

## ***Lost in Translation: Exploring Uyghur identity in Canada***

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the identity reconstruction experiences of the highly educated/skilled Muslim Uyghur immigrants in some Canadian contexts. As a marginalized Muslim ethnic group in China, their migration to the West could be regarded as one of the most effective ways to gain socio-economic and political freedom. With this background, this paper tries to explore 12 highly educated/skilled Muslim Uyghur immigrants' integration experiences in Canada, through the perspectives of critical race theory, identity politics and *Lost in Translation* (Hoffman, 1989) – the story about a Jewish family's new life in Canada. The Hoffman family, as part of a marginalized Jewish community in the communist Poland in the 1950s, would struggle to integrate into Canada during the 1960s and later, which resonates much with the experiences of the Uyghur immigrants who participated in this study. In a context of “blurred genres” (Geertz, 1983), where literary works can influence the production of academic texts in multifarious ways, we consider how our engagement with Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* compares to how other scholars have sought to make use of her memoir. The findings show that the Uyghur participants have been experiencing very similar dilemmas and challenges that the Hoffman family underwent, but they are not only lost in the relatively apolitical local culture, but the much politicised “White” culture hidden in the discourses around nation building which continue “to centre the experiences of the ‘two founding’ nations of Canada” (Leroux, 2012, p. 67). Their experiences belie the more optimistic assumptions

that Canadian multiculturalism inevitably fosters fluid pathways to inclusivity and belonging.

**Keywords:** *Lost in Translation*; highly educated Muslim Uyghur immigrants; identity; Canadian identity; Whiteness; culture

*“As long as the world around me has been new each time, it has not become my world; I lived with my teeth clenched against the next assault of the unfamiliar”* (Hoffman, 1989, p. 278).

## **Introduction**

Among the immigrants who have been arriving in Canada in recent years, Uyghur immigrants from Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China reveal many special features. Their religious identity, language, education, and other human rights have been facing serious threats under the current Chinese government (Millward, 2018; Roberts, 2018, 2020). Thus, the Uyghur intention of immigrating to the West, may have been, to a great extent, generated by the necessity to protect their identity and cultural rights (Shichor, 2010). With such a background, this study intends to explore the identity reconstruction experiences of some highly educated Muslim Uyghur immigrants<sup>1</sup> in Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the Uyghur immigrants who obtained at least a post-secondary level of education and had several years of work experience before immigrating to Canada. They came to Canada through Federal (and Quebec) Skilled Worker Programs.

Theoretically, this study analyses the Uyghur experiences primarily through the lens of *Lost in Translation* (Hoffman, 1989) in combination with critical race theory and Bourdieusian social theory. The Uyghur experiences of alienation and accommodation, which we have explored through the intersection of these theoretical lens, have significant implications for educationalists in terms of underlining some of the complex challenges that migrants face in seeking to find a home in Canada as well as in relation to the significance of migrant inter-generational dynamics and tensions which is a core concern of this paper. Using *Lost in Translation*, as a non-conventional theoretical perspective, is discussed more in detail later.

In terms of research methods, this qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews of 12 Uyghur immigrants (six males and six females) who have been living in Quebec (six) and some English provinces (six) in the last 5-15 years. All data was obtained between October 2016 to September 2017 and the confidentiality of all participants is strictly protected through using pseudonyms. Ethics approval was obtained before the data collection. The interview questions revolve around how they would perceive themselves as Canadian after living in Canada for some years. More specifically, the interview data is analysed through an open coding scheme, using thematic and structural analysis methods and constant comparison method, strictly relying on inductive, rather than deductive reasoning (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

### **Who are the Uyghurs?**

Uyghurs are ethnically Turkic and as early as 10<sup>th</sup> century they have been following Sunni Islam which is organically mingled with local/pre-Islamic and foreign traditions (Harris & Dawut, 2002). Like many other Muslim groups in Central Asia as well in the Middle East, during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they underwent educational and cultural

reformism known as *Jadidism* aiming at reconstituting the existing Islamic education through introducing secular content and Western teaching methods (Brophy, 2016; Waite, 2007). They had been able to gain their independence twice during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>2</sup> The advent of the communist China in 1949 ended the short Uyghur independence.

Currently, the Uyghurs are one of the 55 officially recognised minority ethnic groups in China, contrasting to the majority Han Chinese who comprise 91% of the total population. According to the 2017 Xinjiang regional census, the Uyghur population is slightly more than 12 million, which still constitutes less than one percent of the entire Chinese population. Yet, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region occupies one sixth of the total Chinese landmass and possesses China's most abundant resources of oil and gas.

They mostly live in the far north-western border region which is the hub of the Eurasian Crossroads. Manchu Empire annexed the region to China proper in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and had ruled the local inhabitants through indirect means till 1884 when Xinjiang (CH. new dominion) province was established (Millward, 2007). Since the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, their religious identity, language and other cultural rights have been facing serious threats, which have escalated in recent years under the rhetoric of "war on terror" (Clarke, 2017; Roberts, 2020; Smith-Finley, 2019). Currently, it is estimated that at least one million Uyghurs and other Turkic

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<sup>2</sup> These two independent states were established in two locations of Xinjiang by the local Turkic elites. One of those states was East Turkistan Islamic Republic (1933-1934), while the other being East Turkistan Republic (1944-1949). For more information see Bovingdon, G. (2010). *The Uyghurs: Strangers in their own land*. Columbia University Press.

Muslims have been detained within “centralized transformation through education training centers” (*jizhong jiaoyu zhuanhua peixun zhongxin*- 集中教育转化培训中心) that aim to combat ethnic separatism and religious extremism. The conditions of those centres are extremely poor, and various forms of abuse are widespread (Greitens et al. 2020; Zenz, 2019).

Meanwhile, there is strong evidence that in recent years Uyghur women have been facing increasingly strict and ruthless birth control policies regulated by the state. According to The Associated Press (2020), births plunged by more than 60% in South Xinjiang between 2015 and 2018, while births fell only 4.2 % nationwide over the same period. Moreover, a report by Xu and colleagues (2020) shows that between 2017 and 2019 more than 80 thousand Uyghurs were transferred out of Xinjiang to various cities of China where they were exploited as forced cheap labour in the factories linked to at least 82 international brands including Apple, BMW, Nike, Gap, Samsung and Sony.

Uyghur migration to Canada started in the 1990s. According to Statistics Canada, in 2016 there were 1555 Uyghurs living in Canada. Another estimation puts the Uyghur population in Canada at around 5000 in 2012 (Reyhan, 2012).

### ***Lost in Translation* (Hoffman, 1989) and the Uyghur immigrants**

Eva Hoffman’s autobiography *Lost in Translation* (1989) deeply inspired us while we were first ruminating over the ideas about how to explore the cultural integration journeys of the Uyghur immigrants in Canada. It was her stories that planted the seeds for this inquiry. We found that her personal stories about her and her family members’ identity reconstruction experiences in Canada as well as the USA resonate so much with the narratives of our Uyghur research participants in Canada; the sense of being lost she and

her family experienced has mirrored, to a great extent, the identity dilemmas the Uyghurs faced in their new world. Notwithstanding some major contextual differences in terms of differing experiences of communism in the country of origin, differing levels of prior knowledge of the English language, Hoffman's insights into the migrant experience of displacement and identity formation have major relevance to the case of the Uyghurs in Canada.

Both the Hoffman family and the Uyghurs selected for this study wanted to emigrate as a result of their quest for political freedom, equality and future economic prosperity; all factors seem to have great importance for them. They had all previously had rich life experiences in their home countries prior to their migration to Canada. And they all would "thrash around like a fish thrown from sweet into salty ocean waters" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 160).

Although, Hoffman (1989) seems to be solely dwelling on the language aspect of her identity reconstruction journey, *Lost in translation* occurs beyond the sphere of language or linguistic communication itself; the sense of displacement in the new world Hoffman tries to narrate takes place between two different cultures; it is the product of an "intercultural contact" (Frittella, 2017, p.370). Through the application of Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, critical race theory and Bourdieusian social theory, we draw attention to the ruptured experiences and complex processes of identity formation that are associated with our Uyghur participants' transition to living in Canada. In doing so, we challenge more optimistic assumptions about multicultural society in Canada inevitably fostering fluid pathways towards inclusivity and a collective sense of belonging.

### **Thematic analysis of the Uyghur experiences and perspectives**

### *Estrangement from local culture and politics*

“...they have hardly entered into the web of Canadian life”.

Hoffman (1989, 141)

Eva Hoffman, here, writes about her parents who came from Poland to Canada in their 40s, roughly around the average age of our participants. As suggested by the above quote, our participants, too, expressed limited enthusiasm about Canadian culture. When responding to our questions on Canadian identity and culture, most participants chose to talk about their stance on their positions over Canadian sports, the entertainment industry, celebrities, and general social life, while showing their lack of engagement with these elements in Canadian life. For example, Dolqun from Quebec said:

*I don't know any Canadian celebrity apart from Celine Dion. I knew she was from Canada when I saw Titanic [the movie] 20 years ago. I knew she was from Montreal only after I came to Quebec. I haven't thought about following any Canadian celebrity. I am not interested in them. Of course, I know the political leaders like Steven Harper and Justin Trudeau. But I don't know singers or movie stars. I don't have time for that. By the way I have to make my kids know about Uyghur celebrities.*

Dolqun is one of those typical hardworking skilled immigrants who wishes to prioritize the need to put food on his family's table. While “*having no time*” seems to be a valid reason for not knowing or not being interested in knowing the Canadian celebrities, that is not enough to justify his lack of interest in his surroundings. Another main factor could be the perceived urgency to protect the Uyghur identity, as he expressed in his last sentence. The same concern was demonstrated by Yashar from Quebec, more vividly. However, in his case, before leaving for Quebec, such a concern was totally submerged

by the perceived urgency of internalizing Quebec's French culture in order to become more prepared for the experience of living in Canada, which was accompanied by his admiration and love towards "everything French", as he uttered:

*When I was in wätän<sup>3</sup>, I set a rule in my house forcing everyone to speak French and listen to French music and that situation continued for about a year before we left for Quebec. We even tried to decorate our house in French style. We loved everything French so much and even imagined we were in Quebec. After coming to Quebec, one of the first things we did was to make everything Uyghur in our rented apartment. Speaking Uyghur became a norm and we quickly decorated our apartment in Uyghur style. It is so ironic that, after many years, we still do not feel we are Quebecois or French; we want to be Uyghur...*

It appears that nostalgia led Yashar to implement these measures right after arriving in Quebec. With the passage of time, his immense love towards French culture and lifestyle was rapidly eclipsed by his renewed ethnic consciousness in the diaspora. As in Dolqun's case, the urgency of preserving Uyghur culture and identity which is unrecognized or under-recognized in the West may have pushed him further to defend his own national heritage. Moreover, in both narratives, stressing the importance of native heritage excluded the Canadian or Quebec culture as "the other" from their family spaces. These two sets of identities became mutually exclusive; a similar us vs. them dichotomy emerged again.

For Polat from British Columbia, as well, it was difficult to feel like a Canadian after a decade of living in the country. He uttered:

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<sup>3</sup> "Wätän" means homeland or motherland in Uyghur. Uyghur diaspora community usually uses this word to replace "Xinjiang" which is not seen positively by many Uyghurs.



*It is only on the government's paper that we are Canadian. Emotionally it will take a long time before we will feel like a real Canadian. But I can say now I feel more Canadian than before. I have grown some attachment to Canada, but I am still not that much interested in Canadian politics... We cannot agree totally with the concept of freedom in the White people's culture (Aqlarning mädäniyiti – Uy.). We are scared of it...*

Obviously, he was highlighting “*the concept of freedom in the White people's culture*” as the primary hurdle to a wholehearted acceptance of Canadianness. Put differently, he was equating “*the White people's culture*” to Canadian culture; being Canadian meant to internalize that “White culture”. Azat from British Columbia expressed similar sentiments, while showing much less enthusiasm towards being Canadian:

*While I know many Western or Hollywood movie stars, I am not interested in Canadian celebrities or culture. For example, I really don't understand Hockey...I know the Canadians are crazy about it. But I don't think I will like it one day... Apart from Celine Dion, I don't know other Canadian celebrities. I don't know the names of the Canadian prime ministers before the current and previous one. I am not interested in politics... In my workplace, as well, I cannot be as social as others. I say good morning, hi, good-bye and don't know what else to say to them... I don't understand White people's jokes; they have no effect on me, although my English is good. I don't know how to make friends with them. I have some good friends who are also immigrants. Although some of my locally born colleagues are not White, they are like White. Most of my friends still are Uyghurs. So, I cannot yet feel I am fully Canadian...*

For Azat, his sense of being lost seemed to have come from inside, as in the cases of Dolqun and Yashar, which is his lack of knowledge about and interest in the local culture. To become “*fully Canadian*”, he should be fluent in “White people's” culture just like the locally born non-White residents. In other words, for him “Whiteness” (“Aqliq”

– Uy.) is the key to becoming Canadian; his Uyghur background is incompatible with Canadian identity.

Dolqun, as well, hinted that the reason why he could not become involved in the local culture. *“Their friendship exists only when you get together in some parties. After those parties, you cannot find it. The White people mostly want to be by themselves; they tend to be self-centric....”*, he said, referring to the White Quebecois. For him, the barrier was the personality or the mindset as a form of culture of *“the White people”*, which prevented him from becoming more intimate with them. Meanwhile, he was still consuming the word “friend” in a sense of “strong loyalty and attachment bordering on love”, while being unable to internalize its “good-natured, easy-going sort of” connotation (Hoffman, 1989, p.148) in the “White culture”. Therefore, he could not feel part of Quebec society.

Many other interviews revealed the same “dislocated centers” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 155) that prevented the Uyghur participants from feeling truly at home in Canada. “Their love is oddly isolationist: they are not interested in Canadian politics, or the local culture...” (p. 141). After living in Canada for many years, they could at most name some very famous Canadian celebrities whom they probably had known long before coming to Canada. And among the political leaders, they could only name those who were on the front pages.

That being so, the participants reported that their children experienced a much closer identification with Canadian society. This as well made them feel the growing cultural gap between them and their next generation, as Gülnur from British Columbia recounted:

*About Canadian celebrities I don't know much. But my daughter knows them so well... She watched the Olympics with excitement. She cheered and jumped when Canadians won medals. You cannot imagine how*

*ecstatic she was while watching the games. Seeing me sitting like a dummy, she asked me why I would not show the same enthusiasm. Looking at her, I realized how it was like truly belonging to a nation. Canada is her motherland. For me, Canada is still a country that hosts me...*

Such a gap is discussed in more detail in the next section. But here we highlight the challenges the Uyghur immigrants face in relation to preserving their cultural heritage in Canada where they don't have a sizable community, in contrast to the Hoffman family. That said, the worsening political repressions over Uyghur identity in Xinjiang may have pushed them to more attentively focus on their own cultural heritage rather than developing a strong interest in the mainstream or "White culture" in Canada.

Regarding the more political aspect of the Canadian "White culture", Azat revealed that his growing "dislike" or frustration was partly linked to his experience of economic precarity.

*I have grown in me dislike about the Western politics which is very much money-oriented. They hold elections after elections, and the economy still does not improve. I am paying so much tax, and I don't believe that I can afford a house even my income is pretty high. At my age (42) my mortgage would be very high, and it is difficult to get, as the banks are afraid of me. I am very disappointed with the Canadian politics.*

Overall, our participants seemed to have been experiencing what Hoffman (1989) terms an "oddly isolationist" (p. 141) form of love towards the local Canadian culture, very similar to the scenario of the Hoffman family. They have not yet acquired much interest in the cultural ways of life widely shared and enjoyed in the host country. However, unlike the Hoffman family, the Uyghur participants showed an increasingly strong sense of collective identity crisis, which may have been pushing them to be more inward-looking or conscious of their Uyghur ethnic heritage and identity. This process

may have contributed to their limited passion about being Canadian. Moreover, the life experiences under the highly centralized authoritarian system in Xinjiang, where many economic and political processes are not transparent, may have created in some Uyghurs a sense of apathy or suspicion towards the Canadian political culture as a whole.

Equally important, for many of our participants “Whiteness” was equal to being Canadian; they perceived “White culture” as “the norm” for being Canadian or Quebecois, revealing a serious mismatch with the discourse of multiculturalism or interculturalism, both of which highlight the diverse ingredients that make up Canadian or Quebec identity (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). To a great extent, this may have been the result of what Stanfill (2018) calls “default-white media” (p. 305) that has been shaping the narratives on race and nationhood among the general populations in the West and the Global South. Thus, as immigrants from a developing nation that have been heavily consuming the Western media in the last few decades, our participants could voice being Canadian mostly in that way. Probably they won’t easily change their perspective very soon as “Whiteness” is still overrepresented in the Canadian media. For example, it is estimated that in Canada 90 per cent of the public broadcasters’ staff is White (Mochama, 2017). Generally speaking, the dominance of White representation in the media at the expense of other races is much in evidence in our post-colonial era (Griffin, 2014; Kendall, 2013).

### ***Growing inter-generational distance***

*“What is our Alinka turning into? ....my sister pains us with her capacity for change, with becoming so different from what she was. She is leaving us abruptly, leaving us to find her own pleasures.”*

(Hoffman 1989, pp.143-144)

Eva Hoffman is describing in the above quotation her younger sister who came to Canada at the age of nine. Therefore, Canada virtually is the primary venue where her early life experiences take place. She does not have significant or conscious memories about her life in Poland that could have made her more resistant to the Canadian ways of life. So, “her capacity for change” turns out to be astonishing and difficult for Eva and her parents to accept. Similar scenarios were reflected through the narratives of many participants, who similarly sensed the ever-growing gap between them and their children. Such a growing distance they perceived seemed to be cultural or emotional, or both.

At the cultural level, it appears that some lifestyle factors would often cause friction among the Uyghur parents and their young children, as Ramilä from Ontario recounts:

*My daughter likes to dress up like the local kids, which I don't like, as it is too open. When we say she should not be like that, she will become angry, saying that we are out of date. We don't want to create more tension, so we just accept it. But we feel bad.*

While, Ramilä did not require her daughter to wear a hijab, as she herself was not wearing one, she was not happy to see her “dressing up like local kids” who were too liberal. The culture her daughter was adopting from Canadian society was seen as alien to their Uyghur cultural tradition which emphasizes modesty, especially regarding women (Mahmut & Smith Finley, 2017). Accordingly, several Uyghur parents expressed their concerns over their daughters’ dressing styles during the interviews. They generally accepted the reality but felt very disappointed.

The gap could also be emotional. For example, some Uyghur parents felt their children should have been emotionally closer to them. It seemed that they, like Hoffman,

realized “the familial bonds seem[ed] so dangerously loose here” in Canada (Hoffman, 1989, p. 145). Azat from BC narrated his concerns as such:

*The teachers want children to be independent from their parents, not to be close or bonding with them. They teach the kids what parts of their body their parents cannot touch. In wätän, the bonding between parents and kids is very strong. In our culture, parents and kids should be very close; they should hug each other a lot; they should be able to sleep next to each other. So, I hug my daughter a lot. The first thing I do when she wakes up in the morning is to give her a long hug...I think this is also a societal issue... I found that it is difficult to be friends with White people.*

Azat perceived the same “reality” Hoffman (1989) describes, while highlighting the bonding between parents and children in Uyghur childrearing culture. As Zang (2017) finds in his study on Uyghur conceptions of family and society, the parent–child relations among Uyghurs are seen “more affectionate, more equal, and more consistent and interdependent than those among Han Chinese”, who heavily rely on Confucian ways of parenting which advocates strict discipline and hierarchy, while stressing filial piety. As one of Zang’s (2017) informants said, the Han Chinese parents are “stern and stress discipline; they don’t show as much affection for children as we (the Uyghurs) do” (p. 48).

Although Azat didn’t compare Han Chinese with Uyghurs in this respect, his above narratives are in line with the findings of Zang (2017), in terms of how Uyghurs value affection in intergenerational relationships. In Azat’s view, Uyghur ethnic heritage was undermined by the Canadian “White culture” reproduced by the education system in Canada. Azat clearly didn’t want to see the widening emotional distance between him and his daughter. For him, as well as for many other Uyghur immigrants, there should be no such a gap between parents and children.

He sensed the potential for his daughter to become alienated from him as the result of her exposure to the Canadian education and broader society, if he did not act immediately. Yet, it seemed to have been very difficult for him to prevent it from happening as he “*realized that it [was] a societal issue*”. The “White people” had such a culture that would make anyone “cold”, like “*some of [his] locally born colleagues [who became] like White*”.

Eva Hoffman’s mother and Azat, who both happened to be living in Vancouver, felt the same unpleasant distance between them and their daughters, and could not be comfortable about it. As in the case of Eva Hoffman’s mother who did not want her daughter to become “English” or “cold” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 146), Azat didn’t want the bond between him and his daughter to be jeopardized in the future. He expressed his worries, highlighting the situation among the White Canadians, specifically describing how he found it very difficult to be close friends with the White people in Canada.

Ayshä from Quebec similarly expressed the following concerns:

*I really don’t want to be like the Quebecois <sup>4</sup> who end up living alone and miserably at the old age. But I have a feeling that my children, especially my son is drifting away from me. I want to chat with them on many things, but they don’t want to sit with me very often. I remember I was so much attached to my parents when I was their age. They socialize with their friends, much more often than with us...*

The sense of growing distance Ayshä sensed between her and her children is indeed a painful one. She again highlighted the strength of the inter-generational bond in Uyghur

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<sup>4</sup> During many other conversations, it became clear that by saying Quebecois, the Uyghur participants meant White people in Quebec, rather than the racial others who were born in Quebec, too.

culture, through her own childhood memories, while comparing it with the Canadian or Quebec context, in which the elderly White parents would “*end up living alone and miserably in their old age*”, far away from their children. Meanwhile, she expressed her deep hope that her children would not become alienated from her in the future. In other words, here, the similar “cold” nature of inter-generational connection in the “White” Quebec society was perceived and rejected at the same time.

That said, the Canadian “cold” way of familial bonding, at least partly, may have been the result of the growing discourse of individualism in the West. Collectivism, as a competing discourse, is dominant in Eastern societies (Hofstede et al., 2010). As members of the Jewish cultural community, as well as having come from Poland which was a satellite state of the former USSR, Hoffman’s parents express their rejection of individualism, in a similar way as our research participants who have an Oriental/Muslim background which intersects with the Chinese style of communism or socialism; both highlight collectivism. As Ahmad (2011) contends, in Islamic philosophy, the collectivism needed for building a civilized society is strongly highlighted at different levels. At the family level, the obligation of the children is emphatically stressed. For example, the Qur’an says:

*“Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him and that ye be kind to parents, whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life. Say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them but address them in terms of honour”* (Qur'an, 17:23).

As such, the growing inter-generational gap perceived by our participants indeed reflects their concerns over their children becoming “cold” in Canada where individualism may have been one of the major root causes of such a phenomenon. Thus, both in Quebec and English Canada, the Uyghur participants voiced very similar concerns about the growing inter-generational distance, highlighting the collectivism that has been



at the core of the Uyghur family space. More specifically, familial bonding and filial piety, as stressed in the above Qur'anic verses, were potentially vulnerable in the Canadian "White" and "cold" society.

***"Hysteresis" effect and shifting habitus***

*"Pattern is the soil of significance; and it is surely one of the hazards of emigration, and exile, and extreme mobility, that one is uprooted from that soil"*

(Hoffman, 1989, p. 278).

Bourdieu (1990) highlights the existence of a "hysteresis effect" which takes place when the habitus meets new situations that are not in parallel with the original or traditional upbringings; the habitus cannot catch up with the new conditions or positions which are built on some unfamiliar habitus, resulting in delay (p.78). Such an effect may help individuals change their habitus or creatively adapt to the new contexts while modifying the original ones (Kerr & Robinson, 2009). Accordingly, an increasing number of scholars in recent years have argued that habitus, as the way of life, is becoming more flexible in our increasingly globalized and interconnected world (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Lee & Kramer, 2013).

With regard to *Lost in Translation*, while Hoffman (1989) does not use any specific lens at a theoretical level to describe her identity dilemmas in the new world, her narratives reveal the very "hysteresis effect" she experienced when encountering the new ways of life in the North America. Recalling the early years of her new life in the new continent, she writes:

The more I come to know about America, the more I have the dizzying sensation that I am a quantum particle trying to locate myself within a

swirl of atoms. How much time and energy I'll have to spend just claiming an ordinary place for myself! And how much more figuring out what that place might be, where on earth I might find a stable spot that feels like it's mine, and from which I can calmly observe the world (p. 160).

Yet, towards the end of the memoir she also reveals that “eventually, the voices enter me; by assuming them, I gradually make them mine. I am being remade, fragment by fragment, like a patchwork quilt; there are more colors in the world than I ever knew” (p. 220). Obviously, after going through a “hysteresis” effect (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 78), she gradually starts adapting herself to the fresh sets of habitus in the new world, and begins to see the beauty of her new home, while feeling that her “sense of the future returns like a benediction, to balance the earlier annunciation of loss. It returns in the simplest of ways” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 279).

Indeed, habitus is transformable at a conscious or unconscious level, and such a process can be reflective, too (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). As such, Hoffman was able to build her new self after many years of struggling between two sets of cultures or habitus. The narratives of our participants similarly provide a reminder that identity is not immutable; it changes as habitus can adapt itself to new contexts. Meanwhile, the old sets of habitus are questioned regarding their validity in the new world. Yet, before coming to the stories of our participants, it is important to note that in our highly globalized world, people may have been experiencing habitus transformations without even moving to exotic or fresh contexts.

For example, in 2016, soon after somebody shared a short video of an extravagant Uyghur wedding in Xinjiang, the Uyghur Internet was bombarded by narratives mocking and criticizing the lavish ceremony that showed off wealth and fame. While, as Byler and Kadir (2016) argue, displaying wealth and elaborate music and dancing during weddings were indeed part of traditional Uyghur culture, in our current

globalized world, the Uyghur populace have already started to break away from their old mindsets or habitus. In the authors' words, "mocking Ms. Munirä's wedding was a way of identifying what they did not want to be". The strong intention to pull oneself away from those characteristics is already a sign of feeling uncomfortable within one's own culture or habitus.

Obviously, living in Canada can create even greater influences on the Uyghur habitus, which would be subject to more direct and powerful stimulations and long-lasting impacts. As such, we could see the vivid signs of "hysteresis" effect our participants experienced in their new Canadian contexts. These could be clearly observed from the narratives of Azat from British Columbia.

*You know, it is difficult for me to feel like a Canadian even though I have a Canadian passport now. I still cannot understand the White people. They are difficult to approach. I try to be close to them, but they always seem to want to keep some distance from me. I don't understand the way they treat people. They call you a friend, but you don't feel you are friends.*

Evidently, he was experiencing the clash between his original habitus with the new one he encountered during his interaction with the local White Canadians. More specifically, the habitus within social interactions in Canada didn't match with his habitus adopted through his life within the Uyghur community. There are parallels here with Eva Hoffman (1989) being seen as "English" and "cold" by her mother, while Eva Hoffman learned from her teacher how to interact with others in a Canadian way (p.146). Moreover, Azat saw "White people" as a unique category - the representatives of Canadians. He would not feel like a Canadian, because he could not "*understand the White people*". Similar narratives were voiced by other participants, such as Yashar from Quebec who said: "*The White people are too materialistic; they want to enjoy life as much as they can;*

*they don't save money. They don't want to get married and have kids. I cannot imagine myself living like that."*

Dolqun, too, expressed his similar perspectives by saying:

*They (White Quebecois) don't show their respect towards the elderly people, as we do, as there is no age difference between two generations... Their friendship exists only when you get together in some parties. After those parties, you cannot find it. They mostly want to be by themselves; they tend to be self-centered.*

These narratives indicate that the Uyghur immigrants were experiencing an “hysteresis” effect as the result of the mismatch between their original habitus and Canadian “White culture”. These accounts resonate with the narratives of Hoffman (1989) who is “an incompletely assimilated immigrant, [who is]...always confronting ‘the Culture,’ [which] is becoming... more celebrity obsessed, more materialistic, more sentimental” (p. 220). That is her perception of “the Culture” she has not yet been able to adjust to. Here she uses a capital “c” for culture, most probably highlighting its prominence or power in her new world. The Uyghurs would not feel otherwise about some aspects of Canadian culture – the “White Culture”, either. Such a representation could be more of a reality, rather than just a perception in Hoffman’s time of 1960s or 70s or even 80s during which the White people were the overwhelming majority in Canada. However, Hoffman does not stress her Jewishness contrasting it to “Whiteness” based on Anglo-Saxon roots. Instead, she seems to give more attention to the communist and collectivistic culture she came from, comparing it with the North American, highly individualistic, materialistic “cold Culture”.

That said, Hoffman’s (1989) lack of concerns or reflections over “Whiteness” in becoming Canadian or North American is most probably due to her own racial invisibility within North America. As Jacobson (1999) puts it, “like other non-Anglo-Saxon

immigrants, Jews gradually became Caucasians over the course of 20<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 172). Thus, the main struggle she experienced between Anglo-Saxon and Jewish/East European identities is cultural rather than racial. However, the advantages bestowed to Anglo-Saxon culture are undoubtedly predictable and “natural”. These are among the series of invisible privileges that the White people can enjoy in the West, as illustrated in McIntosh’s (1989) list; they can still be as prevalent as before in our social media driven post-colonial world (Griffin, 2014; Kendall, 2013).

Echoing such hidden power relations, many participants implied that “Whiteness” would directly represent the Canadian identity; being White is being Canadian; “Whiteness” is “the norm” in becoming Canadian; Canadian culture is “White culture”. They most often would compare themselves with the “White people” and their culture when they were asked about their Canadian identity.

Yet, just like Hoffman (1989) who gradually adapts to the local ways of life, the participants also highlighted similar tendencies in their stories. For example, Ayshā’s narratives could reveal such a development very well.

*Although I cannot feel yet I am Canadian, I feel I am different from who I was before. My perspectives were too narrow. I used to think people were either good or bad...you know, we were taught or raised that way, both in school and at home. We judge people according to their look or clothes. When I first arrived here, I was astonished to see how casually people were dressed, and how non-judgmental they were towards each other...*

This was another response to the question of being Canadian, and she clearly tied her points with the Canadian ways of life she perceived through her lived experiences. Now she was questioning her old ways of thinking and behaving, while revealing her acceptance of the new ways of life in Canada. She was breaking away from some of her original habitus, while adopting some new ones into her life. Yashar from Quebec was

more direct in expressing his voices in parallel with Ayshä's by saying "*I don't think now I can live as comfortably as before in the city I was born in. Many things seem to have changed in me. I am more comfortable here*". Likewise, Sattar from British Columbia, uttered similar points, recalling his visit to his hometown in 2015, "*I realized that there was a large gap between me and my old friends. When we chatted, our points didn't match well anymore. Our world views became different. I think I am becoming more Canadian? Maybe.*"

The above three participants had two common points. First, they had now new outlooks on life which were quite different from the old ones. Second, they appeared to have already started to appreciate their new worldviews and lifestyles that they had adopted in Canada. They were signaling that their overall habitus had begun to shift; they had become "*more Canadian*".

Ramilä from Ontario expressed some equivalent positions, but from a more overtly political angle, relating her memories when she went back to Xinjiang last time in 2015:

*I feel that now I cannot live in wätän without feeling a lot of stress. You are either supposed to support the government or you are the enemy of the people. And I can't stand anymore how the Han Chinese treat us in the stores, in government offices, everywhere. After coming to Canada, I felt the equality, especially being women and minority...I feel more like a human being and Canadian. Many things in wätän are too much for me to accept now...*

Here, Ramilä pointed out the everyday discrimination the Uyghurs face in Xinjiang, as well as the political habitus people have become used to over the years. She could no longer experience her previous ways of life in Xinjiang as normal, while starting to appreciate the new sets of habitus in Canada, during which she would become more "*like a human being and Canadian*". She also questioned the habitus at the macro level

in Xinjiang which invokes comparisons with Hoffman's revisiting of her home context in Poland:

The System over there [in Poland], by specializing in deceit, has bred in its citizens an avid hunger for what they still quaintly call the truth. Of course, the truth is easier to identify when it's simply the opposite of a lie. So much Eastern European thinking moves along the axis of bipolar ideas, still untouched by the peculiar edginess and fluidity created by a more decentered world (p. 211).

It is noticeable that both accounts highlight the binary thinking that characterizes the authoritarian regimes of the home countries in question. In the case of Xinjiang, this has taken the form of the dichotomizing of the Uyghur populace into "good" and "bad" Muslims (Mamdani, 2005), who are deemed to be either politically compliant and tolerated or regarded as politically subversive.

Ramilä had started to highly appreciate her new ways of life in Canada where she was adapting to the new sets of habitus that differed in a major way from the ones in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, the gap between the political cultures in two very distinct contexts is likely to have produced some "hysteresis" effects in the beginning. But she soon started to adjust and make herself comfortable in the fresh Canadian context. Like many other participants, her habitus transformed in a way that would make her feel more at home. Simultaneously, Xinjiang could no longer give her the same sense of comfort, belonging and normality.

Obviously, the "hysteresis" effect and habitus transformation journeys have not terminated at all but will continue among the Uyghur immigrants in Canada. Hoffman (1989) spends three decades to feel at home, to make sure that "this is the place where [she is] alive"; no other space can replace it (p. 280). Only time can tell if our participants will have a similar future. Their incomplete translation into the local Canadian or Quebec

Culture will not stop there. But no one can guarantee that they all will achieve equal outcomes. Because, again, “cultural distances are different” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 146), and we are all different as individuals who are all subjective beings.

### **The application of Hoffman’s work to the experience of the Uyghurs: Some broader considerations**

We are not alone in drawing on Hoffman’s work to enhance understanding of the experience of migration and identity. Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* has been analysed to cast insights into language and identity (e.g. Besemeres 1998; Jilani 2015; Lutz 2011), multiculturalism and identity (Fritella, 2017), immigrant autobiography (Karpinski 1996) as well as education and migration (Proefriedt, 1991).

It is noticeable that our analytical approach has been directly shaped by Hoffman’s work in so far as the reading of her work has generated ideas and concepts which has served as a lens through which to enhance understanding of the experiences of emigrant Uyghurs in Canada. In this respect, our engagement with Hoffman’s work resonates with the approach of Helma Lutz (2011) who divulges a direct, revelatory and inspirational impact on her research (rather than viewing the memoir merely as source material) declaring that “When I read the book many years ago, it was eye-opening and in some ways changed my view as a sociologist interested in migrants’ biographies” (p. 348).

In his essay on the nature of anthropological understanding, Geertz has drawn attention to the way that ethnographic research entails a process of translation whereby the views of informants are re-presented through theories, concepts and specialist vocabulary. Drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, Clifford Geertz draws attention to how research inevitably entails a translation from “experience near”



(e.g. everyday familiar terms) to “experience distant” (e.g. specialist, technical) concepts (Geertz, 1983 b). Our use of Hoffman’s work serves as a reminder that the conceptualisation and analysis of qualitative data can occur through diverse and multi-directional channels, especially in the contemporary era of the “blurring” and “mixing” of genres that Geertz has so eloquently elucidated (Geertz, 1983 a). We have been influenced by a memoir by an individual who has deliberately couched her experiences of migration in a language that is accessible to the general reader, relying heavily on “experience near” rather than “experience distant” concepts. This has generated ideas and insights to enhance understanding of the Uyghurs migrant experiences, which has led us to view the ethnographic data through a new lens and has prompted us to engage more deeply with a range of theoretically informed “experience distant” concepts - with particular reliance on the work of Pierre Bourdieu- in response to these influences.

## **Conclusion**

Through the application of Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*, critical race theory and Bourdieusian social theory, we have argued that the experiences of Uyghurs adaptation to Canada as a new home are replete with ruptures, tensions and estrangement that relate to prevailing hegemonic dominance of “Whiteness” (reflected in media representations), the economic precarity of immigrants, inter-generational dynamics and cultural tensions (e.g. relating to perceptions of “individualism” and “collectivism”). The narrative accounts reveal instances of both adaptation to and appreciation of Canadian society as well as enduring feelings of alienation. Such experiences belie the more optimistic assumptions that Canadian multiculturalism inevitably fosters fluid pathways to inclusivity and belonging. At the end of her memoir, Hoffman reminds us that in

increasingly globalized and diverse societies “dislocation is the norm rather than the aberration in our time” and that “the fabulous diverseness with which we live reminds us constantly that we are no longer the norm or the center” (Hoffman, 1989, pp. 274-275). Yet our Uyghur participants seem to be lost in the “White culture” hidden in the Canadian systemic discourses which continue “to centre the experiences of the ‘two founding’ nations of Canada” (Leroux, 2012, p. 67).

Uyghurs in Xinjiang have found themselves to be increasingly marginalized within their *wätän* as a result of the 'Sinification' of the region (evidenced most visibly in the mass migration and settlement of Han Chinese), political constraints and assimilative measures (Roberts, 2020; Smith Finley, 2019). They have subsequently become “strangers in their own land” (Bovingdon, 2010).

In seeking to find a new home in Canada, our Uyghur participants have experienced a new form of estrangement based on a perception that “Whiteness” is a prerequisite to full membership in Canadian society. All of this reveals their double alienation and estrangement within their country of origin and in Canada.

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