

## **Music, Terror, and Civilizing Projects in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region**

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### **“We are as Happy as Little Apples”<sup>1</sup>**

The national hit song Little Apple is now in Yengisar county of Kashgar district, where peasants from every village come to the cultural center every morning and evening to dance together to Little Apple. ... Dancing to Little Apple is intended to encourage the masses of all nationalities to develop their enthusiasm for modernity and progress, to guard against ethnic separatism and religious extremism, and to promote harmonious and civilized lifestyles (China News, January 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Little Apple, released by the Chopstick Brothers in May 2014, was a synthesizer-heavy, retro-style catchy love song with an insistent beat. Its bizarrely kitsch video featured the Chopstick Brothers with a group of young women in stripy pajama suits and red wigs performing a set of simple dance moves. It was a national viral hit. The dance moves and the quirky humor of the video made it ripe for imitation and parody. The tune circulated in countless amateur videos, and it spilled into public space as a sound track for the groups of women who gather daily to dance in China's city squares. The song also resounded across the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China, but in this predominantly Muslim region – also known by Uyghurs in exile as East Turkestan – which had seen a striking growth in religious piety since the 1990s it was a very different affair. For the indigenous Uyghur population, dancing to Little Apple was a compulsory activity organized by local officials in towns and villages across the region as part of a campaign to crack down on religious extremism.

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<sup>1</sup> Caption on a video of dancing villagers posted on Chinese social media in March 2015.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chinanews.com/shipin/2015/01-24/news542897.shtml>

Numerous videos of Uyghur villagers dancing in lines to Little Apple circulated on Chinese websites and social media in 2015. They danced in schoolyards, in community centers, and in the courtyards of police stations and municipal buildings. They danced to the original release by the Chopstick Brothers, and they danced to new Uyghur language versions. In some parts of the region, government officials decided it would be a good idea to mobilize religious clerics (imams) to join in these organized dancing activities. A video of Uyghur imams dancing to Little Apple found its way into the Turkish media where it caused a storm of outrage.<sup>3</sup>



Dancing Imams, Uch Turpan, 2015

A cover version was released by the Xinjiang SWAT Police Force in a high quality MV production. Rendered in a more forceful techno style, the lyrics of this version, instead of claiming “you are my little apple”, promised that the Xinjiang police would serve the people

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.soundislamchina.org/?p=1053>

and protect the (regional) capital, never flinching in their mission to uphold stability. The video underscored this message with grainy sequences of soldiers posing with high tech military equipment, conducting mass military drills, and dancing to Little Apple. The threat against which this formidable military force was deployed was – according to China’s official media – the Islamic extremism which had infected the whole of Uyghur society and posed a severe threat to the Chinese nation.

### **National stability**

Tensions in the region had been on the rise since the 1990s, as China sought to quell any possibility of a Uyghur independence movement in this Central Asian borderland. Too often this policy meant that legitimate calls for Uyghur rights were regarded as a threat to national stability, and met with state repression and violence. In 2009, for example, Uyghurs demonstrated in the regional capital of Urumchi to call for a government investigation into a brawl in a factory in China’s southern Guangdong province, which left several Uyghur migrant workers dead. Police attempted to suppress the demonstration using force, and the situation degenerated into a riot and interethnic violence which led to hundreds of deaths (Millward 2009). In its aftermath, troops rounded up thousands of young Uyghur men, and internet access to the region was blocked for ten months.

Alongside these political tensions, a significant Islamic revival was underway (Harris 2015), part of the wider piety movements that were sweeping across the Muslim world (Mahmood 2005; Rasmussen 2010; Rasanayagam 2011). For the vast majority of Uyghurs, the revival took the form of renewed interest in daily prayer and fasting, the adoption of modest dress, listening to the recited Qur’an, and – for the better-off – charitable projects and building new mosques. Increasingly, however, these new expressions of piety became caught up in violence, as the authorities began to reframe their attempts to maintain control over the region as a battle against Islamic extremism and terror. Local incidents of violence began to flare up, often as a consequence of intrusive policing. Finally, in 2014, a group of Uyghurs – following a failed attempt to flee the country – carried out a knife attack in the Kunming

railway station in southwest China, killing 33 civilians.<sup>4</sup> The Xinjiang government responded with a new “Strike Hard Against Violent Extremism” campaign.

Rather than targeting the small number of people who might reasonably be judged vulnerable to radicalization and violent action, the campaign sought to eliminate all visible and audible expressions of Islamic faith – veiling, beards, public prayer, fasting, religious gatherings, religious instruction, and religious media. Coercive forms of disciplinary and state power came to condition the experience of everyday life for Uyghurs, who faced controls on their appearance, their mobility, their listening, and their everyday bodily practices. The mechanisms of control extended across the landscape and into family homes, and they were enforced by the threat of violence. The “Peoples War on Terror” as it was dubbed was marked by huge demonstrations of state power, including military parades in the region’s major cities involving thousands of troops and violent rhetoric.

In May 2014, Xi Jinping called for the construction of “walls made of copper and steel” and “nets spread from the earth to the sky” to defend Xinjiang against terrorism.<sup>5</sup> This heightened rhetoric signaled the territorial nature of the campaign, and the degree to which the region and its people would be isolated and immobilized. Spatial techniques of control implemented gradually over the following few years included the freezing of mobility and the circulation of information. Passports were confiscated and special passes were required for any Uyghurs who wished to travel outside their hometown. Police patrols were introduced in every village and town, alongside regular shows of force in urban areas with armed troupes in military personnel carriers and even tanks patrolling city streets. A tight net of surveillance drew on a range of techniques from the high tech – security cameras, compulsory tracking devices on cars, and retina recognition software for some checkpoints – to the humanly enforced.

Alongside the surveillance and sanctions against religious behavior, the campaign included many compulsory activities designed to remodel the region’s citizens. “Beauty campaigns” introduced in 2014 involved communal village meetings during which women ceremonially removed their headscarves and men shaved off their beards. The Ramadan fast was disrupted by a policy requiring students and government workers to drink a glass of water as they

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/02/china-mass-stabbings-yunnan-kunming-rail-station>

<sup>5</sup> <http://english.cntv.cn/2014/05/29/ARTI1401365015943338.shtml>

entered the classroom or the workplace. There were reports of public beer drinking competitions organized for Uyghur men and women. Most prominent, however, were the widespread compulsory singing and dancing sessions.

### **Projects of territorialization**

The notion of territorialization, first developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) helps us to understand the processes by which China's border regions (among them Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang) are naturalized as inseparable parts of the Chinese state. Rather than viewing state territory as a pre-constituted geographical unit, we can conceive it as the product of an ongoing process of territorialization through which the hegemonic spatial relationships between state and society are established; a material and embodied process that involves the transformation of both landscapes and subjectivities (Wainwright 2008: 21). In the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the cities of Lhasa (in Tibet) and Kashgar (in today's Xinjiang) served as centers of religion and culture, hubs of trade with Nepal, Kashmir and Persia. After their incorporation into the Peoples Republic of China in the 1950s, they became peripheral backwaters with no political or economic power; places in need of economic development, populated by peoples in need of civilizing (Yeh 2013). As Emily Yeh notes, state territorialization projects are projects of self-fashioning, which work not only to shape the landscape but also to shape the bodies, desires, habits and emotions of their subjects.

Sound plays a crucial role in these processes of territorialization, and the soundscape is a site of struggle in ways that relate directly to – and articulate – struggles over the landscape and the ways that people inhabit the landscape. The notion of “sonic territorialization” helps to explain the ways in which state power and the shaping of habitus are played out through sound. In this chapter we consider the spatial negotiation of Xinjiang as it played out through the campaign to tackle Islamic extremism by daily singing and dancing, and the repetitive singing of revolutionary songs in Xinjiang's internment camps as part of an invasive regime designed to cleanse Uyghur Muslims of the “virus” of religious belief and Uyghur cultural identity, and remold them as patriotic and “civilized” citizens. We argue that the anti-extremism campaign in Xinjiang serves to obscure what is better understood as an ongoing struggle over the landscape, in which the state attempts to remodel the actions, desires, and

very sense of self of its subjects. This coercive project involves multiple infringements of human rights, and it involves the use of music in ways that also directly violate human rights.

### **Acoustic territories**

American journalists who travelled to Xinjiang in the post-2015 period looking for stories on the massive securitization of the region were quick to comment on the new soundscape:

The new police state comes with an eerie soundtrack. Along the streets, you hear the same pair of Mandarin-language propaganda songs: a jolly children's song about obeying traffic laws, and a more somber acoustic tune that promotes core Communist values. The government forces shops and restaurants in Uighur neighborhoods to broadcast these two songs all day on a loop.<sup>6</sup>

These stories were typically framed in terms of Chinese exceptionalism, but the techniques they described are familiar closer to home. Much of the core literature on sonic territorialization (Sterne 1997; DeNora 2000; Labelle 2010), attends to the experience of listening to mediated sound within the urban environments of late capitalism (muzak in factories, the sound track of the American shopping mall), and it attends to the ways that this sonic feed is manipulated in order to influence listeners. This form of sonic territorialization also plays an important role in state territorial moves in China, historically and today. It is deeply engrained in the Chinese revolutionary experience, materialized in the form of the loudspeakers that sounded out in the factories and schools and on the streets of cities, towns and villages across China, providing a nationwide soundtrack for the revolution.

However, the Chinese revolutionary period is also famous for its techniques of mass mobilization, in particular its emphasis on mass participation in revolutionary styles of cultural performance. It is the revival of this form of sonic territorialization in contemporary Xinjiang that we consider in this chapter: the consequences of large-scale coercive musical participation in terms of its impact on human bodies and their relationship with the landscape.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/09/26/553463964/wary-of-unrest-among-uyghur-minority-china-locks-down-xinjiang-province>

Beginning in 2014, the “anti-religious extremism” campaign harnessed sound, and especially the mass performance of popular and revolutionary songs, as a tool for the reterritorialization of the region. The campaign aimed to expel Muslim noise from the soundscape and fill it instead with sounds congruent with state narratives of patriotism, unity, and civilization with Chinese characteristics. As Uyghur villagers and urban dwellers across the region were mobilized to sing and dance Little Apple and other songs, Chinese media reports explicitly linked these activities to civilizing projects: countering religious extremism and fostering modernity. We argue that these activities were intended to break down the embodied norms of religious piety inculcated by the Islamic revival by demanding forms of public behavior that violated religious norms.

The ongoing violence – primarily forms of state violence – that formed the backdrop to this outbreak of mass singing and dancing make studies of sound in the context of war especially relevant to this chapter. In his study of the Iraq war, Martin Daughtry (2015) places emphasis on the act of listening, and is concerned both with the ways in which sound acts on bodies within relations of power, and also with the ways that sound can bring places into being. Listening in the context of war brings together this complex of ideas with particular force: these are the sounds produced in the context of violent, technologized and physical struggles over landscape. The direct relationship between sound and bodies is brought into focus through Daughtry’s account of the physical damage and psychological trauma that the sounds of war can inflict in conflict—burst eardrums, flashbacks—or through the use of music, in Susan Cusick’s study of Abu Ghraib prison, as a form of torture designed to break the resistance of detainees to interrogation (Cusick 2008).

### **Eradicating Noise**

In May 2017, at a mass rally held in Xinjiang University, Party Secretary Zhou Xuyong called on the assembled students to treat those who damaged the “unity of the nationalities” like rats: screaming after them and beating them as they scurried across the street. In the course of the campaign, he declared, all forms of “noise” (*zayin*) and “interference” (*zaoyin*) must be eliminated.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.milestonesjournal.net/articles/2017/6/2/uyghur-names-as-signal-and-noise>



The Uyghur masses attack those who damage the unity of the nationalities like rats. Peasant art campaign, 2014.

In the rich history of noise as metaphor, the term is often used to denote the sounds of the Other (Novak 2017). In her seminal work on “Black Noise,” Tricia Rose argued that the way rap and rap-related violence are discussed in the media is inseparable from the wider social discourse on the spatial control of black Americans. Underscoring the containment of rap culture, she argues, is the belief that black urban teenagers are a threat to the American social order and need to be contained (Rose 1994). In the context of this rally at Xinjiang University, it was apparent that the noise Zhou Xuyong referred to was Muslim noise, and the actions of the campaign made it abundantly clear that one of its primary goals was to silence Muslim noise. There was little to do in terms of the public soundscape; already the call to prayer resonated only within the confines of the region’s mosques or on individuals’ mobile phones. Instead, the campaign targeted the substrata of public-private spaces in which

religious sounds resonated: inside unofficial mosques, in restaurants and family homes, and on social media networks.

The campaign consistently emphasized the dangers of listening; especially listening either to unofficial sermons or to Islamic media. Uyghurs were sentenced to between two and ten years in prison for listening to “illegal religious sermons.” Such sermons did not necessarily contain any anti-government rhetoric; the listeners were sentenced simply because they had listened to sermons by an unofficial imam at an unauthorized venue.<sup>8</sup> The transmission of religious practice was a particular target. New legislation explicitly criminalized “forcing children to participate in religious activities.” Children taking part in religious activities could be sent to special government schools for correction. The measures to cleanse Uyghur society of Muslim noise went so far as a ban on “extremist” names, which included not only names like Bin Laden that might possibly be taken as an expression of enthusiasm for radical Islam, but also common Muslim names like Mohammad and Fatima.

As these moves suggest, the resurgence of Islamic sounds under the Islamic revival was heard by the state as backward, oppositional, and marked by violence, a direct challenge to state projects of modernization and development. Alongside the project of eradicating Muslim noise from the Xinjiang soundscape, the campaign mobilized other traditions of listening in order to reconfigure the soundscape.

### **Song-and-dance**

At China’s National People’s Congress in March 2014, delegates stood in silence to honor the victims of the Kunming train station attack. Dilnar Abdulla, deputy chair of the China Dancer’s Association, delivered a speech complaining that religious extremists in Xinjiang were campaigning for common people not to sing and dance, and even preventing them from singing and dancing at weddings. These injunctions against dancing constituted, she claimed, “a major assault on our traditional culture.”<sup>9</sup> The presence of music and dancing at weddings had indeed become a topic of sometimes heated debate across Uyghur society. Especially in the south of Xinjiang, pious weddings (*islamche toy*) had become popular amongst more

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/crackdown-04262017173652.html>

<sup>9</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-03/04/c\\_119603801.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-03/04/c_119603801.htm)

religious families: simple, sober gatherings in which the religious ceremony was central, and guesting and gift giving were kept to a minimum (Steenberg 2013). Dilnar Abdulla’s speech reduced these debates – which echoed centuries of debates on the permissibility of music within a religious lifestyle – into a simplified and misleading opposition: “foreign” religious extremism versus “traditional” song-and-dance.

The speech signaled the start of a new phase in the anti-extremism campaign. The speech encapsulated the opposition drawn by state media between Islamic and ethnic identities, and it highlighted the central role accorded to music, song and dance in the campaign. Following this speech, local governments in Xinjiang introduced new regulations to compel families to employ musicians to perform at their weddings. In some regions, weddings could only be held at authorized municipal venues where the appropriate amount of music and dancing could be monitored.<sup>10</sup> But compulsory music-making would not be confined to weddings, and over the following year, organized song-and-dance events became a cornerstone of the anti-extremism campaign.



Uyghur women participating in a mass song-and-dance event to counter extremism, Tianshan Net, 2015.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.rfa.org/uyghur/xewerler/kishilik-hoquq/qeshqer-toy-11032015233742.html>

Song-and-dance (*nakhsha-usul*) has a particular history in this region. Commentators have often noted the prominence of song-and-dance in Chinese Communist Party policy, the huge investment in the “development” of ethnic minority musical traditions, and the established rhetoric of China’s singing and dancing minority peoples. Many have argued that the promotion of ethnic minority arts serves as a pay-off for real autonomy in the political sphere (Harrell 2015). Minority song-and-dance is deployed to symbolize the big family of nations that comprises the Peoples Republic of China, and to uphold the rule of the Chinese Communist Party over this huge territory. Above all, these song-and-dance performances are notable for the performers’ smiles, who demonstrate above all their happiness to be part of the Chinese family of nations (Gladney 1994). The sixtieth anniversary gala celebration of the founding of the Peoples Republic of China, held on Beijing’s Tian’anmen Square in 2009, provides the most spectacular example of these themes. Its lavish program placed heavy emphasis on ethnic minority song-and-dance, deploying thousands of brightly dressed, smiling young women dancing in disciplined rows to the Uyghur revolutionary song “Salaam Chairman Mao” and the Tibetan “The Emancipated Serfs Have a Song to Sing.” If China’s professional minority performers have long been accustomed to smiling to service the requirements of China’s nation-building, the unfolding of the anti-extremism campaign in Xinjiang made it clear that it was no longer sufficient for paid professionals to smile; now ordinary Uyghurs were also expected to publicly demonstrate their happiness.

### **Singing Red Songs**

A key theme of the campaign was the performance of Red Songs, the canon of revolutionary songs created in mid-twentieth century China. They formed the sonic backdrop to the social chaos of the Cultural Revolution: Mao Zedong’s attempt to purge the newly established political elite in China, to transform the cultural superstructure and effect a profound transformation of Chinese society, which descended into widespread violence and destruction, underpinned by a cult of personality around Mao. Uyghurs suffered under this period of radicalism, violence and chaos, along with the rest of China, but in this region the violence was complicated by interethnic and religious politics. The songs of this era continue to be familiar staples of China’s national soundscape in the twenty-first century: broadcast on

national media at anniversary celebrations and other events, and widely sung in China's parks by amateur choirs. They provide the soundtrack for nostalgic and commercial reinventions of Cultural Revolution culture (Mittler 2012).

During 2015, many videos of Uyghur villagers singing Red Songs circulated on social media and official websites. Tianshan Net reported that:

In Jiashi [Päyzawat] county, 2600 people gathered to sing Red Songs celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. They sang The East is Red in two languages, and a choral version of Long Live Chairman Mao. 61-year-old Sidiq Hasim sang in Chinese, Chairman Mao May You Live Forever, and Mixia village performed a dramatic skit on the theme of combating extremism. (Tianshan Net October 2015)

The website published a spectacular series of photographs of local people at the rally, with young women dancing in short skirts in front of a large red banner, and older women singing with Chinese flag stickers affixed to their cheeks. According to the media report, they sang about ethnic unity and China's one family of nationalities, and they praised the motherland. The campaign continued to lay emphasis on involving religious personnel in the singing and dancing. One county governor posted on his personal blog:

This week, Aqyar village of Tamtoghraq town organized a public gathering for religious personnel to practice singing revolutionary songs. This activity was implemented across all the county's villages and towns to promote patriotism and teach imams how to dress properly. They sang their love for their country and the Communist party, and they showed their happiness. (Ömärjan Hakim, blog, February 2015)

### **Disciplining bodies**

In what way could these compulsory weekly song-and-dance sessions for Uyghur villagers be said to "counter extremism"? As the accounts presented in this chapter make clear, the anti-extremism campaign was not aimed at the small minority of people who might be capable of carrying out acts of violence in the name of *jihad*. The campaign was aimed squarely at the

broad-based Islamic revival amongst the Uyghurs, at the large numbers of people who had adopted a pious Muslim lifestyle including embodied practices such as daily prayers, reciting the Qur'an, habits of Islamic modesty, and avoidance of tobacco and alcohol. The singing and dancing were part of wider campaign to discipline bodies, and particularly to discipline Muslim bodies; part of a raft of measures designed to disrupt and displace everyday embodied practices, including bans on public prayer, beer-drinking competitions, and bans on Islamic clothing and beards. The campaign was not simply about banning a set of religious practices; it actively sought to replace them with a different set of embodied behaviors. Daily prayer was to be replaced by daily song-and-dance, and demonstrations of happiness.

In many ways, not only in that it revived the old revolutionary songs, this campaign was reminiscent of the mobilization techniques developed in China during the Cultural Revolution. In his searing personal account of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese historian Ban Wang notes the importance of embodiment, repetition and theatricalization in the project of transforming Chinese people into revolutionary subjects:

The revolutionary rituals appealed to our senses and inner psyches, to our desires, and they worked on the surface of our bodies. They functioned on a cynical premise about individual human beings—on the supposition that the individual's mind and body are malleable, amenable to modeling and shaping by the sensuous medium of a ritual.

(Wang 1997)

The ubiquitous Model Operas of the Cultural Revolution provided aesthetic and emotional models for becoming revolutionary heroes. It was their embodied reproduction through the widespread practice of amateur performances that had the most significant impact in the project of transforming Chinese citizens into revolutionary subjects:

Through the constant reproductions of the plays and widespread immersion in them, the people no longer just performed the dramas and acted out the roles on the stage: they came to live these roles and act out the scenarios in daily life. They came to identify with the heroes, taking on the tone, pitch, and manner of their speech and assuming their bodily postures. They even gesticulated and moved in the same heroic and theatrical way. (Wang 1997)

Fifty years later, the anti-extremism campaign in Xinjiang revived these techniques of revolutionary mass mobilization. This was a battle fought not on the ideological front but over bodily habitus, directly focused on undermining the new religious forms of embodiment through the use of revolutionary traditions of embodiment and performance.

The focus on embodied practice is central to readings of Islamic revival movements in the Middle East. As Saba Mahmood (2005) argues, forms of bodily practice such as veiling, daily prayers or reciting the Qur'an do not simply express the self but also shape the self that they are supposed to signify. Ethical self-formation, such as strengthening the desire to perform the daily prayers, can be achieved through constant vigilance, honing one's moral capacities in order to please God. In the course of fieldwork in Uyghur communities between 2006 and 2015, we met many Uyghur men and women who were engaged in these kinds of ethical practice: women who experienced emotional forms of revelation on hearing the sound of the recited Qur'an, and dedicated themselves to mastering and teaching the art of recitation; men who experienced a deep sense of happiness when they obeyed a mysterious voice in their head telling them to pray. These new forms of habitus had become widespread and deeply sedimented in Uyghur society, and they were perceived as a direct challenge to state power.

Bourdieu describes habitus broadly as a system of dispositions, something non-natural, a set of acquired characteristics that are the product of specific social conditions. As a theory of social power, Bourdieu's notion of habitus emphasizes change and process; it is formed through the changing dynamics between agents – individuals, groups and institutions – and their environment (1984: 170). Habitus transforms, but is also transformed by the environment within which it is set into play; it is inherently dynamic, and thus can be used to explain situations of radical social change. Habitus is key to understanding the role of song-and-dance in the anti-religious extremism campaign in Xinjiang. Chinese state responses to the Islamic revival in Xinjiang suggest a deep understanding of the role of habitus in the revival. The anti-religious extremism campaign made a powerful intervention into these processes of Islamic subject-formation, and it acted to replace them with forms of habitus developed in China's Cultural Revolution. As the campaign broadened and deepened, the ground on which this opposition was drawn began to shift, and by 2017 not only religion but the entirety of Uyghur language and culture was being drawn as a threat to the stability of the Chinese nation.

## **The internment camps**

Over the course of 2017, news began to leak out of Xinjiang of the construction of a huge network of internment camps, dubbed “political re-education centers” in official sources. Journalists and scholars began to piece together the evidence, and by early 2018 some were concluding that over a million Muslims – primarily Uyghurs but also Kazakhs, around 10% of the adult Muslim population of the region – had been interned in the camps for indefinite periods of time without any legal charge. Reports by former detainees describe huge facilities, heavily secured with barbed wire, surveillance systems, and guarded by armed police, that could hold tens of thousands of inmates. These reports were corroborated by careful investigation of government construction bids and satellite imagery of the new facilities (Zenz 2018).

By 2017, the so-called “anti-extremism campaign” was no longer only branding all religious activity as terrorism, its scope had expanded still further to target all signs of Uyghur nationalist sentiment, foreign connections, or simply insufficient loyalty to the state. A government official was reported as saying, “You can’t uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops in the field one by one – you need to spray chemicals to kill them all; re-educating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops ... that is why it is a general re-education, not limited to a few people.”<sup>11</sup> Any kind of links with Uyghurs in the diaspora was regarded as evidence of anti-Chinese intent. Families who had relatives working or studying abroad were warned against receiving their phone calls, at the risk of a period of detention in the camps. The campaign was further broadened to include “two-faced” people including government officials, teachers and business people who “appeared to be fighting terrorism while actually sympathizing with it”.<sup>12</sup> Also sucked into the detention camps were prominent Uyghur intellectuals, writers and artists, whose crimes – although they were not formally stated – seemed to be that their work promoted in some way Uyghur language, culture or history.<sup>13</sup> Speaking the Uyghur language in public was branded unpatriotic.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/wealthiest-01052018144327.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/servants-05302018154833.html>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/05/world/asia/china-xinjiang-uighur-intellectuals.html>

In February 2018, Chinese media carried images of crowds of Uyghur peasants brandishing flags to celebrate the Chinese New Year, and standing in front of the doorways of their homes on which they had pasted the traditional Chinese New Year greetings.<sup>14</sup> This new initiative suggested that it was now no longer sufficient to reject Islam; what was required of Uyghurs was a wholesale adoption of Chinese cultural identity. To build new, better Chinese citizens, an official document argued, the camps must first “break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins.”<sup>15</sup> Uyghurs and other commentators abroad began to frame the campaign as a form of ethnic cleansing or cultural genocide. “I cannot bear keeping silent [any more] because I think there’s a genocide taking place in East Turkestan,” said one Uyghur exile based in Turkey. “They want to erase, erase, erase your identity and our culture and to melt them into Han Chinese.”<sup>16</sup>

A media interview with Omir Bekali in July provided one of the first detailed account of the regime inside the camps.<sup>17</sup> Bekali was a citizen of Kazakhstan, imprisoned in 2016 during a visit to his parents in Xinjiang, and released after seven months detention following Kazakh diplomatic intervention. According to his account, detainees would wake before dawn to sing the Chinese national anthem and raise the Chinese flag. They gathered in large classrooms for history lessons in which they learned that the indigenous peoples of Xinjiang were uncivilized and yoked by slavery before they were liberated by the Chinese Communist Party. They studied the dangers of Islam and took regular quizzes to test the knowledge they had acquired. Failing a test or refusal to follow orders was punished by solitary confinement or deprivation of food. Testimony by Gulbahar Jelil suggests that detainees are on a starvation diet – given only when the inmates spoke in Chinese – and living in cells so crowded inmates have to sleep in shifts. She describes the widespread use of psychiatric drugs to subdue inmates, and saw many nervous breakdowns and nine deaths during the months she spent in the camp.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <https://livingotherwise.com/2018/02/23/images-red-han-culture-uyghur-performers-chinese-new-year/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.yahoo.com/news/inside-chinas-internment-camps-tear-gas-tasers-textbooks-052736783.html?guccounter=1>

<sup>16</sup> <https://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-01/satellite-images-expose-chinas-network-of-re-education-camps/10432924?pfmredir=sm>

<sup>17</sup> <https://apnews.com/6e151296fb194f85ba69a8babd972e4b>

<sup>18</sup> <https://livingotherwise.com/2018/12/31/youve-spent-whole-life-prison-uyghurs-starving-subdued-detention-centers/>

Forced repetition and self-criticism feature strongly in Omir Bekali's account of life in the camps. Detainees were made to recite repeatedly, "We will oppose extremism, we will oppose separatism, we will oppose terrorism." Before meals they were required to chant, "Thank the Party! Thank the Motherland! Thank President Xi!" In classes, detainees presented self-criticisms of their own religious histories, admitting to learning to recite the Qur'an, to travelling outside China where they risked being exposed to extremist thought, to wearing Muslim clothing and to praying. They also criticized their fellow inmates and submitted to the criticism of their peers. Gerry Shih notes that, "Detainees who most vigorously criticized the people and things they love are rewarded, and those who refuse to do so are punished with solitary confinement, beatings and food deprivation."<sup>19</sup>

The extent to which this regime violates international human rights treaties has been well documented by human rights organizations and scholars in the west. The legal researcher Hilary Hurd notes that China is a party to four international conventions on human rights: the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The forced internment and religious suppression of Uyghurs arguably violates each of these conventions.<sup>20</sup>

China's constitution also recognizes extensive rights now in jeopardy in Xinjiang. These include freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration. There are specific articles concerning the protection of cultural heritage. The constitution states that "no state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not believe in, any religion." Human Rights Watch has noted that the "human rights violations in Xinjiang today are of a scope and scale not seen in China since the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> <https://apnews.com/6e151296fb194f85ba69a8babd972e4b>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.lawfareblog.com/chinas-human-rights-abuses-against-uyghurs-xinjiang>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>

## **Singing and dancing in the internment camps**

As with the techniques used outside the internment camps, music featured strongly in the re-education program. A leaked video clip circulated on Uyghur exile networks in 2017, which appeared to show two rows of Uyghur detainees kneeling in an empty room, holding plastic bowls and singing a Red Song. The Uyghur intellectual, Abduwali Ayup, who was detained in 2013 and held for over a year, explained, “This is what a Chinese (detention) center looks like. They are Uyghur detainees, they are singing ‘There is no new life without Chinese Communist Party.’ They are singing for (their) meal.”<sup>22</sup> Gulbahar Jelil described how the women in her camp had to memorize songs praising the Chinese Communist Party, and regularly sang the Chinese national anthem. Local government websites confirmed the regime, describing how detainees spend their days “shouting slogans, singing red songs and memorizing the Three Character Classic” (a classic Confucian educational text).<sup>23</sup>

Song and dance have also played a major role in government efforts to persuade the international community of the benign nature of the camps. In the run-up to a carefully stage-managed inspection visit by media groups of carefully selected nations in January 2019, an interviewee reported that detainees were being trained to sing and dance, and were repeatedly told that they must “look happy and enthusiastic when visited by the inspection team ... Authorities tell them, ‘to show your contentment with life, you must dance happily, and everyone must smile joyfully. No one may look sad, otherwise there will be consequences.’”<sup>24</sup> A video produced by a Kazakh news outlet duly showed footage of detainees singing in English, “If you’re happy and you know it clap your hands,” and smiling and dancing for the benefit of the international visitors.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> <https://livingotherwise.com/2018/02/23/images-red-han-culture-uyghur-performers-chinese-new-year/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://theglobepost.com/2018/10/24/inside-chinas-internment-camps/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/preparations-12122018152245.html>

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.azattyq.org/a/world-china-camps/29695682.html?fbclid=IwAR04xii8XeVhgG82qEkHTfnRLWA\\_h1XOLEw68Z3Qu5sDqqIy\\_RBEHC2CgFA](https://www.azattyq.org/a/world-china-camps/29695682.html?fbclid=IwAR04xii8XeVhgG82qEkHTfnRLWA_h1XOLEw68Z3Qu5sDqqIy_RBEHC2CgFA)



Young women in an internment camp sing and dance and smile for an international inspection team, Azattyq News Agency, January 2019.

### **Traumatic legacies**

It is too soon to assess the long-term impact of the current policies, but testimonies like that of Omir Bekali and Gulbahar Jelil hint at the extreme psychological pressure and trauma that Uyghurs and Kazakhs are currently experiencing. Even for those outside the camps, even those living abroad with relatives in the region, fear is pervasive and depression is widespread.<sup>26</sup> Since there are so many continuities with the Cultural Revolution era in the methods now being applied in Xinjiang, it is worth thinking about the impacts on people who lived through that period and were subject to similar techniques of political re-education and self-criticism. A recent collaborative study, led by German psychologist Tomas Plänkner (2014), investigates the lasting legacy of post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological regression fostered during the revolutionary period in Chinese history, focusing on how the traumatic psychic structures of one generation affect the next. A particular source of trauma

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<sup>26</sup> <https://livingotherwise.com/2018/07/31/happiest-muslims-world-coping-happiness/>

noted by his interviewees was the acquired habit that had been necessary for survival: of constant scrutiny of one's own thinking and actions for signs of political deviance.

What role might sound and music play in relation to the trauma suffered through political violence, incarceration and coercive techniques of re-education? Sinologist Geremie Barmé attends to memories of music in the Cultural Revolution, noting that for those who suffered under its campaigns, revolutionary songs were the “shrill sounds of terror ... little less than ‘the threnody of the [Chinese] holocaust,’ for it was these sounds that were the Muzak wallpaper of the violent purges and campaigns of that tumultuous time” (Barmé 1999: 231). Barmé's evocation of Muzak reminds us again of early capitalist uses of music to discipline bodies, and links with the body of work on sonic territorialization. Just as Daughtry (2015) explores the traumatic legacy of sonic experience in war, Plänker's interviewees also cite the impact of memories of sound in their testimonies. One interviewee recalled, “I was afraid of the sound of people being beaten. . . . Since then I can't listen any more, when people are beaten [for example on TV] ... Every time I tremble inside. I can't stand hearing beatings, or crying or screaming” (2014).

Arguably, the use of music in Xinjiang's internment camps is an instance of the “weaponization” of music, which has been extensively critiqued in the context of the Iraq war, notably in Suzanne Cusick's (2008) study of the use of music in US interrogation techniques. The US detention centers used music part of a package of measures designed to break down an individual's will and sense of self, exploiting music's unique ability to serve simultaneously as sensory experience, site of cultural belief, and medium of cultural practice. In Xinjiang's internment camps we find detainees subject to equivalent processes in which singing Chinese language Red Songs is used to break down the detainees' sense of cultural identity and their embodied habits of pious practice. In both cases we find the repetitive and sustained use of music in the context of extra-judicial detention, as part of a package of measures including physical torture. In the Xinjiang context, though, the methods are more invasive, since they require detainees not only to listen but also to embody and give voice to the songs. In this way they form an integral part of the attacks on detainees' will and sense of self; they are a clear violation of rights to self-determination, cultural identity and religious belief, and arguably in themselves a form of torture. Far from undergoing a “civilizing” process which transforms them into loyal citizens, what detainees and the wider population

are experiencing are forms of terror which will have far-reaching consequences on their health and well-being, and inevitably alienate them still further from the state.

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