

The New Battleground: Song-and-dance in China’s Muslim borderlands

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Abstract

This article explores the tensions between formulations of ethnic and religious identity among the Uyghurs: a Turkic Muslim people who live mainly in northwest China. It traces the ways in which these tropes of identity are played out in discourse surrounding ‘song-and-dance’ (*naxsha-usul*) in the transnational space of online web forums and social media posts which link Uyghurs in the ‘homeland’ (*weten*)—the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—with Uyghurs in the diaspora in Central Asia, Turkey, Europe and America. China has long sought to depict its minority nationalities as people who are ‘good at singing and dancing’, and Uyghurs have also embraced musical performance as an important aspect of their national identity. Over the past twenty years, however, an Islamic revival has provided the context for new Uyghur voices that condemn song-and-dance as both un-Islamic and a tool of colonial oppression. There is a strongly gendered dimension to this discourse, which frequently casts Uyghur women’s bodies as the site of these contested identities. This article considers how Uyghurs, and especially Uyghur women, express and negotiate these shifting identities and shifting ethical norms through their embodied behaviours in a context where verbal debate is tightly controlled by state policies within Xinjiang and rigorously policed by Uyghur online activists in the diaspora.

Bio

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Keywords

music – identity – gender – minorities – song-and-dance – Uyghur – Xinjiang – China – Islam

Song-and-dance

Musical performance, dance and theatre are unquestionably central to modern formulations of Uyghur national identity, and have been so since the early twentieth century (Harris 2008; Light 2008; Mijit 2016). When the Uyghur region was incorporated into the Peoples Republic of China in 1955, the Uyghurs were formally recognized as one of China's fifty-five 'minority nationalities' (少数民族), and the development of Uyghur national culture came under the rubric of China's nationalities policies. The mid-twentieth century saw the beginning of considerable state investment in the 'modernization and development' of Uyghur musical traditions (Trebinjac 2000; Wong 2012), including extensive research and documentation, and the implementation of a system of professional performing arts troupes who were attached to towns and cities right across the region. These troupes developed styles of folkloric performance of Uyghur national traditions, which came to be termed 'song-and-dance' (*naxsha-usul*).

On China's national stage too, the minority song-and-dance troupes (Tibetans, Mongols, Dai, Miao, etc.) came to play a highly visible role in PRC representations of national and revolutionary culture, and the rhetoric of the singing and dancing ethnic minorities was born, a trope that continues to dominate representations of China's minority nationalities today. In Dru Gladney's well-known but still apt formulation:

One cannot be exposed to China without being confronted by its 'colorful' minorities. They sing, they dance, they twirl; they whirl. Most of all they smile, showing their happiness to be part of the motherland. (Gladney 1994: 95)

As many commentators (Hann 1991, Harrell 1996) have argued, China's promotion of ethnic minority arts serves as a pay-off for real autonomy in the political sphere. But beyond this, minority song-and-dance has played an active role in establishing and normalizing the hierarchical relationship between Han Chinese majority and ethnic minority peoples, and the territorial relationship between the Chinese state and the regions inhabited by these peoples. In her ethnography of the Miao people of southwest China, Louisa Schein (2000) examines how representations of Miao identity on the national stage produce them as both feminized keepers of Chinese tradition and as exotic Other against which the dominant Han Chinese can assert their own modernity. She notes how these relationships are replicated and upheld through numerous representations and encounters, from glamorous TV shows and media reports to small-scale and often seedy tourist performances. These relationships are found across the different minority regions of China, especially in areas where tourism has flourished in recent years. In Xinjiang, I have observed many such encounters between Chinese tourists and young Uyghur women in performances from Urumchi's central tourist destination, the 'Big Bazaar',¹ to small restaurants in the historical town of Turpan. Smiling young women in dance costumes serve as instantly

recognisable symbols of everything that is good about the region in Chinese media depictions.



Performance by the Xinjiang Song and Dance Troupe in Urumchi, May 2009, [Xinhua]

The continuing deployment of song-and-dance to symbolize the hierarchical and gendered relationship between Han big brother and ethnic minority little brothers and sisters was much in evidence at the sixtieth anniversary gala performance on Beijing's Tian'anmen square in 2009. Its lavish programme placed heavy emphasis on ethnic minority song-and-dance. Alongside a military parade displaying an impressive array of hardware, thousands of brightly dressed, smiling young women danced in disciplined rows to the sounds of 1950s revolutionary songs such as 'Xinjiang is a Good Place', 'Our Motherland is a Garden' and 'A Li Mountain Girls'. These and many other minority revolutionary songs provided the backdrop to the political campaigns, social upheaval and violence of the Cultural Revolution. The 2009 gala celebration was an apt illustration, indeed a deliberate reminder, of the continuities between the early revolutionary period and the present-day in the way that ethnic minority song-and-dance is deployed to symbolize the big family of nations that comprises the Peoples Republic of China.

This relationship is embodied at the highest levels of political power. Chinese media images of the 2009 gala showed then president Hu Jintao surrounded by appropriately costumed and smiling ethnic minority young women. The wife of the current president Xi Jinping, the star singer Peng Liyuan, is famous for her lavishly choreographed song-and-dance performance of the Tibetan revolutionary folk song, 'Emancipated Serfs Sing Proudly'. There is a clearly territorial dimension to these cultural representations, since large areas of the territory claimed by the PRC are

regions that were—prior to the intensive Han immigration of the 1980s and 1990s—principally populated by non-Han Chinese peoples whose historical relationship with China was not easily reducible to one of continuous belonging. Repeated performances of the minority revolutionary songs—declaring these minority peoples’ love for Chairman Mao and their gratitude to the Chinese Communist Party—on national media, in schools, tourist shows and countless other contexts serve to naturalize the status of these peoples as ‘minority nationalities’ and uphold the rule of the Chinese Communist Party over these often contested territories (Yeh 2013).

And yet, Uyghur identification with song-and-dance (*naxsha-usul*) cannot be easily dismissed as a top-down politicized imposition by central government. In contemporary Uyghur society, the professional musicians of the Uyghur state troupes are widely respected and their VCD releases are eagerly consumed. Uyghur parents heavily invest in their children’s ability to reproduce professional song-and-dance performances, and take pleasure in dressing their little girls in miniature song-and-dance troupe outfits. Uyghur song-and-dance—as a notion and set of practices related to but distinct from traditional forms of music-making—has a particular history and set of meanings and values, dating back to the early twentieth century. Rather than understanding song-and-dance as a tool of control developed by the Chinese Communist Party and imposed on a passive and resentful Uyghur population, we need to understand song-and-dance as a co-creation whose roots stretch back well beyond the founding of the Peoples Republic of China. Mukaddas Mijit argues that it was the early to mid-twentieth century Central Asian Muslim reformists (Jadids) who first developed the notion of Uyghur national culture and used musical performance to convey social reformist messages, long before the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army marched into Xinjiang. In part under the influence of Soviet models of cultural reform, Uyghur ‘Sanai Nepis’ theatre troupes of the 1930s produced the foundations of a new national repertoire based on local traditions of *muqam*, *dastan* epic stories and the *meshrep* songs of the *ashiq* Sufi mendicants: early revisions of the Twelve Muqam, staged versions of epic love stories: Leili-Majnun, Ferhad-Shirin, Gherip-Senem, and many more items of Uyghur national musical culture that still resonate strongly with Uyghur listeners today (Mijit 2015: 32-36; see also Harris 2008: 29-33).

There was considerable continuity with the work started by these Uyghur nationalist reformers and the work of ‘developing minority traditions’ subsequently carried out within the framework of the minority song-and-dance troupes after ‘Liberation’ by the Chinese Communist Party. Most of the cultural workers engaged in this task in the 1940s (musicians like Musajan Rozi and Gheyazdin Barat) simply continued their work under the new regime. Many of them suffered badly under the political campaigns of the late 1950s or during the Cultural Revolution—accused of ‘counter-revolutionary’ links to the pre-Liberation nationalist movements—but they cemented their reputation as founders of Uyghur national culture, and some (such as the singer Pasha Ishan) were rewarded by the state with (largely symbolic) positions on the National Peoples Congress. Educated Uyghur urbanites today maintain considerable

investment in song-and-dance, which they regard as a central part of modern national Uyghur culture and identity.

The Uyghur Islamic revival

Beginning in the 1980s, the relaxation of controls on international travel and trade under Deng Xiaoping's post-Cultural Revolution reforms facilitated renewed links between Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the wider Islamic world. These renewed ties, alongside relatively relaxed policies on religious expression, gradually began to introduce new ways of being Muslim into Uyghur society. The beginning of the twenty-first century saw the rise of intense interest in ways of being Muslim right across Uyghur society, both within Xinjiang and in the Uyghur diaspora, cutting across the rural-urban divide. Over the next ten years, it developed into a major revival in religious practice. Greater numbers of people adopted a pious lifestyle, and many travelled abroad to study Islam or for the *hajj*, while wealthy businessmen sponsored the building of new mosques for their local communities. This Uyghur Islamic revival has been accompanied by and facilitated by the circulation of a wide range of media carrying Muslim imagery and sounds, from pamphlets on how to perform daily prayers to recordings of Qur'anic recitation, sermons and *anashid* religious songs.

The revival was largely tolerated by the local authorities, aside from occasional crackdowns on the circulation of 'extremist' religious material, until the 2009 interethnic violence in the regional capital Urumchi. On 5 July, an initially peaceful demonstration by Uyghur students was met by police violence, provoking a night of rioting and bloodshed.² This incident was followed by a major police crackdown that included mass arrests, public executions, the expulsion of Uyghur rural migrants from Urumchi, and the introduction of sweeping controls on many aspects of daily life for Uyghurs across the region, including the shut down of Xinjiang's Internet for over six months. In this atmosphere of heightened repression the upsurge in interest in Islam intensified, sometimes merging with the growing Uyghur resentment of Chinese rule. Accordingly, the Xinjiang authorities began to tighten their control over religious expression, routinely employing the coercive resources of the state to this end. As the anti-extremism campaign gathered in force over the following few years, the scope of its controls widened, and an increasingly wide range of religious practices were subsumed under the rubric of 'Islamic extremism' and criminalized (Harris 2015).

In this context, discussing or attempting to learn about Islam within Xinjiang became an increasingly dangerous activity. As the region's mosques came under increasing surveillance, and public expressions of faith—including veiling, growing beards, praying in public, fasting, religious gatherings—were criminalized, people increasingly turned to the private sphere to practice and learn more about their new-found faith. In this way, Uyghur websites—usually hosted outside Xinjiang—online forums, blogs and discussion boards began to play an important role in promoting and

disseminating Islamic texts, discussions, images and sounds. The newly emerging field of social media became especially important as a 'public-private' site where people could access a wide range of Islamic media, and as a medium for sharing new ideas about Islam and Uyghur identity. Social media linked Uyghurs in Xinjiang with their friends and relatives in the diaspora in geographically far-flung but virtually intimate groups who could share and respond to media items almost in real time, awarding emoticons to particularly affective examples of Qur'anic recitation, discussing the correct series of gestures for prayer, or sharing outrage at some perceived breach of religious etiquette.

Social media and religious identities

Here, I want to pose two questions. What role do specific media technologies play in the making and remaking of religious and ethnic identity in terms of experience, community, and authority? And how is the ideology and performance of song-and-dance—that is the staged and mediated performance of national culture—imbricated in this shifting field? Martin Daughtry's consideration of the ways in which musical icons provide texts for the negotiation of identities, is helpful in thinking about these questions. Daughtry discusses the debates amongst Russians over what the Russian national anthem should sound like in the twenty-first century. Since ideologies and collective self-images are always subject to conflicting and changing interpretations, he argues, they are necessarily conditional, contestable and fluid. For this reason it is more productive to regard an anthem not as the static reflection of a monolithic ideology but rather as a polysemous text through which national identity is constantly being negotiated (Daughtry 2003). Similarly, the powerful and fraught trope of song-and-dance as a signifier of Uyghur national identity is negotiated and contested by multiple actors in transnational contexts in ways that bear witness to, and help to shape, political realities on the ground. Aihwa Ong provides useful ways of thinking about identity politics as they are expressed and negotiated across electronically or digitally mediated transnational networks. Ong views discourses of diaspora not as descriptions of already formed social entities, but rather as specific political practices projected on a global scale. She argues that electronic technology disembods ethnic formation from particular milieus of social life. In this way, terms like diaspora or nation acquire specific emotional and ideological meanings, and are invoked by disparate transnational groups as a way to construct coalitions that cut across national spaces (Ong 2003:88). As I will argue, however, embodied practices forged in digitally mediated circulation are often subsequently re-embedded in local customs.

A Love Story

One example of the often-virulent debates amongst Uyghur netizens surrounding the trope of song-and-dance emerged in November 2011, when a young Uyghur woman, who was then studying in Turkey, appeared on a Turkish TV talent show singing a song in the Chinese language. While the Turkish judges made encouraging comments

in response to her halting rendition of the song, and stressed the friendly racial ties between Uyghurs and Turks in their responses, Uyghur netizens based in the diaspora responded with outrage. A video clip of her performance was posted on YouTube, and a series of Turkish and Uyghur language videos shouted ‘Collaborator!’ and ‘Shame on you, Chinese whore!’ while a farting cartoon cat opined that she had learned the song in ‘Mr Wang’s teahouse’ (i.e. a Chinese brothel).

The controversy spread to the American state-funded Radio Free Asia Uyghur service, where the young woman was condemned by interviewees in somewhat more measured terms for undoing years of hard work by Uyghur activists in Turkey in raising awareness of ‘the plight of the Uyghurs’. This act of publically singing a love song in the Chinese language, on what the activists in the diaspora clearly regarded as their home turf, was anathema to them because it offered a very different impression of Chinese-Uyghur relations from that which they sought to promote amongst the Turkish public. For them, a Uyghur voluntarily singing in Chinese in a public forum was tantamount to signalling acceptance of Chinese rule in Xinjiang. For a Uyghur woman to sing in Chinese in public was a fatal moral lapse, which damaged the body-politic of the Uyghur nation.

The determined efforts at boundary making by the Uyghur activists belied the remarkable transnational affective history of the particular song that the young woman chose to sing.³ This song, ‘Historia de Amor’, was composed by Carlos Almaran in Panama and first released in 1955. It has since enjoyed global popularity, sung by a host of major artists from Nana Mouskouri to Eartha Kitt. In 1960 it was translated into Chinese under the title, ‘In my heart there is only you’ (我的心里只有你) and released in a lush orchestration with a Latin-style trumpet solo, poignantly sung by the Hong Kong singer and dubbing artist Tsin Ting, who provided the vocals for some of Hong Kong’s best-known films of the 1960s and 1970s. The song’s popularity in the Chinese-speaking world was assured by a subsequent version by the major Taiwanese star of the 1980s, Deng Lijun (Teresa Teng), and it was more recently given a new lease of life with an up-tempo samba version by the androgynous star Li Yuchun (Chris Lee), who herself came to fame through a Chinese TV talent show in 2005 (Harris & Pease 2013). The young woman who sang it on a Turkish TV show, like many of the young elite in Xinjiang who were educated in the Chinese system, shared in this cosmopolitan tradition of Chinese popular culture which is itself inflected through the colonial histories of Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Jones 2001).

How might a performance of this globalized and highly affective hit song be reconfigured as an act of betrayal, prostituting the Uyghur nation to China? Gendered attitudes were very much to the fore in the response of the online Uyghur activists: not only the traditional unease with women’s public performance, but also the

diasporic tendency to place the responsibility for upholding cultural values squarely on the shoulders of women (Appadurai 1996). At a time of mourning following the interethnic violence between Uyghurs and Han that took place in the regional capital of Urumchi in 2009, the videos and comments made very clear, the only appropriate sounds for Uyghur women to make were the sounds of grief and the sounds of protest. This perception, along with the borrowed sounds and images they drew on, linked their nationalist discourse to the sphere of political Islam.⁴



Still from one of the activist videos, borrowed from AFP, showing women in Urumchi protesting against the mass arrests of 2009.

The pathways of the controversy illustrated Henry Jenkins's (2008) notion of 'convergence culture' as the vitriol flowed across old and new media platforms from Turkey to the United States, and Uyghur internet activists took advantage of new technologies to annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content, drawing freely on Islamist imagery and sounds, news reports from mainstream media, combining them with nationalist rhetoric and sexist and racist slurs. It was also an object reminder of the ways that grassroots online discourse tends to promote traditional authority and preserve gender hierarchies.

A WeChat Sermon

Fast forward two years, to a new media platform. By 2013, the smartphone app Weixin (WeChat), owned by the Chinese IT giant Tencent, had become the media of choice for some 600 million users worldwide, 500 million of them within China. Amongst Uyghur users too, Undidar, as it is known in Uyghur, became an essential communication tool. From mid-2013 to mid-2014, possibly several million Uyghurs inside Xinjiang and in the diaspora were using this app, often several times a day, to chat with their friends and to participate in online groups or circles, sharing short audio messages, text, images, links, audio and video files. It was largely through the

medium of Undidar—though also linked to other media platforms including Facebook, YouTube, and Chinese equivalents Youku and Tudou—that we observed a steady rise in the circulation of religious images, audio-video files, audio messages and discussion.⁵ All this communication continued for over a year with apparently little control or surveillance, until the state apparently caught up with the new technology and implemented a crackdown in summer 2014.

A rich literature now exists concerning the role of media technologies in the rise of new forms of Islamic ideologies and sensibilities in the Middle East and Africa. Hirschkind's influential (2006) study of the Islamic revival in Cairo explores the means by which Islamic ethical traditions have been recalibrated to a modern political and technological order. He notes the pivotal role that cassette sermons played in the expanding arena of debate that he termed the 'Islamic counterpublic'. Cassette sermons, he argues, have profoundly transformed the political geography of the Middle East. They form part of the acoustic architecture of a distinct moral vision: recorded vocal performances that create the sensory conditions for the emergence of new publics and new ethical and political worlds. In Xinjiang, Uyghur consumption and sharing of new religious media was a largely private and secretive affair. Anthropologist Cindy Huang describes the use of religious media by one of her informants in Urumchi in the early 2000s. When she was at home, Peride performed her daily prayers and surrounded herself with religious media. When she was working (as a shop assistant), she rarely mentioned religion (Huang 2009: 39). Such 'subterranean' listening practices, and their particular entwinings of sound and subject, are increasingly common in the modern sensory landscape (Hirschkind 2006: 73), especially under conditions of tight state control. In Xinjiang, as the anti-religious extremism campaign tightened its hold, public expression of religious faith became too 'sensitive' for the public sphere, but the sphere of social media gave people an illusory sense of privacy, a sense of speaking within a group of intimate friends. In this sphere, emerging forms of religiosity and new forms of affective connection flourished.

The religious media circulating on Undidar during this period was diverse, revealing a wide range of religious sensibilities, and ongoing debates on what constitutes true Islam and how to be a good Muslim. The majority of postings promoted, through images, text and audio files, the values of daily prayer, modesty and charity as part of an ideal Muslim lifestyle. One circle, for example, included people from Kashgar, Urumchi, Ghulja, Beijing, Guangzhou, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Dubai, the US and Europe. They were involved in raising money for the poor and sick in southern Xinjiang, and frequently shared quite gruesome images of injured or sick children along with phone numbers and bank account details for contributions. Many people, especially women, posted daily images and short texts that promoted idealized notions of Islamic womanhood, piety, and self-restraint. One educated woman, for example, posted regularly in four languages (Uyghur, Chinese, Turkish and English). On just one day, she posted a children's poem in Uyghur, a short text in Chinese

reading, ‘The darker the road, the brighter the light’, and another in Uyghur: ‘Ramadan, don’t end. I wish for my sins to be taken away. Please take my sins away with you’. On the same day, a Uyghur businessman posted an image of a man at prayer, with a text that promoted emotional styles of prayer as a psychological tool for withstanding social injustice and violence:

I pressed my forehead to the prayer mat and I said, ‘Be patient’,
There is no justice or peace in this world,
There are tears in my eyes,
Only by praying to Allah can you find peace ...
My prayer mat is wet with my tears.

Many people shared recordings of Qur’anic recitation, and used them to develop their own religious practice, listening regularly to popular reciters from across the Middle East, and learning to recite simpler passages of the Qur’an for themselves by imitating the recordings. Other new religious ideologies and listening practices were spreading across Uyghur social media during this period; ideologies which provided a more overtly political response to the situation. A Uyghur language sermon (*tebligh*) circulating on Undidar in 2013 provides an example. The sermon depicts the subjugation of the Uyghurs under Chinese rule as a punishment by God for their failure to follow true Islam, and it links a range of immoral behaviours, including listening to music, to the downfall of the Uyghur nation:

... On the Day of Judgement Allah will open the doors of hell to the nation who forgets him. Allah will punish the nation who does not follow him. ... Invaders will come and make them slaves; enemies will come and kill them. There will be rumours, and no decency in society, only prostitution, drinking, gambling, songs and music everywhere, and this will bind the whole nation in chains. They will burn in hell after they die ... We are under Allah’s punishment now. We are like slaves under the oppressive Communist regime. When will the people of this nation wake up and open their eyes, hold the holy book in their hands, and recover their morality? When will they have hope? When will our girls protect their modesty? Only then will great Allah will give our nation victory.⁶

This recorded sermon is interesting not only for its rhetoric but also for the style of delivery. The voice is that of an obviously educated, young Uyghur man who speaks in an even, restrained but insistent tone. The recording style, with its heavy use of reverb, is typical of many recorded sermons worldwide, and indexically linked to the echoing spaces of Saudi Arabia’s huge mosques (Frishkopf 2009), the original source of the Salafi revivalist movements. The experience of solitary and secretive listening to this mediated voice on a smartphone provides a particular intimacy and frisson to the listening experience and, paradoxically, a sense of companionship and community created in that act of listening (Bull 2000). Audio media like this impel us to pay

attention to the affective power of the voice and the particularities of the mediated voice. They impel us to focus on the sound quality of particular media forms. Audio files shared on smartphone are particularly good at transmitting affective properties because they help focus attention on the voice. The typically poor sound quality of these audio files—often recorded by individuals on their phones, uploaded and shared—means that they are also good at signifying authenticity, good at conveying the urgency and affective impact of a charged moment of experience, caught and frozen in time and shared.

Dorothea Schulz has argued that the mediated voice has a special potential for mobilizing people's agentic and affective faculties. Writing on the experience of listening to recorded sermons in Mali, she notes that the human voice is considered by people in Mali to 'touch' listeners in a way that is physically experienced, and for this reason it has the capacity to move individuals from an attitude of passivity to action (Schulz 2012). The movement from passivity to forms of action entail for the majority of Uyghur listeners no more and no less than adopting the forms of self-discipline required by a pious lifestyle: daily prayer, fasting, and especially women's adoption of codes of modesty. In the post-2009 period, such forms of action came to be considered by many Uyghurs to be the appropriate answer to their self-perception as a suffering nation under colonial rule, and the sense that only through proper religious observance could they persuade God to change their fate. For some, however, the call was to a more militant form of resistance. In the public-private sphere of Uyghur social media, emerging forms of religiosity and new forms of affective connection flourished, centred on the mediated, disembodied sound of the male voice, and they found their most radical expression in the sung form of *anashid*.

Violence and sacrifice

Letter to my Mother (*Anamgha yezilghan xet*)⁷

If someone says, you can live for a hundred years as a rabbit,
I reply, I wish to live for one day as a tiger.
Please, mother, understand that your son is now a mujahid,
I must be brave in spirit.
The rocks and stones will be my blanket.
As long as I live I will continue to do jihad.
Pray to Allah for us.
I will be happy to die on the battlefield as a mujahid.
Maybe some day you will hear a quiet voice.
If that voice says that your son has died,
Mother, then your son is living joyfully in heaven.
Never doubt that the martyrs
Will find joy in heaven.

This powerfully affective *nashid* circulated in audio and video versions across the

Uyghur diaspora and within Xinjiang, on various media platforms including Facebook and YouTube, and we found it being shared on Undidar groups in 2013. The recording featured a young male spoken voice, heavy with reverb, speaking directly to his mother, followed by a sung *nashid* performed by the same solo voice. It was unaccompanied by musical instruments, so in the view of orthodox Muslims ‘not music’, and religiously permissible. With its young male pop voice, repeated falling riffs and use of vocal counterpoint, in melodic style it was clearly linked to the transnational sound world of Islamic *anashid*.

Traditional *anashid*—sung poetry praising Allah—have a long history in the Muslim world. Today, established recording industries across the Middle East and South East Asia cater to a significant sub-culture of listeners who consume local popular styles of *anashid*. These are often linked to modern, reformist styles of Islam, but are not overtly political or radical (Pieslak 2015; Rasmussen 2010). In Turkey, new styles of popular religious song called *anashid* played a significant role in creating the new aesthetic and ethical conditions that led to the rise of the Islamist movement (Stokes 2016). Examples like the Uyghur ‘Letter to Mother’ belong to a sub-genre of political or ‘jihadi’ *anashid* that can be traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the period of violent struggle between Arab Islamist groups and governments in Syria and Egypt. Here, radical *anashid* formed an important aspect of the Islamist cultural offensive, and were used to reach new youth audiences and to inspire them to join the armed struggle (Said 2012).

Radical *anashid* have been used as soundtracks for videos produced by Hamas, Fateh and Hizbolla in the context of the Palestinian struggle, and by Da’esh to accompany videos depicting their victories in battle or the execution of hostages (Pieslak 2009, 2015). The contemporary *anashid* developed in Iraq and Syria by Al Qaeda and Da’esh are more recognizably rooted in the globalized musical language of pop. They commonly use a cappella song style and complex vocal harmonizations and arrangements. The use of a cappella is in part a strategy to escape the morally dubious sphere of ‘music’. This reliance on the unaccompanied voice aligns *anashid* with core sounded Islamic practices, but the style of vocalization is radically different from that of the recited Qur’an. Gone are the nasality and melisma of Qur’anic recitation and the strict rules of *tajwid* that govern the pronunciation and delivery of the Qur’anic text. These musical productions draw instead on the world of pop, especially the breathy intimacy of the sentimental pop ballad, indexing the listening experience of teenagers. *Anashid* eschew musical instruments in order to escape problematic associations with ‘music’ but they are thoughtfully constructed as musical works, and in terms of production quality and style they draw directly on the technologies and the values developed within the music industry. Their carefully crafted sonic texture draws on techniques of reverb, delay, and various digitally manipulated effects familiar to listeners from the world of pop music production, with the aim of increasing the affective listening experience and thus increasing the impact of the message (Pieslak 2015: 25-29).

Listening to radical *anashid* via Undidar, then, was a pleasurable experience for many people, and especially for young Uyghur men. The connectivity and anonymity nature of social media also facilitated the sharing of these audio files across the diaspora and into the Uyghur homeland. Dorothea Schulz notes the ease with which social media allow immediate sharing and commenting across geographical space, stretching the boundaries of the audience and introducing new senses of community, repositioning listeners as co-creators. In this way locality and identities are increasingly defined through circulation (Schulz 2006). The Uyghur-language sermon and the radical *anashid* are both translations of Islamist discourse that circulates globally. But in every different locale, this kind of rhetoric, and more importantly this style of vocal performance, take root and works their way into local debates and sensibilities in different ways. It is crucial is to trace the particular ways that they play out in particular places. In the Uyghur milieu, these new sensibilities have especially come into play in opposition to the trope of song and dance. This, I argue, is because of the heightened politicization of song-and-dance due to its fifty-year history of association with the Chinese state and state representations of Uyghur identity.

An Anniversary Gala

Let us take another case study, a Facebook discussion held amongst exile Uyghurs in the winter of 2015. The campaigning exile organization, the World Uyghur Congress posted images of dancing children and a Uyghur music ensemble performing at a gala celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Uyghur community in Germany. I should emphasize that song-and-dance performance has not generally been regarded by the political opposition in exile as a cunning plot by the Chinese state to marginalize and disempower Uyghurs. Staged musical performance and dance have been a completely normalized way to perform community, assert national pride, and to do political work in the diaspora. But on this occasion, dissenting voices emerged in a comment thread below the post:

‘Unsheathed Sword’: Is our community still doing this song-and-dance?

‘Vengeance Boy’: Just when the Chinese government is trying to make our Uyghur people into atheists by forcing them to sing and dance, our Uyghurs in the free world are voluntarily organizing song and dance activities. Doesn’t that prove they actually think the Chinese government is doing the right thing? ... It’s like a man whose parents have died and he wraps up the body in a reed mat and goes to a party. Because of these constant tragedies Uyghurs are experiencing, we should be in a state of mourning, but you guys are organizing song-and-dance!

‘Unsheathed Sword’: Why are Uyghurs doing this in exile, when in Islam song and dance is forbidden?

‘Son of Turkestan’: This culture was taught to them by the Chinese.⁸

This kind of ethical religious and political stance gained increasing credibility and power in Uyghur transnational networks in the aftermath of the 2009 violence and subsequent crackdown. The prominence of song-and-dance in state representations of the Uyghurs created a backlash, bringing together Islamist anxieties about music with Uyghur nationalist anti-state sentiment. Singing and dancing was not only un-Islamic and immoral bodily behavior, it was inexorably linked in this discourse to China’s presumed state project to weaken, corrupt and subjugate the Uyghur nation.

In 2014, the US-based Uyghur scientist, Erkin Sidiq, a prominent member of the exile community, started an anxious discussion on music on a Uyghur language web forum:

One of our younger brothers ... asked me about the middle path of Islam, and how we should regard song-and-dance; is it halal or haram? Some fatwa say if its content is unhealthy then we should not listen to it. I know that in history when Muslims went to jihad or on the hajj they would sing. In olden times armies marched into battle playing music. [But then I heard] Yasir Qadhi [a conservative American Islamic scholar] explaining that stringed instruments belong to Satan and it is a sin to listen to them. When I learned this I couldn’t sleep for days because music plays an important role for Uyghurs and our identity. We cannot maintain our culture without music. How to solve this problem? When Uyghurs accepted Islam we already had a very rich heritage. We cannot abandon everything for Islam, can we? We have a thousand year long history of song, dance and music. Have we been committing sin all this time?⁹

Several discussions of these issues were conducted on several Uyghur language message boards: what kinds of music might be *haram*, and what kinds permissible, and why thinking about music distracted the Uyghur nation from its necessary task of self-discipline and development. Detailed *fatwa* on music and dance in Islam can be found on several Uyghur language websites hosted in Turkey, with lengthy quotes from the *hadith* explaining the particular types of music and the particular contexts where listening to music is *haram*.¹⁰ Taken together, these anxious debates evidenced a growing divide within the Uyghur community between the educated urban elite nationalists who had for decades worn their religion with a light touch, and new styles of religiosity concentrated among rural dwellers and business people.

Historically in this region, musical culture has flourished as an integral part of religious expression, especially within Sufi orders and within popular practices influenced by Sufism. In contemporary practice, musical traditions of *muqam* and *meshrep* songs are performed at shrine festivals by religious mendicants (*ashiq*), and Sufi mystic poetry is sung in *sama*’ rituals to the accompaniment of percussion and stringed musical instruments (Harris 2009; Light 2008). This musical-religious

culture has for centuries co-existed in creative tension with more orthodox interpretations of the permissibility of music and dance in Islamic custom. These tensions and debates—which are replicated across the Islamic world—are rehearsed in some of the earliest extant religious texts from the region, such as the sixteenth century *Treatise on Audition* written by the Central Asian Sufi master Ahmad Kasani Dahbidi. Kasani explains that human beings are composed of spirituality and sensuality. If spirituality is predominant in people, then listening to beautiful voices will bring them closer to God, but if sensuality is dominant, then listening to fine voices will incline them towards fornication and obscenity. In other words, the practice of listening to music is neither the cause nor the problem; the real stake is the nature of the individuals (Papas 2015). Such debates on the moral effects of listening to music are reproduced in the folk stories that circulate in Uyghur society. A nineteenth century tale recounts that on the Day of Judgment, Satan will appear riding on a donkey whose tail hairs are made of the strings of musical instruments, and the sounds they produce will entice people to follow him to hell (Bellér-Hann 2000: 41).

Attitudes to music in contemporary rural Uyghur society are likewise a field of debate and fine nuance. Village socializing revolves around live musical performance and social dancing in ways that are certainly not part of life for other Muslim peoples of China. In the village in Southern Xinjiang where I conducted fieldwork between 2006 and 2012, playing musical instruments was regarded by most people as something inappropriate for respectable or high-status members of the community, and especially inappropriate for women, although dancing at village gatherings (called *meshrep*) was generally considered acceptable. *Meshrep* were highly valued, but the musicians who performed at them generally came from the lower end of the scale in village society. For respected religious figures such as *haji* (those who have completed the pilgrimage to Mecca) or *imam* (religious clerics) even attending musical gatherings might provoke comment. As the Islamic revival gathered in momentum, voices proclaiming the moral dangers of listening to music, and the inappropriateness of public dancing for women, became increasingly dominant, within this village and right across the region.

In these new debates, which were conducted between friends meeting in town restaurants, in village homes, student dormitories, and across transnational digitally mediated networks, views on the permissibility of music within an Islamic lifestyle intersected with questions of national identity and the relationship between Uyghurs and the Chinese state. The heavy emphasis on song-and-dance in state representations of Uyghur identity created a negative cycle, bringing together traditional Islamic anxieties about music with modern anti-state sentiment. In this climate it became harder for Uyghur nationalists to defend their interests in what they still regarded as their national music (*milliy-muzika*), but what critics denigrated as song-and-dance (*naxsha-usul*), precisely because it was so hard to dissociate it from support for, or at least acquiescence in the Chinese state project to uphold its rule over the Uyghur region.

A Wedding Video

These debates, as we have seen, are clearly articulated on transnational media networks, but within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where the religious and political spheres are tightly policed, there is less scope for public debate on such issues. Instead, shifting ethical norms are expressed through the ways people act, through embodied practices. This is especially visible where different norms collide. In his discussion of approaches to contemporary Islam in Central Asia, Johan Rasanayagam argues for the need to study how individuals fashion themselves as Muslim in contexts where governments maintain tight control over religious expression. Because of these state imposed constraints, lived experience in these contexts is privileged over debate as a site for moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is not only expressed through cognitive reflection but is also inherent within experience: an embodied, ongoing engagement in a social and material world (Rasanayagam 2006). This approach also has important advantages for understanding women's experience, in contexts where women's bodies are foregrounded as political symbols, but women's voices are particularly hard to hear.

A wedding video made in the southern town of Khotan in spring 2016 provides a fascinating text to analyze the complex negotiations that now surround dancing in small-town Xinjiang.¹¹ Wedding videos are a major industry in Uyghur society; an essential component of every wedding. Usually set to a soundtrack of celebratory Uyghur pop songs, these often lengthy videos, running to three hours, show the whole extended process of the wedding, including the core ritual (*nikah*) conducted by the local *imam*, the greeting of the guests who stand stiffly to attention as the camera records their presence, the banquet, and the convoy of cars carrying bride and groom between destinations. They are to an extent manufactured representations of the family. Made to be viewed together, with friends and the extended family, and replayed years after the event for visitors, they are intended to show off family wealth and prestige, fashion or piety. However, in the less carefully edited sections of the videos it is possible to capture moments of tension, where people's embodied responses to events evidence the collision of shifting ideologies and norms of behaviour.

In this particular video, a curious contretemps occurs as the bride and her friends arrived in their car at the banquet venue. The sounds of a drum-and-shawm (*naghra-sunay*) band greet the guests as they alight. A group of men in suits and embroidered hats (*doppa*) mill around the road, greeting each other. One man decides to persuade the chief bridesmaid out of her car. The woman emerges, modestly dressed in a full-length floral dress, pink headscarf covering her head and neck. "Let's dance!" he calls. Apparently embarrassed, she makes a token effort at the customary movements of the dance he demands, but she holds her hand in front of her face, attempting to shield her identity from the prying camera. Sensing a dip in the celebratory mood, more of the

men come forward to dance and utter celebratory shouts. As men, they have less to worry about in terms of community gossip. The woman escapes back to the safety of her car. Then the groom arrives, and the men grab him bodily and try to force him to dance. He is not at all interested, and gesticulates angrily at them. The video cuts abruptly to a still of a flower bouquet.



Still from a wedding video, Khotan 2016, copy shared by Mu Qian with permission.

In moments like this we can observe the way that ideological debates trickle down into popular consciousness and inform everyday actions. Forms of bodily practice have been a key focus of analysis in discussion of the Islamic revival in the Middle East. In her study of the revival movement in Egypt (2005), Saba Mahmood argues that forms of bodily practice (veiling, daily prayers or reciting the Qur'an) do not simply express the self but also shape the self that they are supposed to signify. Ethical self-formation, such as strengthening the desire to perform the daily prayers, can be achieved through constant vigilance, honing ones moral capacities in order to please God. These habits of cultivation have also been central to the development of the Uyghur Islamic revival, as evidenced by the thousands of Uyghur men and women who began to engage in these kinds of ethical practice over the course of the past two decades. These forms of habitus are part of the cultivation of gestural capacities which is central to the Islamic and Christian traditions: habitus as a set of practices formed through specific pedagogical processes in order to acquire moral character.

Pierre Bourdieu describes habitus more broadly as a system of dispositions, a set of acquired characteristics that are the product of specific social conditions. As a theory of social power, Bourdieu's notion of habitus emphasises change and process; it is formed through the changing dynamics between agents—individuals, groups and institutions—and also between agents and their environment (1984: 170). Habitus transforms, but is also transformed by the environment within which it is set into play.

By highlighting the dynamism of habitus, Bourdieu raises the possibility of using the concept to explain situations of radical social change. This perception is key to understanding the fraught relationship between Islam, Uyghur national identity and song-and-dance in this period. As these processes of Islamic subject-formation acquired increasing importance in constructs of Uyghur identity, singing and dancing were increasingly configured as bodily actions that were antithetical to the Islamic cultivation of a pious disposition. If, in the view of the religious reformists, singing and dancing had previously figured in Uyghur culture, then this was merely evidence of a national failure to follow ‘correct’ Islamic practice, and part of the reason for the nation’s subjugation under Chinese rule. The prominence of song-and-dance in state representations of the Uyghurs fed into this narrative that linked song and dance with national subjugation. Only by cleansing Uyghur bodies of these un-Islamic practices would God forgive them and throw off the yoke of infidel rule.

As we saw in the example of the young woman who sang *Historia d’Amor* on a Turkish TV show, women bear the heaviest burden in terms of the new requirements for ethical behaviour. Here again, in this wedding video, we observe women caught at the sharp end of changing ethical standards, with dance taking its place alongside song as site of tension. The man’s invitation to the bridesmaid to dance is customary practice in Uyghur weddings, part of the ritual exchange of courtesies between the two families. But in the new ethical milieu that took hold in Uyghur society after 2009, for a woman to be caught on camera dancing in the street was to expose herself to public shaming. How should she respond? Negotiating the conflicting demands of identity politics, tradition and changing religious norms is today part of the complex work of being a Uyghur woman in Xinjiang, a project of self-fashioning in which opposing political forces have so much invested that the space for women to fashion their own ways of being is increasingly conflicted and constrained.

These gendered bodily dilemmas bear the traces of the colonial and the diasporic experience. As Appadurai has noted, women typically bear the brunt of the strains of cultural reproduction in diasporic conditions, where women’s ‘honour’ often becomes a surrogate for male identity (1996: 44), and embodied practices are key sites for the contesting of culture under these conditions. In the Uyghur Islamic revival, under the twin pressures of state appropriation of musical performance and Islamist prohibitions on musical performance, the space for women’s musical expression is doubly foreclosed. Music is regarded as religiously suspect, and the dancing female body is tainted by association with the colonial regime. The singing voice is disassociated from the female body, purified and reconceived as ‘not music’. Idealized images of Uyghur womanhood as silent, symbols of piety, veiled and eyes cast down, directly oppose the state-promoted images of brightly coloured, smiling female dancers. In their place, the male voice is idealised as both religiously permissible and as a symbol of national identity, and eagerly consumed through mediated encounters with recordings of Qur’anic recitation and radical *anashid*.

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¹ A modern complex loosely modelled on medieval Central Asian Islamic architecture which houses KFC and Carrefour outlets and souvenir stalls

² See Millward 2009 for a balanced account of this incident.

³ I am indebted to Fiorella Diaz for her insights into the history of *Historia de Amor*. At the time of writing, the online critiques of this performance were no longer accessible.

⁴ See, for example, John Baily's discussion of Taliban prohibitions on music-making in a time of conflict (Baily 2001).

⁵ All the content referred to here forms part of a survey of Undidar content made during 2013-14 by Aziz Isa and Rachel Harris as part of the Sounding Islam in China research project. For further details see the project website: <http://www.soundislamchina.org/>.

⁶ The audio file can be accessed here: <http://www.soundislamchina.org/?p=1222>.

⁷ http://www.soundislamchina.org/av/Anamgha_yezilghan_xet.mp3.

⁸ Facebook thread under a post on the World Uyghur Congress site, made on 16 November 2015.

⁹ Erkin Sidiq (April 2014) *Din, Muzika we Uyghurlar*

<http://bbs.bozqir.com.cn/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=8149> (accessed 15 May 2014).

¹⁰ Hosted on a multi-lingual website supervised by Shaykh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid; also copied on the Turkish Uyghur site 'Islam House' <http://islamqa.info/ug/5000> (accessed 23 July 2017).

¹¹ The wedding was attended by Mu Qian, research student on the Sounding Islam in China project, and the wedding video was shared with him by the family of the groom.