

[Translated from Chinese]

Receipt is hereby acknowledged of the letter dated 20 September 2023 addressed jointly by the United Nations Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights and Special Rapporteur on the right to education (ref. AL CHN 13/2023). The Chinese Government wishes to make the following reply:

A. Legal and regulatory basis for the establishment of boarding schools in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China

In accordance with article 17 of the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China, which provides that "people's governments at the county level may set up boarding institutions as needed to ensure that children and adolescents of school age who live in dispersed areas receive compulsory education", and in conjunction with the implementation of the Outline of the National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020), in 2011, Xinjiang issued the Outline of the Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan for the Autonomous Region (2010–2020), which calls for "Rationally planning the placement of schools in accordance with the needs of urban and rural development and the principle of facilitating students' access to nearby schools, and concentrating on running a number of boarding institutions in agricultural and pastoral areas and in agricultural and pastoral settlements, while also running the necessary teaching points". In 2023, the Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Accelerating the Construction of a High-Quality Rural Education System and Promoting Education Services for Rural Revitalization (Education and Development [2023] No. 2), called for "promoting the transformation of the application of education planning from a single administrative area to economic zones and across administrative areas; improving the efficiency of education resource allocation and the level of basic public education services in county areas; paying a high level of attention to small-scale schools, especially rural schools with zero enrolment, and strengthening the construction of boarding institutions in urban and rural areas to meet students' residential needs". Boarding institutions in Xinjiang are designed to ensure educational equity and allow children in remote and difficult-to-reach areas to have equal access to education, always fulfilling the epochal responsibility and historical mission of rural education, and are an indispensable part of the basic education system, as well as a basic project to ensure that children of school age in remote areas of the agricultural and pastoral regions receive compulsory education.

Boarding institutions are an important form of schooling in China, a natural choice that has long been made in the practice of schooling in various places, in keeping with the basic national conditions in China, the geographic realities of each place, and the educational needs of the people, and with a clear legal and regulatory basis; they are found throughout the country, and pupils of all ethnic groups can voluntarily choose whether or not to board.

B. Overview of compulsory education in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China

Located in north-western China, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is a sparsely populated area covered by a wide range of deserts including the Gobi. Due to geographic and climatic factors, the population and villages of Xinjiang are mainly located in oases surrounded by the Gobi and other deserts, where the people live in more dispersed settings. The long distances and inconvenience of travelling to various

places also make it difficult for students from rural and pastoral areas to attend school in the immediate vicinity of their homes. For example, the village of Raskam in Dafdar Township, Taxkorgan Tajik Autonomous County, Kashgar Region, is 160 kilometres from the seat of township government and 220 kilometres from the county seat. Travelling to and from school on their own or with parents is a heavy burden on students and their families, and consumes a great deal of time and energy on the part of both. In order to fulfil its legal responsibility to ensure that school-age children and adolescents receive compulsory education, and to foster the development of compulsory education, Xinjiang has resorted to a number of modalities, such as promoting the construction of boarding institutions and operating alternative education facilities at the rural level, thereby reflecting the regional characteristics of schooling in Xinjiang and better suiting the objective educational needs of the people of all ethnic groups.

In September 1949, the enrolment rate of school-age children in Xinjiang was only 19.8 per cent, with only 457 primary school students per 10,000 people. By the end of 2022, the net enrolment rate for primary schools was 99.98 per cent and for junior middle schools 99.90 per cent.

Boarding institutions have been developing in Xinjiang for a long time. As early as 1954, Xinjiang set up the first government-provided full board and lodging Tajik primary school in Taxkorgan County, Kashgar Region, and subsequently in Wuqia County, Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture and other pastoral areas. In order to ensure that school-age children and adolescents in the pastoral areas receive an education, and taking into account the characteristics of the vast territory of Xinjiang and the inconvenience of transport in the border pastoral areas, Xinjiang has primarily set up boarding institutions and regular primary day schools, and also run mobile itinerant primary schools. Boarding schools in pastoral areas are both government-sponsored and run by pastoralists themselves; boarding conditions are ensured by the pastoralist brigades and the schools, teachers and students are self-sufficient.

In Xinjiang, in order to fully safeguard the right of children and adolescents of all ethnic groups in rural and pastoral areas to receive compulsory education, both boarding institutions and small-scale rural schools with fewer than 100 pupils continue to operate. By improving their conditions of operation, strengthening their teaching staff and upgrading the quality of their teaching, these schools have effectively handled the correlation between pupils' proximity to schools and their ability to receive a good compulsory education, and have effectively safeguarded the right of rural students of all ethnic groups to fairly receive education.

C. Key practices and results for boarding institutions in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China

The construction of boarding institutions in Xinjiang is intended to implement and enforce the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China and the relevant policies and regulations of the State and the autonomous regions, and to guarantee that school-age children in need receive compulsory education. In actual practice, whether primary and secondary school students board or not is a voluntary choice made by the students and their parents on the basis of their actual needs, with the schools respecting the wishes of the students and their parents. We have made the construction of small-scale rural schools and township boarding institutions an

important part of the standardization of compulsory-education schools and the balanced development of compulsory education, and have coordinated the relationship between local schooling and centralized school operations, effectively resolving the problems that children in remote farming and pastoral areas encounter. For example, the village of Raskam in Dafdar Township, Taxkorgan Tajik Autonomous County, is more than 300 kilometres from the city of Kashgar at an average altitude of more than 4,000 metres on the Pamir Plateau, with a total area of 25,000 square kilometres and a population of only 41,000 people. For some time in the past, these conditions made it difficult for children in the mountainous areas to go to school. Now, most parents and children here choose boarding institutions. Another example: ██████████, a third-grade student from this county, said: “My home is in Raskam village, more than 160 kilometres from the township seat and more than 220 kilometres from the county seat, the road is very long and mostly mountainous, so Mum and Dad sent me to board at the school. I’m very happy here, learning well, eating well and having fun, and I get more opportunities to make more friends.”

Xinjiang boarding institutions are built in accordance with the relevant construction standards of the State and the autonomous regions and are fully equipped with all types of learning and living facilities; the teaching workforce is maintained and replenished in a variety of ways, such as through recruitment, volunteer teaching assistance and government purchase of their services, while funding for the running of the schools is borne entirely by the Government. Rural boarding students at the compulsory education stage are completely exempt from tuition, textbook and lodging expenses and enjoy a special subsidy for living expenses of RMB 1,250 yuan per person per school year for primary schools and RMB 1,500 per person per school year for junior middle schools. For example, ██████████, a student at ██████████ ██████████ in Yutian County, Hotan Prefecture, said: “My home is more than 60 kilometres away from the nearest school, and my family’s economic conditions are not very good, but my Mum and Dad have never had to worry about my younger brother and me being able to attend school, because we enjoy the 15-year free education policy; once we arrived at the school, we didn’t have to pay out of pocket to attend, and we also enjoy each semester’s subsistence allowance. More than RMB 70,000 yuan in tuition, textbooks and room and board expenses for my younger brother and me from primary school to secondary school have all been free of charge. Without the benefit of such a good State education policy for the people, there’s no way my family could have afforded to pay that kind of money.”

Xinjiang boarding institutions teach in accordance with national and regional curricula and standards, providing evening self-study in the evenings with teachers on duty to provide in-class counselling, answer students’ questions and clear up any confusion they may have, and help them consolidate their subject knowledge and improve their academic standards. For example, ██████████ ██████████, a student at ██████████ ██████████ in Hotan City, Hotan Prefecture, said: “My academic performance used to be poor, and my parents are farmers too, so when I went home at night to do my homework, there was no one to guide me when there were topics I didn’t know, and I often couldn’t keep up with what the teachers taught me in class either. But when I went to the boarding institution in Hotan City, I had teachers to help me with my homework in the self-study sessions every evening. Before going to bed at night, you can also compare notes and study with your classmates, or discuss maths problems that you can’t do. My studies have taken off, thanks to my teachers who are

with me every day in my studies and my life, and I will definitely study hard and try to get into a good college.”

To attend to students' diets and everyday lives and to help them develop good living habits, Xinjiang boarding institutions have arranged positions for dormitory counsellors, life instructors and others. In accordance with national and regional standards, these institutions are also equipped with such facilities as bathrooms, canteens, infirmaries, libraries and psychological counselling rooms, providing students with clean, hygienic, nutritious and safe diets, bathing and all types of life-support services. For example, ██████████, parent of ██████████ a student at ██████████ in Qira County, Hotan Prefecture, said: “Our home is more than 100 kilometres from the county seat and more than 10 kilometres from the school next to the township government building. Our living conditions are ordinary, and as our child was growing, I feared that the nutrition she got at home would be insufficient. Later, when she went to the boarding institution and I accompanied her to report for school, the school was so beautiful. The dormitory was so spacious, with separate toilets, washrooms, sports facilities and so on; whenever she came home, she had put on weight, and kept saying that the food at school was better than the food at home.”

In order to facilitate contact between parents and students, regulations require every boarding institution to install a fixed-line telephone in the dormitory building; students can call their parents at any time. The telephone numbers of the teachers in charge of the school's classes are made available to parents, who can also call their children at any time if something comes up. Boarding students generally go home at weekends, and while at school they can also take leave to go home at any time during the school year if needed. Normal holidays and summer and winter breaks are observed. For example, ██████████, a seventh-year student in Wupu Township, Yizhou District, Hami City, said: “I study in a boarding institution, and every Friday the school sends a bus to take us home, and then to take us back to school on Monday, which is very convenient.” Another example: ██████████, parent of ██████████, a student at ██████████ in Hami City, Barkol County, said: “Boarding conditions at the school are particularly good; not only do they not charge any fees, but also the school provides a weekly subsidy to students for going home by bus. At school, our child often uses the public telephone to call and tell us what happened to him at school; eating at school is free of charge, the meals are tasty and the nutrition well balanced, and our child likes them very much. School materials and tuition are all free, which allowed our family to save nearly five thousand yuan over the past year.” Another example: the ██████████ founded in 1891, is the oldest school in Xinjiang; its Green Valley Campus is a boarding institution with 1,079 boarding students. ██████████, a student there, said: “The residence hall teacher is like a mom to us, very strict but also warm and considerate. The living facilities and environmental hygiene of the school dormitory are very good, and make us feel particularly comfortable; I really like boarding at school.” Another example: ██████████, a seventh-year class 3 student at the boarding middle school in Chunkur Town, Burqin County, Altay Prefecture, said: “My family lives in Chunkur Village, Chunkur Town; due to the distance from the school and the inconvenience of the road, I chose to go to the boarding institution. I stay at the school from Monday to Friday, where we laugh and play every day, and the students of all ethnicities learn together, play together, and live together, just like a big family. We study hard together in the classroom, exercise our bodies on the playground, and add bricks and mortar to the

future of our hometown.” Another example: the ██████████ in Hami City is a boarding institution in the city, nearly 60 per cent of whose boarding students are of Han ethnicity. Eighth-year class 3 student ██████████ father ██████████ said: “Since our home is relatively far from the school and I am very busy at my work, picking up and dropping off our child is very inconvenient, so we applied to let him live at the school. Since he’s been at the school, studying and living together with children of all ethnicities, he’s gotten more proactive in all respects, and his personality has also become much more optimistic. He often likes to share with us what the teacher taught in class, or the interesting things that happened among his classmates. His ability to take care of himself has become stronger, he can finish his homework on time every day, organize his own school bag, and conscientiously gets up in the morning to study. In October of this year, the school held an open week for parents, inviting parents to the school to get a sense of the conditions under which their children learn and live. I personally went to the school, and it was just like what our child had been telling us on his home visits. All this is part and parcel of what the teachers are teaching. We are grateful to the teachers and are perfectly at ease handing over our children to the school.”

The introduction of residential education meets the expectations of all ethnic groups and also promotes the healthy physical and mental growth and academic performance of students in their localities. The results of the unified middle school examination in the Autonomous Region show that academic performance in all subjects has been improving year by year. As monitored by the Region over the past three years, the average overall regional total score on the junior middle school academic level examination rose from 324.83 points in 2020 to 361.93 points in 2023, an increase of 37.1 points, of which the average mathematics score rose from 58.2 points in 2020 to 66.85 points in 2023, an increase of 8.65 points. For example, ██████████ is a parent residing in Maigaiti County, Kashgar region; his daughter ██████████ is a ninth-year student at ██████████ in Maigaiti County. He said: “She used to not like to do homework, but when she started residential study at the ██████████, her self-management has gotten a workout, and now when she comes home she can do homework on her own initiative; her academic grades have improved and her class rank has gone from the bottom to near the top. When she comes home, she also often shares with us the scientific and cultural knowledge she has learned at school. From the bottom of my heart, I think that the boarding system is really good.”

From a national perspective, boarding institutions are not unique to Xinjiang. Every province in China has established “boarding + day” schools for all school-age children, and boarding is becoming a major form of schooling in China, especially in the large-scale agricultural and pastoral areas. This is a natural choice based on the long-standing practice of schooling in various regions and is in line with the basic national conditions of China, as well as the geographic realities of the vast agricultural and pastoral areas and the educational needs of the people. In 2021, the proportion of boarding students at the primary school level was 12.94 per cent on average in western China, and 13.54 per cent in Xinjiang.

D. Offering of ethnic-minority language classes and preservation of ethnic-minority languages and cultures in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China

Language and writing are important vehicles for cultural transmission. All compulsory-education schools in Xinjiang, including boarding institutions, strictly comply with the relevant requirements of the State and the autonomous regions and are carrying out comprehensive education in the national common spoken and written language, as well as offering classes in minority languages for primary and secondary school students, so as to better pass on and carry forward minority languages and cultures. Schools in all regions consult students and their parents in a variety of ways so that students and their parents can voluntarily choose whether or not to take minority language classes, and the number of students and classes they choose to study are used as the basis for curriculum arrangements. In terms of teaching materials, the Autonomous Region guarantees the supply of four types of teaching materials for primary and secondary schools, namely Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Mongolian, with a total of 74 volumes of teaching materials in these minority languages. With regard to teachers, localities select teachers with professional backgrounds and teaching experience to teach minority languages. For curriculum development, localities are implementing the requirement that “minority language courses are to be offered as local courses in years 1–8” and are designing teaching modes and organizing education and teaching in a scientific manner, taking into account the number of students choosing to study minority languages and scripts and the school year in which they are enrolled. In the area of teaching, research and evaluation, localities have incorporated minority language courses into their teaching and research systems, strengthened routine teaching management and actively carried out various teaching and research activities to ensure the quality of teaching and learning in minority language courses.

In higher education, Xinjiang has made great efforts to cultivate persons talented in minority languages, relying on professional specialists in Chinese minority language and literature to set up Uyghur and Kazakh language training orientation for enrolment and training, and has built a system for cultivating such talented persons from the undergraduate to the doctoral levels. At present, eight universities and colleges, including Xinjiang University, Xinjiang Normal University, Xinjiang Agricultural University, Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics, Kashgar University, Yili Normal University, Changji College and Xinjiang Polytechnic Institute are cultivating undergraduates in this speciality; four universities and colleges, including Xinjiang University, Xinjiang Normal University, Kashgar University and Yili Normal University, are cultivating master’s degree students in the relevant specialities; and two universities and colleges, Xinjiang University and Xinjiang Normal University, are cultivating doctoral students in the relevant specialities. In addition to offering related majors, some colleges and universities also offer elective courses in minority languages, providing opportunities to meet the needs of non-specialist students of all ethnicities to learn minority languages.

In addition to the training of professional art students, schools around the country are actively strengthening campus culture through arts groups, culture and arts festivals, campus exhibitions and after-school services, among others, giving full play to the cultural and artistic characteristics of all ethnic groups and passing on and developing the cultures and arts of all ethnic groups, including ethnic-minority cultures. For example, the ██████████ in Kashgar City, Kashgar Prefecture, employs professional teachers to teach traditional Uyghur musical instruments such as the dutar, the tambur and the ghijak outside class time; students sign up to play them according to their own interests and strengths. The school offers the classes based on student enrolment and selects the best students to form the “Silk Road Camel Bells” folk

orchestra, which has been invited to perform at various other schools and has received a strong response from teachers and students. In June 2023, the “Silk Road Camel Bells” folk orchestra went to Shenzhen City, representing Kashgar City, and exchanged performances with the Shenzhen Pinggang Middle School wind orchestra. [REDACTED], a member of the folk orchestra, said: “Through my folk music studies, I have met more friends from various ethnicities, learned about more cultures and had more opportunities to broaden my horizons; as a bearer of ethnic culture, I feel very proud and honoured.” The [REDACTED] in Akqi County, Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture, gave full play to the role of multi-functional classrooms and started a special-interest class on the Manas heroic epic in the school. Students enrolled enthusiastically and teachers taught them conscientiously; [REDACTED], a member of the special-interest class, said: “Manas is one of the three major epics in China, and I want to study it well.”

Since ancient times, Xinjiang has been a place where many ethnic groups live together and an arena for the intermingling of many cultures. Xinjiang attaches great importance to the unearthing, transmission and preservation of the outstanding traditional cultures of all ethnic groups and has created a new atmosphere for the prosperity and development of the cultures of all ethnic groups. For example, the Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang and the Kyrgyz Manas epic have been inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and the Uyghur Meshrep has been inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. Representative intangible cultural heritage items of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang have also been included in national and regional intangible cultural heritage lists in China. The outstanding cultural traditions of ethnic minorities are being transmitted and developed, including the Uyghur “Meshrep”, the Kazakh “Aitysh”, the Kyrgyz “Singing and Komuz-playing Recitals”, the Mongolian “Naadam Festival” and the Hui “Flower Festival”, and other folklore activities are widely conducted. Traditional sports of all ethnic groups have undergone considerable development, with various types of games being held throughout the country, and traditional sports competitions and performances with ethnic characteristics, such as wrestling, horse-racing, archery, buzkashi and dawaz high wire-walking, taking place during traditional festivals, with the participation of people of all ethnic groups competing on the same field of play and learning from each other and sharing the joys of doing so.

E. Conclusions and outlook

The education provided in the boarding institutions of China is varied and vibrant and is a good way of running schools to develop the educational enterprise and raise the level of education popularization; it fully embodies the public welfare attributes of education, satisfies to the greatest extent possible the people’s thirst for high-quality educational resources and provides children, especially those in remote areas, with an excellent environment in which to learn and grow, making it a golden key for them to open up a better life. Practice has proved that the development of residential education is by no means simply a special measure for a particular ethnic group or region; its conformity with the laws and regulations of the State and autonomous regions and the relevant requirements is conducive to consolidating and improving the popularization level of compulsory education to achieve balanced development; it fosters the concentration of high-quality educational resources so that more children can enjoy more advanced teaching equipment, a higher level of teacher

quality and a better campus environment; and it is beneficial for the learning of scientific and cultural knowledge. It is also conducive to the alleviation of the burden on their parents and the friendly coexistence and common growth of students of all ethnicities, and is generally welcomed and widely supported by the parents of students of all ethnicities.

China is a unified multi-ethnic State. Since ancient times, Xinjiang has been a homeland in which many ethnic groups have lived together. Over the course of its long history, the children of the various ethnic groups living in Xinjiang have interacted closely with each other in a spirit of interdependence and solidarity, working together to develop and build Xinjiang, to safeguard the stability of the borders, the unity of the country and the unity of the ethnic groups, and to promote the development and progress of the country. All ethnic groups in Xinjiang are united in their endeavours to achieve common prosperity and development, and the political, economic, social, cultural and other rights of the people of all ethnic groups are effectively safeguarded. Xinjiang attaches great importance to the unearthing, transmission and protection of the outstanding traditional cultures of all ethnic groups, constantly upgrading the level of public cultural services, vigorously promoting the use of the common national language and script, encouraging all ethnic groups to learn each other's languages and scripts and effectively safeguarding citizens' right to education. In particular, it is constantly increasing construction investment, continuing to optimize the way in which schools are run at the compulsory education stage and taking a variety of measures to improve the level of schooling and the quality of education so as to effectively ensure the right of children and young people of all ethnic groups to receive an education. The allegation that "Xinjiang has increased the number of centralized boarding institutions for children of all types, forcibly separating Uyghur children from their parents, weakening children's traditional ethnic and cultural ties, severely restricting the teaching of the Uyghur language, forcing them to learn Mandarin and forcibly assimilating them" is a complete fabrication and is totally at odds with reality.

At present, the general social situation in Xinjiang continues to be stable, with people of all ethnic groups living in harmony and contentment, and the Autonomous Region is in the best period of development in its history. Xinjiang, together with the whole country, is building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and is embarking on a new journey to comprehensively construct a modern socialist nation, which will safeguard the equal rights of all ethnic groups to a greater extent and at a higher level, and the people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang will surely usher in an even happier and better tomorrow.
