Dissonant Voices in China’s Harmonious Society: From Cassettes to WeChat, Nation to Anashid.

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Abstract

This chapter takes a medium-term view of developments in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region over a period of twenty years during which the indigenous Turkic Muslim Uyghurs were transformed in popular discourse from ethnic separatists to religious extremists. It considers the factors that impelled a shift in the voicing of dissent from the “new folk” songs of the 1990s to radical anashid in the 2010s. It focuses on the roles played by different forms of technology in the circulation and reception of these sounds, and the ways in which this affects the relationship between the sounds of dissent, the territories they contest, and the communities they hail.

Keywords

Uyghur, Xinjiang, China, nationalism, Islam, anashid, social media, dissent, soundscapes, affect, voice

Dissonant voices in the harmonious society

In the tightly policed public sphere of China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region there is no sanctioned space for protest, while dissent is broadly construed as any form of
expression which might be read as contrary to official efforts to construct the “harmonious society” of China’s “big family” of nationalities. The “harmonious society” was an all-pervasive slogan introduced in the early 2000s by China’s then leader, Hu Jintao. It was widely used in Xinjiang as part of campaigns to target social unrest and interethnic tensions, and to present idealized displays of social cohesion, typically involving mass performances of patriotic songs and colorful folkloric dancing. In this context, where musical performance is so thoroughly co-opted by the state and where protest is so severely delimited, protest music must be broadly defined, and it seems particularly appropriate to focus more broadly on the “dissonant voices” (cf. Paranhos 2011), which express sentiments not congruent with state narratives. This chapter focuses on the remarkable shift in register in these dissonant voices that has occurred over the twenty-year period between 1995 and 2015, a shift which mirrored the changes in music technology during this period.¹

In the 1990s, Uyghur singers began to release cassette recordings of obliquely allegorical nationalist poetry sung to the accompaniment of the dutar two-stringed, long-necked lute. This “new folk,” a distinctively local musical style, filled the bazaars and the long-distance buses, and defined a distinctively Uyghur regional soundscape. These musical productions attempted to articulate Uyghur national identity² and nationalist concerns while evading the label of “attempting to split the [Chinese] motherland.” The style endured into the next decade, and survived the transition to VCD technology, but increasingly tight controls on lyric content saw the end of this genre as a site of dissent, and it gradually receded in popularity over the next decade. Instead, new forms of technology—primarily social media platforms accessed on mobile phones—carried a new wave of dissonant voices. In the aftermath of an outbreak of interethnic violence in Ürümchi,³ the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in 2009, radically new ways of voicing dissent emerged on Uyghur media networks. These anonymous, privately circulating voices adopted
and localized expressive forms associated with globalized radical Islam: recorded sermons and sung anashid that praised violent struggle and martyrdom. These voices promoted new forms of identity and new narratives of dissent. They were no longer regarded by the state as “separatist”; instead they were heard as “religious extremism” and “terrorism.” This chapter considers the factors underlying this shift: the role of different technologies in the production of communities of dissent, the affective experience of listening to the mediated voice, and the place of dissenting voices in the soundscape.

Cassettes and bazaars

The independent music industry in Xinjiang arose in the early 1980s with the easing of government controls on cultural and economic life across China. Cassette recorders became available for the first time in the shops, and local independent producers were able to produce and market their own cassette tapes. Uyghur pop and traditional productions released by Chinese recording companies could be found on sale alongside bootlegs of western pop, rock and light music, and Hindi film songs (Harris 2002). Early production was a backroom affair. Basic equipment was used to record live performances, and producers made copies, five at a time, in their homes or under the counters at their shops. By the mid-1990s, more sophisticated recording technology had arrived in Ürümchi studios, and independent music producers could send their productions to China’s state-owned production companies—who were then experimenting with the open market—for production. During this period, the industry was regulated with a relatively light touch: song lyrics required approval from the censor’s office, but this approval was not hard to obtain. VCD technology was beginning to make inroads but cheap, easily reproduced and often poor quality cassettes were still the norm.
As Peter Manuel (1993) argues in his study of the independent cassette industry in India, cassette technology may serve as a local counterforce to national and transnational control of the recording industry. In Xinjiang, the independent cassette industry was a significant factor in forging new models of Uyghur national identity in the aftermath of three decades of revolutionary upheaval. This new Uyghur identity was based on early to mid-twentieth century nationalist movements; it was largely constituted in opposition to Chinese rule, and it overlaid local, intra-ethnic cultural divisions.

The urban soundscape of Ürümchi in the 1990s clearly stated the ethnic divide. Taped music delimited ethnic territory. The Uyghur heartland in the south of the city (Döng Kövrük in Uyghur, Erdaoqiao in Chinese) at that time consisted of a ramshackle collection of restaurants and shops centered on the main mosque. Its crowded, brightly colored bustle and air of poverty was permanently awash with Uyghur pop and folk music, each shop contributing another stereo system to the din. A cassette player was an essential ingredient for clothing shops and small restaurants. Many of the food stalls which set up outside the Döng Kövrük cinema at night, selling noodles, kebabs, stuffed sheep’s lungs, or boiled sheep’s heads, had their own source of music. Music dominated the complex of stalls making up the heart of Döng Kövrük, which sold many goods imported from neighboring countries: dress materials from Uzbekistan and household ornaments and henna dye from Pakistan, alongside goods from around Xinjiang: hand-crafted knives from Kashgar, and hand-woven carpets and silk from Khotän. The bazaars, at that time, were the place to hear popular music in Xinjiang. They functioned as a kind of unofficial charts; the density of advertising posters, as well as the number of shops and restaurants playing a particular cassette, provided a reliable guide to the latest hit. In contrast, the sounds of Mandapop filled the Han Chinese-dominated shopping areas to the north of the city. Here a new high-rise department store selling high-end Chinese and Western brands seemed to open every week, while the latest wave of
impoverished rural Chinese migrants crowded its shiny steps peddling cheap plastic goods produced in the factories of southern China.

In the burgeoning sphere of soundscape studies, several authors have considered the role of sound in shaping public space and defining community in contested urban environments. Matt Sakakeeny’s close reading of a New Orleans brass band in a funeral parade passing under a concrete bridge notes how urban structures and participatory sound work together to orient the individuals involved in the parade as a collective (Sakakeeny 2010:2). Brass bands help to shape the New Orleans soundscape for the African American community, and through their music-making they reclaim and resignify the built environment which historically worked to exclude and disempower them. Conversely, Noriko Manabe focuses on the ways in which the built environment helps to shape protest music, highlighting Japanese anti-nuclear activists’ deft use of Tokyo’s dense urban geography to maximize the impact of their sound demonstrations. Demonstration organizers tailor their sound to suit the path of the march or exploit the urban topography to amplify their sound messages and maximise the community building capacity of the demonstration (Manabe 2015: 234-254).

This capacity of sounded practices to reshape the urban environment is also emphasised in studies of the Islamic revival. In Cairo in the mid-1990s, the practice of playing recordings of Qur’anic recitation in cafes or sermon tapes in shared taxis helped to reshape the moral architecture of the city, introducing norms of sociability associated with the mosque into public spaces (Hirschkind 2006: 6). Writing on the Islamic soundscape of Mombasa, Andrew Eisenberg (2013) emphasizes the role of the adhan (call to prayer) in recruiting a set of bodily practices in listeners that produce and reinforce pious sensibilities. Through their embodied responses to the sound of the adhan, Muslims transform the ostensibly public spaces of their neighborhoods into the private spaces of the Muslim community. In Ürümchi in the 1990s, we can see similar spatial practices at work, as
Uyghurs reclaimed the public urban space of the bazaar as an ethnically marked place belonging to the Uyghur community. These were places where the norms of Uyghur sociality prevailed, sonically marked by recorded music and the Uyghur language, sensorily marked by the smells of local foods—grilled meat and baking bread—and they created a refuge from the wider Chinese sphere and the encroachment of the new Chinese migrants.

The dominant musical style of the Xinjiang bazaars cassettes was the “new folk,” a post-revolutionary Uyghur folk music revival that seemed to blare out, thick with reverb, from every stall and every restaurant in the mid-1990s. It was a distinctive new sound—a national style which drew on and overlaid the local oasis styles. Modally it was darker than the traditional repertoires, with a marked preference for the melodic minor scale. The style was exemplified by three male professional singers: Küräsh Kösän, Abdurehim Heyit, and Ömärjan Alim. Their booming bass vocal style synthesized the trained, operatic technique of the professional troupes with the declamatory style of the Uyghur bards, the dastanchi (singers of dastan epic poems) who could still sometimes be found in regional bazaars and shrine festivals. This vocal style was well suited to assume a dominant place in the public soundscape. They accompanied themselves, often in virtuosic fashion, on the dutar plucked lute. This, the most common Uyghur instrument, which was kept hanging on the wall in many households, had hitherto featured very little in public professional performance. Now it appeared in the public sphere as a marker of national identity and authenticity. With their poetic language, rich in the styles of metaphor and allegory familiar from folk song and dastan, the songs also enjoyed unprecedented sales in rural areas, and they spread out from Ürümchi in tentacular fashion via the sound systems of the long-distance buses which linked Ürümchi to the outlying regions of Xinjiang. Unlike the more regulated soundspace of the trains that brought Chinese migrants from central China to Ürümchi, and which typically featured upbeat Chinese-language songs extolling the gentler beauties of Xinjiang and its
welcoming young women, the long-distance buses were filled with Uyghur passengers, and
their Uyghur drivers were free to choose their own music. In my own experience of riding the
region’s long-distance buses in the 1990s, these portentous songs became indelibly associated
with the spectacular desert landscapes of the Taklimakan. This association was underlined by
the music videos, which inevitably featured (often poorly photo-shopped) images of the
singer juxtaposed with a jagged outcrop of rock or vista of rolling sand dunes.

**The New Uyghur Folk**

The role of this new folk song movement in expressing modes of Uyghur protest, and
claiming space for these modes of protest on the city streets, crystallized around the funeral of
the Uyghur novelist and poet, Abdurehim Ötkür in 1995. Ötkur spent most of the
revolutionary decades of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule in prison, and was released
only in the late 1970s. He went on to publish three influential novels, which represented an
attempt to reconstruct the history of the Uyghur people. An iconic poem, “Iz” (Tracks), was
published in 1985 as a preface to the first of these novels. Set in eastern Xinjiang during the
bloody peasant revolt of 1912, the novel—and particularly the poem which prefaced it—
served as a nationalist call to arms for Uyghurs, a call to remember their history and preserve
their identity. The “tracks” or “footprints” of the title served as a metaphor for the Uyghur
nation’s history, all too easily erased in the region’s shifting desert sands. Gardner Bovingdon
comments eloquently on the reception of this poem in the mid-1990s:

Because the journey seemed to have been completed by the novel’s end, the censors
allowed it to be published. But Uyghurs clipped out the poem and printed it by itself on
posters, made it the frontispiece of magazines, or even scrawled it on building walls.
Stripped from the historical setting of the novel, the poem referred to a still unfinished journey towards Uyghur independence. (Bovingdon 2004: 365)

Ötkur died in 1995 a national hero. His funeral was a huge and emotional affair. His supporters paraded the coffin through the streets of Ürümchi, and crowds lined the roads with public demonstrations of grief. Uyghur singers released several cassettes mourning him, and setting his poetry to song. The most popular of these was undoubtedly Ömärjan Alim’s *Qaldi Iz*. Alongside the titular poem by Ötkur, it included many other politically resonant songs written by contemporary Uyghur poets. These songs took the standard state narrative of China’s “big family of friendly nationalities,” and recast the relationship between Han Chinese and Uyghurs as that of colonizer to colonized (Smith 2007). They also offered a stringent critique of contemporary Uyghur society and culture. The lyrics sung by Ömärjan Alim lamented the Uyghur national character as they sang it into being—it was a character marked by passivity, opportunism, decadence, and disunity.

“I Brought Home a Guest” (*Mehman Bashlidim*), released on *Qaldi Iz*, reflects anxieties about the burgeoning numbers of Han Chinese migrants arriving in the region in the 1990s, linking the tradition of hospitality—a founding principle of the Uyghur national character—to gullibility:

I invited a guest into my home
Asked him to sit on a soft cushion
And now I can’t get in
To the home I built myself
Another song, “Barren Chickens” (Tūghmās Tokhu), reflects on the inadequacies of (Chinese appointed) Uyghur officials and elites, commenting on their failure to help or protect the Uyghur people while other more competent and committed individuals were excluded from government:

Barren chickens sit
Occupy the roost
While those who could lay eggs
Roam the streets

In 1995 I spoke with Mehmet, a sound engineer in an impressively equipped and privately owned recording studio in Ürümchi, about the significance of Ömärjan’s music:

We recorded his last cassette, Tracks (Qaldi Iz). People were so used to the poor quality of his previous recordings that when they first heard this they said, “This can’t be Ömärjan.” What a joke! This cassette has sold around 100,000 copies . . . Why such a hit? . . . Ömärjan has caught the heart of the Uyghur peasants, that’s 90 percent of the population. He is popular because his words are direct, easily understood. He uses peasant language, proverbs. There’s a double meaning in every word . . . it’s not necessarily political, but it’s usually read that way.

In 1995, the Xinjiang government introduced a “strike-hard” anti-separatism campaign in response to the growing Uyghur nationalist sentiment. It was the first of a series of government campaigns targeting the expression of dissent in the Xinjiang region, which later morphed into the “anti-religious extremism” campaigns that continue to the present day.
Tighter controls on the Uyghur recording industry were introduced, requiring producers to obtain approval for song lyrics from the Cultural Bureau, and limiting Uyghur music production to just two approved recording companies. Many producers were forced out of business, but others found ways to adapt, as Mehmet explained:

> We thought that *Tracks* would never pass the censor, but it did ... The music producers have a selling strategy: when a cassette is about to come out, they flood the shops with posters and say, “We think they are going to ban this one.” Everyone gets interested. Then they bring out a lot of copies, and say, “Buy quickly before the censor has second thoughts.” If a thing is banned, people assume it must be interesting.

This flourishing of allegorical expressions of Uyghur national identity in the sphere of the “new folk” music came to an end in 1997 with the violent suppression of demonstrations by Uyghurs in the northern town of Ghulja, protesting a ban by the local authorities on a community movement to combat alcohol and drug abuse. From this point, the state was no longer prepared to tolerate public expressions of dissent or Uyghur national identity—which were now largely conflated with dissent or the crime of “separatism” (actions intended to “split the Motherland” by promoting the separation of Xinjiang from the Chinese polity). The violent suppression of the demonstrations was followed by a new crackdown on Uyghur cultural expression. Over the next decade, critique gave way to lament, and the trope of mourning began to feature strongly in Uyghur popular culture. By the late 1990s, coinciding with the onset of VCD technology, it seemed almost obligatory for Uyghur pop albums to conclude with a song mourning a relative, with the singer pictured wandering forlornly in a graveyard. These songs seemed to be expressions of a new sense of self within Uyghur popular culture, one that equated national identity with grief and loss.
At the same time, the dominance of the “new folk” in the Ürümchi soundscape withered away as an urban renewal project swept away the old ramshackle bazaar, food and music stalls, and replaced them with a monumental new commercial and tourist development, which was opened in 2003. It was modeled on the medieval Islamic architecture of Central Asia, but it housed a Carrefour Supermarket, a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, tourist-orientated stalls selling Uyghur crafts, and a dedicated space for song-and-dance troupe performances. The independent music shops clung on in the underpasses beneath the new ring road for a few years, but eventually fell victim to a new shift in technology, away from VCDs and towards digitally mediated listening.

The new virtual soundscape

During the 2000s, aided by innovations that facilitated the use of the Uyghur Arabic script online, the Uyghur Internet grew into a large, vibrant space filled with news, blogs, music, bulletin boards and chatrooms. The increasing surveillance of public space and the policing of social gatherings served to push young people, especially urbanites and students, towards online life as an alternative space for social activity. Cheap Internet cafés (wangba) provided the major point of access to the Internet. Xinjiang-based Uyghur language websites such as Makanim.com and Diyarim.com offered sections on Uyghur culture and history, contemporary literature and poetry, interviews and online chat with prominent Uyghur writers and musicians. They devoted considerable space to Uyghur music videos.

Web blogs and forums were the prime site of a new wave of dissent in the lead up to the 5 July 2009 incident in Ürümchi, when a demonstration protesting the killings of Uyghur factory workers in southern China was broken up by police, sparking a night of rioting and interethnic violence (Millward 2009). State media characterized the incident as an explosion of separatist sentiment and Islamist terror, spread through the medium of the Internet by
hostile foreign forces. This official characterization permitted mass arrests of Uyghur youth, and the cleansing of Uyghur rural-urban migrants from the city. In fact, the new online discourse leading up to the incident showed much continuity with the nationalist discourse of the 1990s, as can be seen in this call, posted on a Uyghur language web forum, to join the 5 July demonstration:

**Invitation to a mourning ceremony (nāżir)**

On 26 June 2009 between midnight until 7am in Xuri toy factory in Shaoguan, Guangdong, more than 10,000 Han Chinese gathered because of rumors that Uyghurs had attacked a Han girl. They forced their way into a dormitory and attacked and killed innocent Uyghur factory workers. During the incident more than 50 of our Uyghur brothers were killed, while another 300 escaped into the streets. . .

You people who spend your time drinking alcohol, gambling, or taking drugs, you mothers who don’t care about your children’s education but spend your time attending parties in restaurants, you young people who enjoy falling in love and breaking hearts, we invite you all to attend this quiet mourning ceremony for our martyred brothers who have lost their lives. Please stop your entertainment for a while. Our children’s blood should not be spilled in vain. We ask all of you to contribute your strength for the future of our nation. (translated in Harris & Isa 2011: 40)

Here again is the sense of national moral decline and the ever-present trope of mourning, alongside the new figure of the martyr, a figure that began to be a constant presence in a new discourse of dissent. The Uyghur websites were closed down and their editors imprisoned in the aftermath of the 2009 violence. Over the following few years, Uyghur dissent took on a more strongly religious tone, and it shifted into the new context of social media.
Religious media began to filter into the Xinjiang region in the 1980s, in the form of cassettes brought back from the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) or traded across the border from Pakistan and neighbouring Central Asian states. Developments in technology in this sphere mirrored the popular music market, and cassettes were gradually replaced by VCDs. Under the “strike hard” campaigns, the sale of recordings of Qur’anic recitation and other religious media was prohibited, but the ban was uneven and the black market continued to flourish. As access to the Internet became more widespread in Xinjiang during the first decade of the twentieth century, new ways of accessing global Islamic media became possible, although heavily filtered by state control systems. Beginning in 2011, a huge rise in the use of smart phones and various forms of social media across urban and rural areas of Xinjiang enabled the formation of new social networks centred on sharing and discussing religious media.

In January 2011, the Chinese IT giant Tencent launched the smartphone app WeChat (in Chinese: Weixin, in Uyghur: Ùndidar). By 2013 it had become the media of choice for some 600 million users worldwide, 500 million of them within China. Amongst Uyghur users, too, Ùndidar became an essential communication tool. Between 2013 and 2014, 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. During this period there was a steady rise in the circulation of religious images, audio-video files, audio messages and discussion. The speed of the spread of this new discourse, and the increasing radicalization of some of the content, was remarkable. All this communication proceeded 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, banning all forms of religious expression on social media, and implementing the ban through systematic checking of people’s phones.
The WeChat platform provides particular affordances for the creation of new forms of association, specific to its capabilities as a media platform (cf. Tufekci 2017: 110-112). It offers a choice between one-to-one messaging, closed circles, and posting to all friends. People can share text messages, images including their own photos, links, and emoticons. They can record and share their own audio messages and videos. They can also maintain a semi-public profile, posting regular personal status updates in order to craft an online persona. Thus it is a flexible platform—it ranges between the intimate (especially in its capability for voice messaging) and public—and arguably a democratic platform, in that it supports local production, encourages grassroots voices and creativity—much in the same way that Peter Manuel (1993) noted in the case of the Indian cassette industry. These similarities made the medium suitable for voicing dissent in a tightly-policed environment, but there were significant differences between the voicing of Uyghur dissent via the medium of cassettes and via social media, and especially significant differences in the ways that this discourse was produced, disseminated, and consumed.

As many authors have noted, small media—whose circulation is not centrally controlled or directed—stretch the boundaries of the audience and introduce new senses of community, so that locality is increasingly defined by circulation (Schulz 2006). The WeChat platform permitted the formation of “friend circles,” semi-private groups that might be constituted by Uyghurs living within Xinjiang alongside friends, family, or new virtual acquaintances living in Los Angeles, Paris, Istanbul or Shanghai. Within these groups people could share links and files originating from a wide range of sources, and they could comment on them, either by text or in voice messages. As media theorists have noted, such digital networks provide affordances for new types of protest, which resemble collective action but without the role previously played by formal organizations. These new forms of protest have been termed “connective action”: that is forms of action that are de-centred and distributed,
in the sense that they can exist without central organization and cross geographical borders, and dynamic, in terms of the changing populations who may opt in and out of play (Bennett & Segerberg 2012: 752-759).

**New forms of piety**

Recent work in the anthropology of Islam considers a related set of questions, in particular the ways in which mediated sounds and images accessed by Muslims via social media impact upon the affective experience of faith (Hirschkind 2012), practices of self-fashioning (Mahmood 2005), and the geographies of knowledge and experience. The religious material shared on Ündidar during this period was diverse, revealing a wide range of different religious sensibilities, and ongoing debates amongst Uyghurs concerning what constituted true Islam and how to be a good Muslim. Through a range of images, text, and audio files, the majority of postings on Ündidar promoted the values of daily prayer, piety and modesty as ideal lifestyles, in an often miracle-laden and affective style of discourse.

Accessing religious media in this way—listening to sermons and Qur’anic recitation, sharing exhortations to self-improvement—has become part of daily practice for Muslims across the world, part of an ethical and political project which promotes social responsibility, pious deportment and devotional practice. Hirschkind has argued that recorded vocal performances “create the sensory conditions of an emergent ethical and political lifeworld” (2006:8). These practices are not generally about direct forms of dissent or protest, rather they entail and enable the creation of new kinds of publics (Hirschkind 2006; Schulz 2012; Stokes 2013, 2016). For Uyghurs in this period, especially for the younger generation, the turn to new styles of religious piety suggested the failure of the secular nationalist project in the face of increasing state oppression, a reaching out to other struggling Muslim peoples around the globe and simultaneously a turning inwards, a sense that the personal discipline of
religious practice was now the only possible response to their experience of economic and political marginalization.

The religious media circulating on Ündidar during this period included some more overtly nationalist, political styles of Islam, which linked the failure of the Uyghur nation to follow true Islam to their oppression by a Communist regime. It also included a small number of anashid: songs which promoted the virtues of jihad and sought to create empathetic bonds between listeners and an imagined community of mujahidin (guerrilla fighters). These most radical examples of the new Islamic forms of dissent were generally shared by younger and less educated individuals (Harris & Isa forthcoming).

In form, musical style, and religious orientation, this new Islamic discourse was very different from the 1990s nationalist song productions, but there were continuities in the discourse of self. They signalled a sense of crisis—one personally and collectively experienced—to which Islam, in various forms, offered a solution through personal and collective transformation. A common theme was the question of national survival: only by becoming true Muslims could Uyghurs withstand oppressive and assimilative rule, and only by becoming true Muslims could Uyghurs counter damaging tendencies in society like drug abuse, alcoholism, fraud, and prostitution, since these immoral acts spring from living in a non-Muslim society.

One striking aspect of the arrival of these new dissenting voices in Uyghur society was their almost total absence from the public soundscape. Whereas the Islamic revival in Egypt was marked by the sounds of cassette sermons into shared taxis and the recited Qur’an into cafes, Uyghur consumption and sharing of religious media was a largely private and secretive affair. Anthropologist Cindy Huang describes the consumption of religious media by one of her informants in Ürümchi in the early 2000s. When she was at home, Peride performed her daily prayers and surrounded herself with religious media, but when she was at
work or with friends, she rarely mentioned religion. Huang suggests that this might be due to the restrictions on religious practice that made people wary of appearing overly religious in public, but it also reflected a division between two different sensory worlds: inside was where Peride cultivated her faith, outside was not (Huang 2009: 39). Such “subterranean” listening practices, and their particular entwinement of sound and subject, are increasingly common in the modern sensory landscape (Hirschkind 2006: 73), especially under conditions of tight state control.

In the post-2009 period 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 and like-minded friends. In this “public-private” sphere, emerging forms of religiosity and new forms of affective connection flourished, and they converged with older forms of nationalist dissent, finding their most radical expression in the sung form of anashid religious chants.

Violence and sacrifice

Letter to my Mother (Anamgha yezilghan khät)

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.⁹

This powerfully affective nashid¹⁰ 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 Ündidar 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 youthful 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, and worlds away from the local dutar style of the Uyghur “new folk” of the 1990s. However, the concerns expressed in the accompanying video, which featured footage of the 2009 Ürümchi violence and the subsequent arrests and executions of young Uyghurs, were closely tied to tropes of Uyghur identity developed during the 1990s: the bitter perception of Chinese colonization and state violence against Uyghurs. The anashid offered a solution to this painful reality in the religious purity, brotherhood and sacrifice of the mujahidin.

Audio media like this impel us to pay attention to the affective power of the voice, and the particularities of the mediated voice. The aesthetic and affective quality of the solo male voice is an important aspect of radical anashid. Thomas Hegghammer relays the
testimony of the wife of a Yemeni jihadi who performed anashid in order to recruit new members:

Abeer Al Hassani’s ex-husband was famed for his beautiful voice. He used it, she says, singing poetic hymns to martyrdom and jihad to try to draw youth from their neighbourhood of the Yemeni capital into joining Al Qaida. (Hegghammer 2017: 17)

They also 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 intimacy of the often solitary listening experience means that they are also good at signifying authenticity, conveying the urgency and affective impact of a charged moment of experience, caught and frozen in time and shared.

Dorothea Schulz has argued that mediated speech and voice have a special potential for mobilizing people’s agentive and affective faculties in Islamic cultures. She notes that voice and speech are considered to “touch” listeners in a way that is physically experienced. For this reason they have the capacity to move individuals from an attitude of passivity to action (Schulz 2012). Such views on the capacities of speech are rooted in the wider Islamic culture of orality centered on recitation of the Qur’an (Nelson 2001), and the virtues of listening (Hirschkind 2006). The movement to forms of action for the majority of people entail no more than adopting the forms of self-discipline required by a pious lifestyle: daily prayer, fasting, and modesty. If such forms of action are now considered by many Uyghurs to be the appropriate answer to their experience of colonial rule, a sense that only through proper attention to their religious duties could they persuade God to change their fate, the appearance of radical anashid within the wider field of Islamic media circulating on social media mobilized these new religious sensibilities, and refocused them on violent resistance.
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 subculture of listeners who consume locally 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 subgenre of radical or “jihadi” anashid which can be traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period of violent struggle between Islamists 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: 863-5). Such anashid have been used as soundtracks for videos produced by Hamas, Fateh, and Hizbolla in the context of the Palestinian struggle. They are also used by Da’esh to accompany videos that depict their victories in battle in Iraq or Syria, or the killing of Western hostages. In Afghanistan, similar audio recordings of sung religious poetry called tarana have been circulated by the Taliban since the 1990s (Baily 2001), first by cassette and more recently via social media, and used to glorify the mujahidin fighters and promote the necessity for jihad.

In January 2017, we spoke with Ehsan Hajim, an exiled Uyghur religious scholar based in Turkey. According to him, Uyghurs have been listening to anashid since they were first deployed during Afghan war: a conflict which was joined by small numbers of Uyghurs in the early 1990s:

There’s no doubt that anashid played an important role in stirring up the young people and encouraging them to fight in these wars. People listen to anashid, and they cry . . .
They [the creators of anashid] try to get people emotional, excited, to inspire them. Their aim is to target young people who aren’t clear in their minds, to get them to join their jihad. This is not true Islam, persuading young people to go and get themselves killed . . . They take advantage of the weakness of our people who love Islam but do not understand the Qur’an and hadith. If they had better understanding they would not be cheated (Ehsan Hajim, Istanbul, Jan 2017).

Ehsan Hajim saw the anashid as essentially an Arab import: “The Arabs created them and the Uyghurs copied them; it’s an act of translation.” My reading of the Uyghur anashid is that this act of translation involves creative processes that we might read as forms of glocalization. Certain aspects of radical anashid are shared across productions in different languages, while other aspects of these productions reference local expressive traditions, experience and sensibilities. Among the various regional styles of radical anashid, probably the most clearly rooted in local expressive traditions are the tarana produced by the Taliban. The poetry draws on and manipulate Afghan cultural identifiers and historical memories, and the musical style, rooted in Pashtun folk song, drives home these forms of cultural intimacy with affective force (Johnson and Waheed 2011: 26-7). The anashid developed in Iraq and Syria, on the other hand, are more recognizably rooted in the globalized musical language of pop. Jonathan Pieslak notes the common use of a cappella song style, vocal harmonizations and arrangements in al-Qa’ida anashid. Their carefully crafted sonic texture draws on techniques of reverb, delay, and digitally manipulated effects familiar to listeners from the world of pop music production, with the aim of increasing the affective listening experience and the impact of the message (Pieslak 2015: 25-29).

The Uyghur anashid “Letter to my Mother” is a professional production, most likely recorded outside Xinjiang, which shares many of these attributes, with its use of the
compositional styles of multi-part harmony and canon, and digital effects of vocal distortion, reverb and echo. The singer’s voice bears the hallmarks of a trained professional pop singer.

Ehsan Hajim confirms this impression:

> Recently we heard that some Uyghur pop singers had come to Turkey. They regretted all the things they’ve done in their lives—living like unbelievers—and they repented their sins, and then they started to produce anashid. (Ehsan Hajim, Istanbul, Jan 2017)

Another video circulating Uyghur networks in 2014, “They Don’t Understand” (Chushenmeydu) has the feel of an amateur back-room production. A poor quality, simply recorded young male voice sings in an undertone, almost as if he fears being overheard. The stepwise melody, with its sparing use of melisma, recalls the style of contemporary Uyghur pop. The singing is typically pop in style—breathy and natural—and is clearly amateur, wavering in metre and pitch. The result is intimate, authentic, and affective. The lyrics are more authoritative than the musical performance, showing a strong grasp of Uyghur poetic structure and style.

There is only one direction for the hijrah (migration of the Prophet / road to jihad)

Those who haven’t set out don’t know its taste
They don’t understand the rewards of jihad
To those who have never learned the truth
Night looks like day
Those who have never prayed
Can never join the frontline of jihad
Unlike “Letter to Mother,” whose musical style references al-Qa’ida *anashid* while the video conveyed images of the local struggle, in this production the song style references the local while the accompanying montage of images—posing Da’esh fighters with their iconic black flags and machine guns—has nothing to do with Uyghur concerns. This production moves the call to *jihad* beyond the sphere of nationalist struggle, calling Uyghur listeners to the global Muslim struggle. In this production, the enemy is no longer China but rather the Western powers, and the images of resistance of those of Da’esh.

There are creditable reports of small numbers of Uyghurs fighting with Da’esh in Syria in 2014, and Da’esh has produced Uyghur language *anashid* both with a view to recruit new Uyghur fighters, and to welcome new recruits (Rosenblatt 2016). Ehsan Hajim reported that the Uyghur fighters in Syria were divided into two factions: the “small community” (*kichik jema’et*) whose aim was to liberate their homeland from the Chinese, and the “big community” (*chong jema’et*), who rejected nationalist concerns and fought instead as part of the global *mujahidin*. He told an anecdote about a veteran Uyghur separatist, now in jail in Turkey, which reveals the shift in attitudes to armed struggle among militant Uyghurs in recent years:

He said to me, “I have no problem with the ‘big community,’ but there is one point we can’t agree on: is China our enemy or not? Is East Turkistan our homeland or not?” I was very surprised. He told me, “I feel very tired. I joined the *jihad* to expel the Chinese from my homeland when I was fifteen. I’ve been in and out of prison all my life. The Chinese never got bored with locking me up, and I never got bored of cursing them. Now I’m over fifty, and I have used up all my strength trying to expel the occupier, but these new *jihadis*, they won’t even allow me to try anymore.”
This shift from the “small community” to the “big community” speaks directly to theories of “connective action”, and the affordances digital networks provide for forms of action that cross geographical borders and engage changing populations (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). The role of sung anashid in making these links is significant, in terms of their ability to make affective connections across borders.

**Conclusions**

In her recent study of digitally media and protest movements, Tufekci argues that technology rarely generates absolutely novel human behavior; rather it alters the spatial and temporal architecture of society, changing the terrain on which such behaviour takes place (Tufekci 2017: 129-131). The circulation of religious media amongst Uyghurs in Xinjiang exemplifies the processes of decontextualization and abstraction typical of digitally mediated productions. The sounds of dissent are no longer tied to the soundscape experienced by a co-present community. Listeners experience these new forms of cultural intimacy in particular ways. The act of listening to the sounds of dissent, as they have shifted from the bazaar and the long-distance buses onto social media, has been accommodated to the architecture of the virtual environment with its specific modes of connectivity and affective experience. Social media technologies create connections across the globe with ease and immediacy, but as they do, so they divide the voice from the present body. The listening experience is at once personal, intimate, secret, and also public, offering the illusory freedom of a space of communication within a “private public sphere” (Warner 2005). Those who engage in these practices do not necessarily think of themselves as speaking to strangers, but they are engaging with avatars, and inhabiting imagined worlds which are predicated on anonymity (Hirschkind et al 2017). Such an environment lends itself to the circulation of extreme forms
of mediated experience, with which people can engage and then detach themselves from with ease, creating multiple personas and compartmentalizing their lives.

Just as local forms of Islam have been supplanted by the new mediated forms of Islamic revival, so too have older styles of nationalist identity formation and protest been supplanted by forms of dissent which are rooted in globalized radical Islam and increasingly deterritorialized. The self-conscious revival of national tradition exemplified by the dutar has been replaced by multi-part vocal harmonies rooted in contemporary globalized pop and newly come to signify radical Islam. Where in 1995, cassette technology delivered the booming voices of individual iconic singers into the soundscape of the bazaar, chastising and then mourning the nation, in 2013 new communities forged by the younger generation around social media platforms furtively shared audio files of anonymous voices who promoted messages of violent resistance, martyrdom, and the global community of Islamic jihad, through the sounds of globalized pop.

These mediated sounds and images extend the boundaries of what can be imagined, and they help to forge interpersonal bonds and build transnational communities of dissent. Although Uyghur practices of listening to anashid via social media were largely subterranean, as Noriko Manabe notes, cyberspace is not hermetically isolated: activities in it spill over into physically co-present space (Manabe 2015: 110). This capacity of online protest to provoke direct action on the streets was evident in the lead-up to the 2009 protests and subsequent violence in Ürümchi. The severity of the 2014 crackdown on social media in Xinjiang evidences the Chinese government’s deep concern over the ability of social media networks to develop into social movements with the capacity to provoke seemingly leaderless action on the ground.\textsuperscript{11}

The role of musical sound in this process (even if its musicality is theologically denied) is also significant. As Pieslak notes, it is typically anashid rather than sermons or
ideological discussions that form the focal point around which members of radical Islamic online forums communicate (Pieslak 2015: 76). While most listeners engage with such items in a passive way, attracted by the thrill of the illicit, the extreme imagery of the accompanying videos and the affective beauty of the melody, these sounds may signal a path for those already propelled towards violence (be it through psychological disorder, trauma, or police harassment), and they may provide emotional support along that path.

Another *nashid* circulating on Uyghur networks in 2014 provided a glimpse of the grim reality faced by those who were propelled along the path of *jihad*. Titled “The Jihadi of Guma” (*Guma Jihadchiliri*), it memorialized the deaths of a group of seven Uyghur men who were shot by police amidst a “strike hard” campaign, and subsequently labelled as “terrorists” by the Chinese media, although scant details were released to support this claim. The audio combined a short excerpt of Saudi-style Qur’anic recitation, followed by an Arabic language *nashid*. The accompanying footage, which was apparently taken from a Xinjiang police video, showed a manhunt culminating in shots of a pile of bloodied corpses lying in a cornfield. One man remained alive, cowering amongst the corn as the armed police yelled at him to come out. He shivered as he contemplated the choice between flight and immediate death, or to surrender and undergo protracted interrogation, imprisonment and possible execution. Uyghur language text imposed over this footage called for the “vengeance of the Umma” (*Ummätning qisasi*), but this video revealed only the desperate and pitiful condition of those men, armed with carving knives and facing the might of the Chinese military, pressed into the role of *jihadis*, cornered and shot as terrorists.
References


This is a draft of a chapter that has been accepted for publication by Oxford University Press in the forthcoming book ‘The Oxford Handbook of Protest Music’ edited by Noriko Manabe and Eric Drott due for publication in 2018. Accepted version downloaded from SOAS Research Online: http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/25384/


Huang, Cindy, Muslim Women at a Crossroads: Gender and Development in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous (Ph.D., Anthropology, UC Berkeley, 2009).


This chapter is based on my own fieldwork in Xinjiang since 1994. Since 2006 I have been working in collaboration with my husband and research partner, Aziz Isa, and I am indebted to him for his contributions to this article.

The designation of the Uyghurs as a (stateless) nation rather than a “minority nationality” (shaoshu minzu) is widely accepted in Western scholarship. This is most clearly articulated in David Brophy’s (2016) monograph, which explores how a twentieth century community of Central Asian Muslims responded to the historic changes in the region by reinventing themselves as the modern Uyghur nation.

In this chapter I follow the transliteration system for Uyghur adopted in most academic publications, see Bellér-Hann et al 2007 for details.

The early stages of Chinese Communist Party rule in the 1950s saw the implementation of Uyghur language teaching in schools, the establishment of a network of Uyghur cultural troupes, a wave of Uyghur literary and scholarly publications, in part impelled by China’s favorable nationalities policies and in part by Uyghur nationalist fervor, but this work was swiftly reversed as China lurched towards the Cultural Revolution, and already by 1958 Uyghur nationalist intellectuals were being labeled as counter revolutionaries, imprisoned and persecuted. More liberal policies resumed in the 1980s.

Mainstream popular songs sung in the national language of Mandarin Chinese (hanyu).

All names in this chapter have been changed.

For details of this campaign, which was ostensibly aimed at extremism but in fact targeted a wide range of everyday religious practices amongst Uyghurs including public prayer, fasting and veiling, see the report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project: China’s Iron-Fisted Repression of Uyghur Religious Freedom (Washington DC: UHRP, 2013).

The audio file can be accessed on the “Sounding Islam in China” project website: http://www.soundislamchina.org/av/Anamgha_yezilghan_xet.mp3
Lahoud (2017) also notes the presence of affective *anashid* that dwell on the sacrifice of mothers in al-Qa’ida productions.

10 singular form: *nashid*, plural: *anashid*.

11 A recent study of online censorship in China reported that censors swiftly acted to remove posts that had any potential to encourage collective action, and they were especially likely to act if multiple posts tending toward action were concentrated within a single geographical area. If the people making the posts were near each other, there would be more likelihood that they could come together and do something (Tufekci 2017: 234).