

## **Listening in on Uyghur Wedding Videos:**

### **Piety, Tradition, and Self-fashioning**

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This chapter is based on a mini-research project on Uyghur wedding videos, part of the larger “Sounding Islam in China” project which explored changes in religious ideology and practice across China primarily through the medium of sound.<sup>1</sup> It was conceived and carried out in 2014-16, a period when the crackdown on what the Chinese government termed “religious extremism” was beginning to tighten its grip on all aspects of life for Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In order to stay within the boundaries of acceptable research in China, the authors endeavoured to find the least “sensitive” topic they could that might still cast some light on changing religious sensibilities and practices in this period. In spite of these efforts to accommodate our research to the shifting government line, Rahile Dawut was detained without charge in December 2017, and she remains incarcerated as this volume goes to press. The final write-up and any mistakes are thus the sole responsibility of Rachel Harris. The editors of this volume have decided to publish this chapter as a co-authored piece although Rahile Dawut has not been able to see the final edit, as we felt it important to continue to give her voice a platform on the international stage. Although this chapter arises from a minor aspect of her research, we believe that it now has extra value because of the way that it demonstrates the exemplary moderation of her scholarship, and her efforts

to demonstrate the breadth and nuance of religious and social change amongst Uyghurs in Xinjiang in the period leading up to the policies of mass securitization and incarceration.

Wedding videos provide a rich field for studying changing attitudes to religious belief and practice. Weddings are key sites for the production of community and the display of family prestige, contexts where Islam is deeply embedded in social life. Studying weddings through their video productions is studying social practice that is cut loose from the immediate bodily and contextualized experience. This entails a set of methodological challenges but also potential insights: the ways people portray their own lives and practices may challenge both state narratives and ethnographic narratives. Wedding videos are not straightforward records of events. They are intended for particular audiences; typically they are for watching with friends and relatives. They serve as a record of social bonds forged through the reciprocal rituals of the wedding celebration, as a repository for family memories, and as a powerful statement of family identity.

In this chapter we discuss specific examples of wedding videos without identifying the families or the production companies involved in the creation of these videos. Interviews have also been anonymized to protect the identity of our informants. A small team of research assistants based in Xinjiang conducted an interview with a producer of wedding videos, held discussion groups on the topic of changing wedding customs, and sourced a selection of wedding videos produced between 1996 and 2016. This material was supplemented by a survey of videos posted on YouTube.

Uyghur wedding videos provide vital perspectives on forms of religious revival and new styles of religious expression amongst Uyghurs in Xinjiang, because

the development of the expressive potential of this media form has risen hand in hand with the rise of religious piety within Uyghur communities. As other chapters in this volume demonstrate (notably Yang Yang's chapter on wedding photography amongst the Hui of Xi'an), there are many similarities in the articulation of representation, consumption and religious piety within different Muslim communities across China. In this chapter we pose a set of related questions, namely: What role do these media forms play in the making of religious experience, authority and community? How do practices of consumption and media engagement sustain, expand, and potentially transform conventional understandings of religiosity (Hirschkind 2006; Schulz 2006)? What kinds of "self-fashioning" are evident in Uyghur wedding videos (Port 2006), and what did this self-fashioning say about the shifting religious imagination in this region in the period leading up to the wholesale criminalization of Uyghur Islam in Xinjiang?

### **What makes a Uyghur wedding video?**

Wedding videos first became popular among Uyghur families in the early 1990s. Early productions were simple affairs, transferred directly to VHS with no editing possible. Their primary function was to register the faces of the wedding guests, and to show the gifts that they had given, and they included extended shots panning across the faces of awkwardly seated guests, and zoomed in on the ritual presentation of gifts. It was a focus shared in videos from across the spectrum of wealth and class, across the urban-rural divide, and a constant from the earliest to the most recent videos. A 2012 example, made in rural Keriye in the far southeast of the Xinjiang region and preserved on VCD, shows a group of formally dressed older village women in headscarves and padded jackets, some with the iconic tiny hats of Keriye

pinned on top of their headscarves. They kneel around the edges of a dimly lit carpeted guest room in a family home while the mother of the bride arranges a fan of crisp 100-yuan notes on a plate balanced on a suitcase in the middle of the room. Another video, made at a high-end urban wedding party in a large and lavishly decorated Ürümchi wedding venue in 2016, zooms in for shots of friends and relatives of the newly-weds (the bride was dressed in a low cut white bridal gown, the groom in a dark suit), as they fasten expensive watches onto their wrists, and present the bride with sets of jewellery.<sup>2</sup>

In her seminal historical anthropology of the Uyghurs, Ildikó Bellér-Hann (2008) argues that Uyghur social relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were shaped at all levels of society by the principles of reciprocity and community, and these principles were fundamental to life-cycle and religious rituals. They continue to form a central part of contemporary Uyghur wedding videos, underscoring the role of these media items in documenting and celebrating the social bonds formed and solidified through practices of gifting and gifting. It is the interweaving of these core functions with changing styles of self-fashioning, influenced by new forms of religiosity and new media trends that make Uyghur wedding videos both fascinating and revealing documents for analysis.

By the mid-1990s, VCD discs had become the dominant form of technology for distributing Uyghur wedding videos. This period saw the early development of the wedding video as a media production, with all the aspects of styling that this entailed. It was marked by the rise of celebratory Uyghur pop songs used as soundtracks, usually completely replacing the diegetic sound. As with Uyghur music videos of the period, they drew on a bank of stock images and glorious, newly available special effects including images twirling in and sliding out of the frame, cascades of hearts or

stars, infinitely multiplying images of the happy couple, or family photos inserted over iconic scenes of the region's desert or mountain scenery.

By the 2000s, wedding videos had become big business, and many dedicated wedding video companies had sprung up around the region. These companies could draw on large banks of audio tracks and video footage, including Uyghur pop songs and endless shots of Xinjiang scenery. They also drew on religious media emanating from the Middle East: audio recordings of Qur'anic recitation and images of Saudi mosques. In this period, wedding videos often used a generic opening sequence which began with the company advert, signalling clearly that this was a commercial film product. They proceeded with a succession of images of local places, which captured parallel notions of pristine nature and glossy modernity: mountains and pasturelands, aeroplanes and wind farms, new highways and skyscrapers. A procession of cars moving along the town streets—a display of wealth and prestige—was an essential element. Folkloric depictions of the region became increasingly prominent, as the growing tourist industry gave rise to an endless repetition of aestheticized images that became icons of the Xinjiang region.

Footage of the state song-and-dance troupes performing in well-known touristic sites featured prominently in the videos, just as it did in media and tourist representations of the region. Video firms based in different cities drew on local sets of stock footage to produce a montage of local imagery. They set them to synthesized renditions of popular wedding songs (*Toy Mubarek! Mubarek Bolsun!*) and celebratory kettle-drum and shawm (*naghra-sunay*) music: a style traditionally used in the wedding context, normally performed on the street outside the wedding banquet venue or played from the back of a lorry as part of the wedding procession.

The other type of mediated sounds and images becoming increasingly important were types of religious media imported from the Middle East. By the 2000s, these too became an essential component of wedding videos. In videos from this period we often find a sudden jolt, as the pop song track and cityscape are cut suddenly short and the video abruptly transitions to a sequence of sounds and images signalling religious piety: Qur'anic recitation overlaying images of the Grand Mosque in Medina, or pilgrims circling the Kaaba in Mecca. Sometimes the town's local mosque is also highlighted in these videos, especially where the local community had supported the construction of a particularly large and impressive new mosque through individual contributions. These new sounds and images were indicative of the new religious sensibilities that were taking hold in the region. They demonstrated the hold that the Middle East (particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia) had taken in the popular imagination as the source of "true Islam," to which increasing numbers of Uyghurs were beginning to believe they should return.

In this early period, diverse and contrasting elements within Uyghur wedding videos were unsynthesized and uneasily juxtaposed. Over the following decade, wedding video editing and production processes became technologically increasingly sophisticated and consumers, especially in urban areas, became more media savvy, thus allowing the development of more sophisticated and individualized styles of self-fashioning.

### **Being the star of your own TV show**

In more recent Uyghur wedding videos, TV assumes a central position. Not only are wedding celebrations dominated by cameras, but a constantly re-occurring trope within the videos is of people watching TV, evoking the possibility of endlessly

scaled repetitions of people watching themselves watching themselves. This phenomenon spans the rural-urban divide, from sequences of wedding guests in a village in eastern Qumul (Hami) watching song-and-dance performances on TV to a high-end Ürümchi wedding video that include a manufactured sepia-tinged scene of the friends of the bride and groom watching the video, within the video. At a wedding we attended in 2016, held among the Uyghur diaspora at a large dedicated wedding venue in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, the live feed from the cameras was simultaneously relayed on a large screen just behind the action. The ubiquitous presence of cameras at the ceremony, and the subsequent appearance of the event on the TV screen, offer people powerful mimetic experiences, and the fantasy of being stars for the day. Whilst the images and sounds of the Islamic world continued to exert a powerful attraction, they were interleaved with other forms of globally circulating fashions.

**<INSERT FIGURE 5.1 HERE>**

Fig. 5.1. Cameras circle the newly-weds at a high-end Ürümchi wedding in 2015.

Photo by Rahile Dawut.

One influential model which began to appear in urban Uyghur wedding videos in the 2010s was the East Asian soap opera format. This styling filtered into Xinjiang via Beijing from Korea, the leading trendsetter for music videos and soap operas across East Asia and beyond. The Korean model produced wedding videos which were carefully constructed to imitate TV productions. Video companies carefully selected venues, and instruct the couples and their families on what to wear, how to

act, and even what emotions to show in order to achieve the desired “soap” style. In Xinjiang, this was a style that only the most high-end Uyghur productions aspired to, and it was a feature of the most Sinicized and cosmopolitan productions. One wedding video produced by a Beijing company for an Ürümchi-based family (published on YouTube in 2015) reproduced this style expertly, juxtaposing familiar tropes of Uyghur national identity (professional costumed song-and-dance performance, bread baking in a clay oven) with sequences showing the family preparing themselves for the ceremony. Their wealth and modernity were discretely displayed through a procession of complex multi-angle panning shots, carefully edited together with a sophisticated array of background instrumental music designed to set the mood of each scene. A snippet of Middle Eastern oud signified the exotic and the Islamic in this sequence. American rock guitar underlaid a flashback sequence of a proposal made in a European-style bar. Unusually, this family could be heard speaking in the video, and very unusually it included Chinese voices. Xinjiang’s large Han Chinese population and its Sinicized urban landscape were conspicuous by their complete absence from every other wedding video we observed, a phenomenon also observable in Uyghur films and music videos.

In this and some other contemporary urban wedding videos, parts of the sequence followed the bride in lengthy preparations of her clothes, hair, make-up, and nails, assisted by a group of friends and professional stylists. These sequences borrow from “the making of” form of TV documentary, in which the camera takes viewers behind the scenes of a theatre show or onto a film set. As Mattijs van de Port (2006) argues, these mimetic tendencies should not be surprising. The media technologies used in wedding videos have been developed and used in other settings and arenas. When they enter this new field they come with specific histories, and they bring with

them the formats and styles developed elsewhere. This is also part of the process of self-fashioning. Wedding videos borrow notions of prestige and splendor from the sphere of popular media, and frame wedding ceremonies as televisual realities, exploiting the style and format of TV programs. Media formats and styles are more than the mere “packaging” of a narrative. Through constant exposure, people become thoroughly accustomed to certain styles and certain formats, so that these styles shape people's sense of what is convincing or credible, cool or outdated, desirable or distasteful. Wedding videos address and stimulate new communities of style and taste. They mirror worlds that are aspired to, and offer opportunities to people to become mirrors themselves by participating in and displaying those aspects of style in their own videos.

These forms of styling became progressively more sophisticated and individualized in the 2010s. A new innovation in Uyghur wedding videos, which appeared around 2013-14, was the practice of opening them with a tailor-made five-minute fast-moving sequence set to music that encapsulated and styled the whole wedding. Our interviewee, a professional wedding video producer we have called Alim, explained:

Around two years ago we started shooting a five-minute-MV [music video] for the bride and the groom. I would say we learned this MV thing from the Han Chinese. We film an MV before the wedding for around 4-5,000 yuan. Then, we add it to the beginning of the wedding video.

In 2015-16, this practice was restricted to the most expensive video productions. For less well-off families, a fraction of this cost (around 500 yuan) would be sufficient to

pay for a full wedding video, lasting at least two hours, minimally edited, with the company's standard opening sequence appended to the front. For this substantial fee, wealthy couples were able to fashion themselves in the style of their favourite pop singers.

These high-end wedding MV sequences drew closely on established music video styles, and they appropriated globally circulating sounds. Wedding MVs—as high-end, fashionable and expensive products—were often distinctly cosmopolitan, referencing a range of globalized “romantic” popular musical styles from classic mid-twentieth century Arab popular songs to Argentinian tango. One 2015 music video sequence in a wedding video from Kashgar borrowed liberally from tropes of European period drama squeezed up against references to the world of Hindi film. Accompanied by a nostalgic Uyghur pop ballad, the camera circles around a moodily lit headshot of the groom who peers wistfully upwards, cut with fleeting glimpses of the bride appearing in various outfits (in ways closely resembling Yang Yang's account in this volume of a bridal photography salon in Xi'an); now dressed in white crinoline and silhouetted against a bow window, now dressed in South Asian-style sequined red salwa-chemise, posed before a classic Kashgar-style carved wooden door.

Style, in Birgit Meyer's formulation, is a shared practice of signification based on creative recycling and repetition, which is central to performing identity. Style, like discourse, imposes its own regulations and constraints on its users. What links people to a certain style, she argues, is less about that style's capacity to make true statements about the world and more about the mood that it generates:

Style, by putting things in a certain way, speaks to, as well as evokes, emotions.

Employing an ensemble of recurring key terms and conventions, style makes people feel at home in, as well as confident with, a particular discourse (Meyer 2004:95; see also 2015:103-7).

Style and forms of self-fashioning are typically linked to the modes of perception and appraisal that people have cultivated as modern media consumers. In the period up to 2016, Uyghurs in Xinjiang drew on and synthesized a wide range of styles in their wedding video productions. The influence of Chinese mass media was strong—Chinese soaps, styles of music video, and the ways that Xinjiang was depicted as a tourist destination—but they were also influenced by other globally circulating styles of film and TV, including global symbols of Muslim piety. These are the styles, fashions, and expressive registers that are circulated via transnational media and that link Muslim believers around the world. These practices of consumption and media engagement sustain, expand, and transform conventional understandings of religiosity. As Faegheh Shirazi argues, these practices are not necessarily a marker of adherence to religious piety but also part of a search for identity and security in a global environment increasingly hostile to Muslims (Shirazi 2016). They assume particular importance among Muslims living as minorities in non-Muslim societies, who use them to mark their difference from mainstream secular society, and to connect to a wider global Islamic community. Amongst Uyghurs, as amongst the Hui, they are thoroughly integrated with other globally circulating styles which may be far removed from the Muslim world.

### **Shifting styles in wedding ritual**

Weddings provide opportunities for display and self-fashioning but they are also, of course, religious rituals and important sites for the performance of embodied religious practice. The rise of the professional wedding host in urban Uyghur weddings provides an interesting example of the development of new styles of performing religious experience. The blessing—a prayer for the couple that takes place within the evening wedding party—became a crucial part of high-end wedding videos in the 2010s. In fashionable urban weddings in the 2010s, its ideal realization required a performer with the ability to provoke authentic emotional responses from the close family, ready to be caught in close-up by the circling cameras. In interview, Alim expressed his frustration with what he regarded as the lack of the necessary performative qualities amongst older family members:

These days it's hard to find elders who know the Qur'an and can also come to the stage to make a beautiful blessing. Most of them end with an Arabic prayer or they just say "Amin", raise their palms and stand there for a bit, then end it with "Allahu Akbar." They're quite unable to give a moving and meaningful blessing in a loud voice. Nobody can give a moving blessing like Shirzat.

Shirzat was a professional wedding host who was much in demand in Ürümchi in this period, prized for his ability to create atmosphere and provoke tears. In a 2016 Ürümchi wedding video, he stands behind a keyboard in the midst of a ballroom, casually dressed, playing a simple progression of chords. As the close family line up behind the bride and groom, who are dressed (respectively) in white bridal gown and dark suit, he sings in a voice brimming with sincerity, "My greetings, beloved mother! My greetings, dear father!" The bride and groom bow on each sung

“greeting” and a crowd of cameramen rush in for a close-up of the face of the bride’s mother, which is quivering on the edge of tears. This focus on the emotional expression of mothers is, of course, a stock trope of film and soap operas worldwide, and it is particularly prominent in the Uyghur film and TV industry. These carefully produced moments crystallize and display particular styles of ritual experience, which are rooted in embodied and emotional styling. Shirzat’s new-style blessing exemplified the professionalization of a point in the wedding ritual usually reserved for the expression of family bonds by family elders. The new style de-emphasized the ritual role of older male relatives, and placed the focus instead on an aestheticized eliciting of displays of emotion. In their conversations, our discussion group of young Uyghurs gave diverse views on this shift in practice in middle class urban weddings. Some expressed a more religiously oriented unease that a professional singer, who might be the kind of person who drank alcohol (ie not a pious Muslim), could be allowed to perform this important religious duty. Others clearly felt at ease with the new style, and mocked the efforts of family elders to give the blessing, with their tendency to end their prayer with an “Amen” or worse “Allahu Akbar”! Examples of change in the wedding ritual like this suggest that modes of religiosity, as with other aspects of daily life, are embedded in shifting senses of style and fashion that are driven by encounters with transnationally circulating media forms and styles, which seem on the surface to be quite distant from the religious sphere.

### **Foreign extremism and national traditions**

Alongside their role as a site of globally circulating expressions of style, wedding videos provide a site where negotiations about the nature of Uyghur Islam were played out. We can read in wedding videos many examples of the debates and

embodied conflicts about Uyghur Islam in this period. They reveal a discursive field where new styles of belief and notions of tradition were under constant negotiation. Although it is rendered barely visible in wedding video productions, the state is a constant and powerful presence in these negotiations. Amongst Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Party policy and Islamic faith are both integral parts of people's lives. A speech made by a slightly eccentric guest and captured in a rural wedding video made in eastern Qumul (Hami), illustrates the ways in which Uyghurs internalize and integrate these twin poles of life, which are so often depicted as opposing and irreconcilable. The wedding guest addresses the bride, saying:

According to our government's policy you should have two children ... I wish that you will have one boy and one girl ... your son should grow up to be like the leader of all the Muslims of the world, the Prophet Muhammad ...

In this 2004 video, the assembled guests respond to these felicitous words by tucking money into the band of the speaker's hat. A few years later, such overt expressions of religious faith would be deemed inappropriate for inclusion in a wedding video, a dangerous sign of religious extremism. By 2016 all overt references to Islam and even to Arab culture were being edited out of wedding videos. Alim told us:

If we add foreign music, then it's nice. Uyghur music is not really that appropriate. Youngsters about to get married, they really love the MVs we make. Now we've started adding Turkish, Uzbek and English songs in other parts of the film as well. But in the version for elders, we add Uyghur music. A

few years ago we sometimes added Arab music if our customers demanded it ...  
but now we don't use Arab music anymore.

This last sentence is an oblique reference to the “anti-religious extremism” campaign in Xinjiang, which began to gather force in 2013. By 2016 this campaign had come to dominate life in the region to such an extent that even the use of an Arab pop song in a wedding video might be sufficient to label a family as religious extremists and condemn them to a period of detention in one of the many “re-education centers” that were then springing up around the region.<sup>3</sup> Fearful of having their wedding videos checked in police searches and being found to reveal extremist tendencies, families and production companies carefully monitored their content, and images of Mecca and the sounds of the recited Qur'an disappeared from Uyghur wedding videos. Although the increasingly tight controls on religious expression effectively filtered out overt references to the wider Islamic world in Uyghur wedding videos after 2013, the sensibilities and styles of consumption and production underpinning Muslim piety continued to be influential in more recent productions.

The anti-extremism campaign impacted not only on video production but also on the shape of the wedding celebrations. One aspect of change that illustrates this shift was the degree of prominence given to the *nikah*: the religious heart of the wedding ritual conducted by the imam. Alim commented:

Some people who employ us don't want to use too much of the *nikah* on the video. That's also related to practical issues. Especially people who come from southern Xinjiang to make their video, or people who are going to send copies

to the South, they are now demanding less nikah and less of other religious components.

How did this core aspect of marriage ritual become too “sensitive” to include in wedding videos? By the mid-2000s, the imam’s sermon at the nikah had become an important site for the dissemination of new religious ideas among Uyghur society. Particularly in the poorer areas of southern towns, large groups of young men would crowd into the wedding venue to listen to often lengthy sermons on the importance of daily prayer and a pious lifestyle delivered by “unofficial imams”: religious preachers who had studied Islam abroad, not formally approved or employed within the state system.<sup>4</sup> The practice of using weddings as a site for religious instruction had already become widespread in other parts of Central Asia as early as the 1990s. In southern Kyrgyzstan a new Islamic style wedding (*sunnati/ibodat toi*) became common at this time, one that eschewed evening parties, music and alcohol, maintained strict gender segregation, and kept the bride hidden from public view during the wedding. An Islamic preacher, typically from outside the local community, would be invited to the wedding to deliver a religious message that called the guests to observe more closely the way of Islam. Julie McBrien (2006) traces the debates that arose within local communities in Kyrgyzstan over this new style of wedding, and the tensions they revealed between local notions of “religion” and “national culture”. In Xinjiang, the state responded to similar developments in Uyghur weddings with deep alarm, and the “anti-extremism” campaign soon forced these preachers out of sight.

In Uyghur weddings before 2016, the nikah also became a site where tensions between the desire to adhere to notions of “correct” Islamic practice and the desire to preserve national traditions were played out. The practice of feeding a piece of bread

dipped in salt or salt water to the bride and groom during the nikah is recorded in early twentieth century sources on wedding customs in Kashgar (Bellér-Hann 2008: 242). The practice reflected the high respect accorded to these basic foodstuffs in Uyghur tradition. Eating the same salt symbolized a promise to stay together, and the salt was thought to serve as a witness to the ceremony (Reyhé 2013: 261). In recent years, however, the practice was criticized by some Uyghurs as a deviation from correct religious practice. A student in our discussion group commented:

In Karamay, we don't eat bread dipped in salt any more. In Karamay, the religious atmosphere among people has changed over time. Now it's more common for people to gather together and read the Qur'an. According to them, there is no such thing as eating salt-dipped bread in the Qur'an, so doing that is not allowed. Salt used to be a highly regarded thing among the Uyghurs, and the reason for eating salt was to strengthen the nikah. But now, it's not like that any more.

And yet in some wedding videos the eating of salt-dipped bread was deliberately highlighted: a conscious performative statement in support of "national traditions." The "bi-lingual" wedding video discussed above provides an example of an educated and influential family making a self-conscious style statement about this tradition, with an extended close-up shot of the groom's father popping a piece of bread into his son's laughing mouth.

Another site of tension in which the authorities became deeply embroiled was the question of music and dancing at weddings. At the National People's Congress in March 2014, Dilnar Abdulla, deputy chair of the China Dancer's Association, gave a

speech claiming that religious extremists in Xinjiang were “not permitting people to sing and dance at weddings.” This, she explained, was a “major assault on our traditional culture.”<sup>5</sup> This speech, pitting “foreign extremism” against “authentic Uyghur traditions,” signalled an extraordinary set of government measures implemented especially in the south of the region, to encourage the performance of music at weddings. In Kashgar, families were required to pay a “music performance deposit” ahead of a wedding, which they could retrieve only if they could demonstrate they had invited musicians to play at the wedding.<sup>6</sup>

In his study of changing wedding customs in Kashgar in the period 2010-2012, Rune Steenberg notes the rise in popularity of what he terms “piously oriented weddings” (*islamche toy*, *sünniy toy*). These *islamche toy* were simple, sober gatherings in which the religious ceremonies were central and guesting and gift giving were kept to a minimum. Dancing and music were absent or very limited, clothing conformed to standards of modesty, and displays of wealth such as car processions, expensive gifts and banquets were avoided. Even the customary gifts of food and snacks given to the guests as they leave were often omitted. As Steenberg notes, “one of the criticisms voiced against these weddings is that they turn joyful weddings into something more like a funeral” (Reyhé 2013: 250). Alim commented:

A few years ago there were also weddings called Islamic weddings. In these weddings, people didn't play music or dance. They didn't go to a big restaurant either. They just went to a local restaurant to have a simple meal and then took the bride and that was it. Usually, the process of this kind of wedding was very simple, and there was very little celebration. The bride would be veiled. Now, there are no longer weddings like this.

Such “Islamic weddings” were unlikely to be subjects of wedding videos, which, as we have seen, form an integral part of the display of wealth and embrace of mediated popular culture that overtly pious Muslims might be expected to reject. It is, however, possible to find many traces of religious reformist sensibilities within recent wedding videos.

The performance of piety at Uyghur weddings involved gendered rules about who should see what and when, who was allowed to speak or sing when, what sounds were appropriate, and what forms of bodily expression were appropriate. This was especially visible where different norms collide. A particularly public context for dancing in weddings is the moment when the groom’s party arrives at the venue where the celebration will be held. Another member of our focus group explained:

In Aqsu, we call it the “wedding furrow” (*toy qoshti*). The groom’s side will call to say, “We’re heading off!” The bride’s side will prepare wedding candies and have several people go out to greet them. Especially relatives with a good reputation would definitely go out. When the groom’s relatives arrive, they don’t directly enter the restaurant. They stand about a hundred meters away and play music, and the young people start dancing. The two sides will get closer to each other through dancing. After the two sides are mixed up, then the elders will walk around, hand out the wedding candies, and greet each other, and then they can enter the restaurant with the music playing. In Aqsu, nobody would be surprised by dancing and singing on the streets at a wedding.

The necessity for weddings to include or eschew celebratory aspects such as music and dance came to be an important fault line in debates over correct religious practice and how to live a good Muslim lifestyle during this period. Given the emphasis placed on “song-and-dance” in Chinese state representations of Uyghurs, it should come as no surprise that this aspect of the new-style pious weddings was singled out for criticism in state media. As this account by another member of the focus group makes clear, public displays of singing and dancing are deeply enmeshed in Uyghur practices of reciprocal gifting and the forging of social bonds:

In Turpan, when the groom went to the bride’s neighbourhood to collect the bride, the relatives and neighbours of the bride would all come out, and they set tables in front of the house with all kinds of snacks and fruits. They would hold up a two to three meter-long cloth and block the road with it. We call that the “wedding blockade” (*toy tosush*). Then, the groom’s friends would have to get out and dance in front of the wedding car, and eat the food prepared for them on the table. Everybody who participated in setting up the table would receive a small gift. Doing this is about showing the neighbourhood’s respect for the new couple. If the bride’s parents have good relationships with their neighbours, then a lot of people would help set up the tables and prepare the stops.

Stenberg also notes the onset of tensions surrounding singing and dancing at weddings. He recounts a story, told during a long-distance bus journey by a young man whose marriage plans had nearly been ruined when the bride’s family walked out of the wedding venue because he and his friends started to dance. For the bride’s family, dancing had no place in a proper Muslim wedding. For the groom, dancing

and music were essential components in a “real Uyghur” (*milliy*, ethnic) wedding. Following the telling of this story, a discussion broke out between passengers on the bus over whether a wedding should be held with or without music and dance. Steenberg notes that this was “a hotly debated topic in Kashgar among almost all social groups, save government workers” (Steenberg 2013: 249).

A 2016 wedding video from the southern town of Khotan provides a fascinating text through which we can observe the embodied negotiations that surrounded dancing in small-town Xinjiang in this period. In this video, a jarring episode occurred as the bride and her friends arrived in their car at the banquet venue. The sounds of a drum-and-shawm band greet the guests as they get out of their cars. A group of men in suits and embroidered hats mill around the road, and one man decides to persuade the chief bridesmaid out of her car. The woman emerges, modestly dressed in a full-length floral dress and headscarf. ‘Let’s play!’ he calls. Apparently embarrassed, she makes a token effort to dance, holding her hand in front of her face in an attempt 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. The woman escapes back to the safety of her car. 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.

**<FIGURE 5.2 HERE>**

Fig. 5.2. Still from a Khotan wedding video, 2016. Courtesy of Mu Qian.

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 (Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006). As Johan Rasanayagam (2006) argues, in contexts where governments maintain tight control over religious expression, lived experience is often privileged over debate as a site for moral reasoning, and in Xinjiang, debates over correct religious practice and tradition were often played out through embodied conflicts. As is common right across the world, women found themselves at the sharp end of changing ethical standards, and dance was a particular site of tension. In the ethical milieu in Khotan in this period, for a woman to be caught on camera dancing in the street was to expose herself to public shaming.<sup>7</sup> The video catches her at a moment of tension: how should she negotiate the conflicting demands of identity politics, tradition and changing religious norms?

### **Halal and traditional wedding videos**

It is instructive to compare the Uyghur situation with the recent history of wedding celebrations in Egypt during the rise of Islamic revival movement and into the “post-Islamist” period. In Egypt, observers have described a process whereby the new pious sensibilities were gradually absorbed into mainstream practice; a synthesis of new and traditional styles of celebration, and a gradual moderation in religious sensibilities. In Karin van Nieuwkerk’s (2013) account, Islamic weddings in Egypt began in the 1980s as sober parties consisting of a short religious ceremony attended exclusively by male guests, after which the male and female guests divided into two separate venues for a simple dinner. In the early 1990s the Muslim Brothers sought to widen their appeal amongst the Egyptian population, a move that necessitated compromises on their more austere edicts. During the 1990s, the wide gap that existed between “Islamic”

weddings and “normal” weddings decreased. The growing number of pious and well-to-do Muslims stimulated the creation of an extensive religious market and a wide range of customers, within and outside the Islamist circles, looking for forms of wedding entertainment that were both halal and festive. In Xinjiang, by 2015, we can see the beginnings of a similar process of absorption and synthesis.

The new “Islamic weddings” posed a challenge to modes of Uyghur sociality in fundamental ways. Central to these were the role played by weddings in the “reciprocal sociality” that Ildikó Bellér-Hann (2008) situates at the heart of Uyghur tradition. As Steenberg (2013: 260) notes, the logic of reciprocal obligation was challenged by the new pious weddings and the ideology behind them. Stripped of the practice of gifting that underpinned social bonds, the core meaning of weddings underwent a fundamental shift. The traditional demands of reciprocity made it difficult to adhere to the modest imperatives of these new weddings if this model was not generally accepted and followed within the social circles of the families involved. Inevitably there were many instances of clashes between families over the proper way to proceed.

In some recent Uyghur wedding videos we can see processes of absorption and synthesis at work that mirror the historical developments which Karin van Nieuwberg observed in Egypt a decade earlier. These videos are opportunities to demonstrate family prestige—of which piety forms an important part—and they integrate Uyghur tradition and Islamic piety in ways that belie the entrenched opposition set up by Chinese media. In the opening sequence of a 2015 wedding video, dynamic views of the Kashgar streets combine the Islamic (the call to prayer given from a local Kashgar mosque), the folkloric (craftsmen hammering metal) and “halal” music (which took the form of excerpts from the canonical Uyghur Twelve

Muqam repertoire sung by an all-male group of voices).

The wedding was held in a large and beautiful traditional Kashgar courtyard house. We see taps used for ritual washing before prayer, large numbers of guests arriving, evidence of traditional but not excessive hospitality—bowls of tea and mutton rice polo that the guests eat in the traditional way with their fingers while seated on carpets around a large table cloth—then an emotional shot of the bride’s mother kissing her daughter and placing a wedding veil over her head, and finally a lengthy nikah ceremony attended by male family members and friends and dominated by the imam’s sermon. During the ceremony, the bride is revealed sitting outside an open window, her bowed head completely covered by a traditional Kashgar-style embroidered veil, flanked by older female family members.

Videos like this demonstrate a carefully crafted display of a style of wedding that is at once lavish and pious, insistent on a rigorous level of gender segregation but highlighting forms of hospitality and reciprocity, at once deeply halal and deeply traditional. Such videos suggest the possibility of bridging the trenchant opposition set up between religious revival and Uyghur tradition. They drew on visual tropes of local identity constructed in tourist promotions and on national TV. They used musical forms developed by the state performance troupes, and the sentimental fashioning of mothers familiar from films and TV, and they integrated them into new forms of self-fashioning that were entirely congruent with Islamic revivalist modes of pious comportment.

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, wedding videos are not straightforward records of events. In a region where the state places so much emphasis on representations, and where state policies intervene so closely in aspects of daily life and practices of self-fashioning, media items like this need to be

interpreted with particular care, and studied in tandem with other methods of accessing peoples' experience of changing religious norms. In this collaborative research project we have tried to do this through a combination of interviews and discussion groups and reviewing Uyghur wedding videos made in different parts of the region over a period of twenty years, highlighting aspects of social and religious change from across the region and at different levels of society during this timespan. Through the changing style statements made by Uyghur wedding videos over the past twenty years, we can see how they draw on particular transnational flows of consumption and media engagement. We can see a shift in ways of framing religious experience, authority and community, and the tensions between different models of being religious and being Uyghur. Processes of self-fashioning in Uyghur wedding videos evidence and sometimes deliberately assert different standpoints within the debates on piety, identity and tradition, but most importantly they offer the possibility of integration and synthesis in a context which has been so erroneously drawn as one of violent polarization.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.soundislamchina.org/> (accessed 14 July 2019).

<sup>2</sup> On contemporary debates in Uyghur society concerning gifting practices and the excessive display of wealth, see Darren Byler and Aynur Kadir: “Ms Munira’s Wedding Gifts”. <https://livingotherwise.com/2016/08/26/ms-muniras-wedding-gifts-trolling-uyghur-elite-society/> (accessed 14 July 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Uyghur Human Rights Project, *China’s Iron-Fisted Repression of Uyghur Religious Freedom*, Washington DC: UHRP, 2013); <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/09/26/553463964/wary-of-unrest-among-uyghur-minority-china-locks-down-xinjiang-province> (accessed 11 November 2017)

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<sup>4</sup> Our thanks to Rune Steenberg for sharing his observations of this practice in Kashgar in 2010-13.

<sup>5</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-03/04/c\\_119603801.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-03/04/c_119603801.htm) (accessed 21 July 2017)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rfa.org/uyghur/xewerler/kishilik-hoquq/qeshqer-toy-11032015233742.html> (accessed 23 July 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Compare the discussions of Islamic recitation by Hui Muslim women in Jaschok and in Ha Guangtian in this volume, and the controversies surrounding the women's voices especially in public arenas.