labour, starvation, discrimination and humiliation at the hands of the prison guards (she judges them fairly, however, and points out when a guard behaves decently towards her, thus lending a degree of authenticity to her experience). She writes about this excruciating process of annihilation with passion in her memoir: *The Land Drowned in Tears*.

The reader is confronted with a cataclysm, a continuing work of destruction of individuals and of a country by a greater and brutal power. This is a story not entirely without hope, but it portrays the inevitable suffering and moral corruption that arises when one group of people set out to conquer and submerge another, by depriving them of human rights and political standing, and by imposing an alien language and ideology at the expense of their own culture and faith. It is a story that prevails in many places around the world – in the Middle East, in Latin America, in Chechnya, in Palestine, in Africa, in Bosnia – these sites of suffering and despair are reported in the media and then forgotten as other stories are taken up by the headlines. Yet the people continue to suffer and need to be witnessed, just as Söyün'gül's book should be witnessed.

The Land Drowned in Tears has huge resonance with the undeniable influence of modern day China. It enables the reader to understand more clearly China's complex and multifaceted domestic politics and its contested and bifurcated cultural identity. There are many other books in existence that portray the devastating effects of China's political tumult between 1965-1968, but its effects on ethnic minorities, many of whom had previously lived independently of modern day Chinese rule, remain a largely unrepresented area of history. This history has particular relevance since 9/11 and China's ensuing 'War on Terrorism' which has enabled the government to carry out systematic human rights violations on the Uyghur people – who have a strong and peaceful Sufi tradition – under the guise of waging war against Islamic extremism. This almost covert aggression against an entire people has remained largely unchecked, unreported and unchallenged by the international community for many

reasons including, of course, the perennial political reason of convenience. As Söyüngül shows throughout her book, realpolitik prevails.

The narrator relates a harrowing story of how she and her fellow students are attacked, tortured and suppressed by an overweening State apparatus intent on subjugating the native population, demoralising it and eradicating its identity through systematic and collective discrimination. Söyüngül, who was a young female medical student at the time, describes in vivid and telling detail the daily humiliations and cruelties inflicted upon her and her fellow students and colleagues, mainly by the Han Chinese. This invasion is not ideological – Communism now an ever-shrinking fig leaf for the massively exploitative State capitalism which was espoused by the present Government in China. The actions of the Chinese Government can be accurately described as an anachronism; a 21st century manifestation of old-fashioned colonialism with disturbing racist undertones.

In this book, the writer depicts the unfolding of this little-known tragedy through the prism of the estranged lives of students who are physically attacked, mentally tortured and brutally suppressed by the imposition of an alien system of so-called ‘education’ which was tantamount to brain-washing. Many students are incarcerated, cowed and killed. Many others resist and revolt against the usurping State authorities. Söyüngül’s book is a disturbing narrative of apocalyptic suffering both on an individual and communal level – it portrays the enigma of power which is deemed necessary by many to keep order, even though it is inevitably accompanied by moral corruption. Acton’s adage of power corrupting, and absolute power corrupting absolutely, is enacted and re-enacted by the Government as it finds the excuses and the means for oppressing the Uyghur people over decades.

The detailed description of Söyüngül’s imprisonment will move the reader to horror and pity with its meticulous account of her suffering. She writes movingly and graphically, but always sets her experience in the context of the greater political conditions of the time (i.e. the Cultural Revolution), conditions that have affected both her own people and many Han Chinese in appalling ways which we in the West can only imagine. Söyüngül does not indulge in apologetics, but has harsh words to say about her own people who collaborate with the Chinese invaders in carrying out state and penal policies.

Throughout the book we are presented with a complex but realistic view of the diverse ways in which radical and oppressive state policies have affected society. This honest appraisal gives the book great legitimacy as a piece of autobiographical history. It accurately depicts the environment of fear and suspicion that occurs in an authoritarian state, which inevitably leads to self-censorship as the only practical shield against oppression.

The story of the Uyghurs has a universal resonance that crosses cultures and societies; we are witnessing the unfolding of a tragedy in a global and connected world. But Söyüngül’s story is not unremittingly dark and depressing... amongst the currents of almost continuous suffering she shows glimmers of joy and hope, of optimism and comradeship. Often this takes the form actions, of expectations, of exchanges between friends, fellow students and members of her family, and from the kindness of strangers she meets during the course of the book. Hope and human compassion are always present even though suffering and oppression prevail. Beyond providing balance, these brief but important moments of human intimacy enrich the reader’s admiration of Söyüngül and the people she so ferociously defends.

This book should be required reading for anyone interested in China and its dealings with ethnic minorities within its Empire. Not only does it reveal, in excruciating detail, a hidden and unexplored

history of political and cultural upheaval, it also offers us insight into present day Xinjiang and the Uyghurs' globally scattered diaspora. Moreover, there is a worrying but important correspondence between Söyüngül's life and the people in present day Xinjiang. If we are to take into account the findings and fears of many international human rights organisations and governments, then this book describes the first steps of the present State-sponsored policies of cultural and political oppression in Xinjiang. The Uyghurs are a little-known but fascinating people with a civilisation of their own who live in what was once a hub of the ancient Silk Road, bordering Mongolia, Russia and Central Asia.

This capacious book, based upon Söyüngül's diary during her 18 years imprisonment, offers a rare chance to encounter this important but fast-disappearing history, and the lives of the people who make it. The book is unique in that it is written by a native speaker and it will be a rare source of information and knowledge about the devastations of Chinese rule on the Uyghurs for sociologists, historians, academics and ethnographic researchers. Thus its translation into English would be a necessary addition to this important area of study.

Overview of *The Land Drowned in Tears*

This is an extensive book and may require abridging for a UK audience, below find a breakdown of the three main parts of the book.

From University to Imprisonment

Söyüngül Janishif was born on 3 October 1940, in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (or East Turkistan). Having completed her secondary education at No2. Girl's School of Urumqi in 1958, she enrolled at the Medical University of Urumqi.

Just two days after starting university, the so-called 'Hundred Flowers Movement' campaign was launched nationwide. The government ostensibly encouraged students to criticise its policies at political gatherings, which later turned out to be a means to identify political dissent. Soon afterwards, The 'Anti-Rightist Campaign' followed, cracking down on dissent, and punishing those who had spoken out against the regime and its ideology. Many students and teachers were imprisoned after being put through inhumane denunciation meetings.

In 1960, famine plagued China and Xinjiang suffered the first food shortage in its history, as food was requisitioned from the region and sent to the rest of China. As a medical student, Söyüngül bore first-hand witness to people dying of starvation, not only in the town but also in hospital.

In 1962, the Chöchek Incident occurred, when nearly a hundred thousand people were forced to flee to the Soviet Union, while in Ghulja a similar incident took place. At the same time, the influx of Chinese migrants into Xinjiang brought instability, as they were given priority over the Uyghur locals. The political turmoil and inequality made Söyüngül aware that the only way to stop the oppression was to form an independent nation for the Uyghurs, East Turkistan. On 4 February 1962, she and three of her friends Abliz, Ablekim and Ahmet Tohti set up the East Turkistan People's Party.

Despite having established security protocols and being very selective of whom they spoke to and confided in, in April 1963 three of them, along with Söyüngül's best friend Sajide who had also been recruited, were arrested due to information supplied by Ablekim, who had betrayed them. Söyüngül

was sentenced to three years imprisonment, Sajide two years, and Ahmet Tohti and Abliz 13 and 19 years respectively.

Life in Solitary Prison and Labour Camps

Life in prison was defined by darkness, filth, and isolation. It was painful for the author to hear the screaming and moaning of the victims of maltreatment, and to see their injured bodies. Over time the darkness would be lifted as communication and information was transferred between prisoners by those bringing water or food to the cells. This was reinforced as prisoners would spontaneously break into song, lifting the deep mood of sorrow and sadness. Söyüngül would join in the singing, forgetting where she was. These changes were helped by being able to look through the cracks in the door and window frame to see her comrades, while at other times she could communicate to the cell next door. She was also able to clean her cell walls with extra water given to her by the Chinese prisoner who brought water to the cells every day. Gradually her cell and way of life improved and as a result her state of mind remained strong.

Söyüngül was later sent to the Mechanical labour camp where she stayed for a short period of time before being transferred to Shigobi Desert, where she lived underground in a crowded cellar, filthy and full of insects and mosquitoes. The other occupants were prostitutes or criminals. She underwent long working hours, shortage of food, and extreme temperatures. Inmates' struggled and competition for survival led to betrayal amongst them and the establishment of a system of group loyalties. During this time the support and friendship between Söyüngül and Sajide was cemented as they endeavoured to fight off the malignance of certain members within the working group.

Fighting and arguing were an everyday occurrence, which brought hardship to everyone by way of punishment. The isolated location of this camp in the desert meant that security levels were low as nobody could escape without risking their life.

Söyüngül and her friends, along with the other prisoners, were subsequently moved to Bajahu labour camp, built in the style of a high security prison, where they would be escorted daily to work on the field or carry out the other tasks at dawn, and escorted back at dusk to be confined for the night. Although the mixed ethnic backgrounds of the prisoners caused cultural misunderstandings, the birth of a child brought everyone together and was one of the most touching episodes of this most difficult time.

Life Under Surveillance Regime: Cultural Revolution

Released from prison in May 1966, Söyüngül found herself in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution where she was branded a counter-revolutionary. She was placed under the Surveillance Regime in Nanshan (a mountainous village approximately four hours drive south of Urumqi) and became a main target of abuse, forced to live a subhuman existence. Her labour included carrying unbearably heavy bags of cement and shovelling coal, and she was forced to work in hazardous areas. These tasks were imposed under all weather conditions upon prisoners who received little or no food or water and were physically abused by the militia.

At denunciation sessions, she would be beaten along with others by the crowds that were forced to attend. She survived the constant physical and mental humiliation thanks to her youth and perseverance. During this time she observed the brutal treatment of many respected imams and

mullahs, land owners of all different ethnic background by the authorities, the details of which she would record in a secret diary over many years.

In 1969, Söyüngül was hospitalised due to a liver complaint resulting from years of ill-treatment and malnutrition. Later she was released as an inpatient but had to attend the hospital daily for ongoing treatment. During this time she started to search for a way to clear her name and challenge the false accusations made by the Security Bureau that resulted in her being placed under the Surveillance Regime, which is against the Education Through Labour policy. The futility of her struggle made her realise that even the regional authorities had little or no power to help her and her people.

With the country in chaos and crisis, the Central Government set up an office within the Department of Public Security to allow people to lodge complaints about their suffering during the Cultural Revolution. It was then that she overheard and witnessed the heart-wrenching stories of the victims of this political movement from all over Xinjiang.

With the death of Mao in 1976, prisoners returned to their hometowns in various states of ill health or disability, homeless and jobless. Abliz and Ahmet Tohti were among those who returned from Tarim Prison. The author's emotional reunion with Abliz after over a decade of separation and lack of contact gave her great joy. Reminiscing about the tragedy of loss and suffering, she felt lucky to have survived to be reunited with her friend, who at times she had believed to have perished in the harshest prison on earth in the Taklamakan Desert, and to be able to tell their story to the people of the free world.

With thanks to Jessica Travess and Dr. Dolkun Kamberi for their input into this report.