

# IN SEARCH OF SUFI MUSICIANS IN THE XUAR

BY TING TING CHENG

**A Han Chinese woman gains a deeper understanding of the Uyghur experience through contact with a disappearing art form.**

In May 2006, I set out on a trip to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in western China. My objectives seemed straightforward—to find Sufi musicians deep in the Taklamakan desert, record their music and videotape their performances.

As I left the United States, the Uyghurs were making international headlines; out of some 25 Uyghurs detained at the U.S. detention and interrogation center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, five had been ostensibly released after being cleared of all charges brought against them by the military tribunal, but they had continued to be held in Guantanamo for over a year because they had been denied political asylum in the U.S., but faced a strong likelihood of official persecution if returned to China. Later that month, they were accepted by Albania and sent to the National Center for Refugees in Tirana.<sup>1</sup> I had planned my trip to Xinjiang months earlier, but the plight of the newly-released Uyghurs led me to anticipate a similar situation in Xinjiang, where the reach of China's "war on terror" extends deep into the province and affects the most innocent of the Uyghur population.

The typical Chinese view of Uyghurs was brought literally "home" to me on my first night in China, which I spent in Shanghai with my family. The eastern coastal cities could hardly be further removed from Xinjiang. Although Uyghurs have a visible presence in Shanghai, mainly as food vendors, restaurant owners and migrant workers, the media offer a politicized view of Uyghurs in which separatist movements use senseless violence in pursuit of the impossible goal of attaining independence. Throughout the 1990s, the Chinese media have focused increasing attention on turbulence in Xinjiang and resistance by independence movements such as the Sharqiy Turkistan Azatliq Tashkilati (East Turkistan Liberation Organization) against government control in the region. Images of the Beijing bus bombing and the Yining incident in 1997 have fostered a national image of Uyghurs as prime suspects in violent terrorist acts.<sup>2</sup> Similar official concerns about the region have been issued through the PRC's white papers on "East Turkistan" terrorism in Xinjiang.

I did not live in China in the 1990's, and developed my interests in Xinjiang's Sufi musicians while in music school, through the lens of performance, rituals, ethnomusicology and anthropology. Local government officials and the CCP have imposed a political stance on Sufi Uyghur musicians in Xinjiang; the ban on their music further perpetuates a system of oppression. Before coming to China, I had watched CSPAN as the indefatigable Uyghur human rights activist Rebiya Kadeer testified at a congressional hearing on human rights in China. She detailed the human rights violations committed by the Chinese government in Xinjiang, ranging from the repression of Uyghur women's reproductive rights to arbitrary detention, torture and summary execution.

My uncle warned me, "Xinjiang is not just unsafe, it's extremely dangerous." But what was the basis of this dangerous image? I had understood the Yining incident as largely a protest against the government's "Strike Hard" campaign involving mass arrests of suspected terrorists. I argued with my family that the clashes with police and resulting casualties in Yining could not be blamed solely on the Uyghur independence movement. Even within China, claims by local officials regarding the trend of separatist terrorism have been contradictory. Zhao Yongchen, deputy director of the Ministry of Public Security's Counterterrorism Bureau, has said, "Under the influence of many complex international and domestic factors, violent acts of terrorism in Xinjiang have been escalating seriously."<sup>3</sup> But in another instance reported by the Uyghur Human Rights Project, Ismael Tiliwaldi, Chairman of the XUAR regional government, claimed, "Not one incident of explosion or assassination took place in the last few years," and that the "public security situation was very good."<sup>4</sup>

Besides, I continued, I was interested in special "minority" music in western China and planned to travel along the Silk Road in search of Uyghur musicians—nothing to do with violence. In my quest for Sufi music, I wanted to arrive at the inner culture that speaks through ritual and sound that has been practiced by Sufi Muslims for hundreds of years; rituals that are inherently non-political, and that do not represent separatist allegiances so much as an insular culture contained within a tight-knit community.

Sufi music is a prime example of the disparate representations of Uyghur national identity. Chinese national culture

presents “Uyghur” music in the digestible forms of pop melodies and state-sponsored troupes. Yet integral to the Sufi music tradition in Xinjiang is the oral tradition and canon of songs that have been passed down from one generation to the next to express religious faith, songs that originate in Iran, with striking instrumentation and powerful narratives. For the Chinese government, which appropriates minority culture as a political vehicle toward national unity, the integral spirituality of Sufi music and its *Muqams*<sup>5</sup> is irreconcilable with Party ideology. Expressing a time and place outside of the Chinese context, the music is virtually impossible for the Chinese government to assimilate, and is therefore simply outlawed, hidden and persecuted.

Leaving my family’s worries behind, I flew to Urumqi sitting between two friendly Chinese men who were directors of the CCTV news station in Xinjiang, stationed in Urumqi. They had just returned from a conference in Beijing on building media unity among the various branches of CCTV nationwide. Like many Chinese in the region, they had been enticed to move to Xinjiang in the late 1990s through dream jobs offered in government resettlement programs aiming at populating Xinjiang with Han Chinese. They were energetic and warm and expressed awe of the landscape as well as the uniqueness of the province. When asked if they had learned Uyghur, they laughed and said no, it wasn’t necessary.

Once in Urumqi, I met with an acclaimed Uyghur Sufi scholar who was working on a book on Sufi musicians and was in the process of collecting recordings of all the musicians in the region. He initially refused to offer any guidance when I revealed that I was an American and was carrying recording devices. He had been instructed by local officials not to communicate with Americans about Sufi music, and noted that he had been plagued by police interrogations and raids, including confiscation of his recordings and equipment, during his trips into southern Xinjiang. We spent 10 hours together that day talking about Sufi music and ethnomusicology in the region,

and ultimately I convinced him to allow me to cautiously follow up with his contacts.

From there I set off across the Taklamakan desert, traveling south to an oasis town where many Sufi musicians reside.<sup>6</sup> I should note here that I was hampered by two major limitations on this trip: I didn’t speak Uyghur, and was a foreigner in many respects—a Chinese-American woman searching for Sufi rituals attended almost exclusively by men. I was given the contact of a Uyghur engineer who worked in the city and outlying towns, and who spoke Mandarin by virtue of the graduate degree he had obtained in Beijing. He drove me to a small town, where we met with Umit, an organizer of sorts in the region. I was invited to stay at his house while he arranged gatherings, and we communicated through hand gestures and rudimentary Uyghur. I never got a straight answer to my question of what his occupation was, but most Uyghurs I met in that region, and almost all of the Sufi musicians, were farmers or small business merchants.

I offered to work on Umit’s farm alongside his wife by day, cutting stalks of corn in the blazing sun. In the evenings I played with his children, wrote and waited. Some evenings he would gesture toward my equipment bag, and we would set out into the night in his car, down small dirt roads that crisscrossed the fields, eventually ending up in the home of the host for that evening’s ritual. The musicians arrived separately and sat down to eat, then pray. Sitting among them, I listened as they talked in excited tones, and nodded when the conversation turned toward me, attempting to communicate in the limited Uyghur that I learned along the way. In many ways, it seemed safer for everyone involved that I didn’t know the language or the details of their lives, or even exactly where I was; then, if my footage and recordings were confiscated, I could claim sheer ignorance.

Late into the evenings, the musicians gathered in the main room of the house to begin singing. One of the first nights after my arrival, I had dinner with a group of Buiwe singers, a rare collective of women Sufi ritualists. They had almost celebrity status in the region and exuded an infectious charisma. Yet they were also farmers by day, and bore the marks of hard labor on their faces and hands. They spoke in hushed tones and prayed into their palms before beginning a somber tune, reciting the names of Allah in verses that modulated slightly from the one before, set in a pattern of powerful swells where the women wailed the capitulating chorus in reply to the singular voice of *Muzah*, the lead vocalist. They proceeded through 20 songs in the course of four hours, singing with eyes closed and hands cradling the Koran, and ended the evening with a joyful *Sama* dance. Later I found out that they rarely came together to sing and dance because of their heavy workloads and the restrictions on Sufi ritual gatherings; a mass gathering such as theirs would arouse suspicions among the local Chinese police.

I attended many other gatherings in the course



Unlike Sufi musicians who perform only in secret, these Uyghur musicians are allowed to perform for tourists outside a major bazaar in Urumqi. Photo: Reuters

of my stay. One night, en route to hear a family ensemble of balaman<sup>7</sup> players, we were delayed by a police interrogation. They had pulled us over on the road, and a heated argument ensued, after which we were taken to the local police station. Umit explained that I was a university student visiting from Shanghai, the daughter of a family friend, and we were just returning from touring the area (in the middle of the night). I sat silently in the police station, wondering how much trouble Umit would get into just for being with me. Luckily they didn't search my bag, and we were allowed to leave two hours later, after Umit bribed the police to release his car.

On another evening, a blind singer performed a muqam from Karkash. This particular dastan, or epic tale,<sup>8</sup> narrated the life of a fictitious character named Usep Almet in a mystical story about the ability to foretell the future. It is believed that the story originated with ghosts before eventually intertwining with everyday life. The Sufi rituals that I saw in Xinjiang involved music and dance that transcended earthly life. The musicians described to me the experience of channeling a voice that is not of this world, and which allows them to express a spectrum of emotions in communication with God.

Many Sufi musicians in the area expressed anger at the repression imposed on them by the Chinese Government, especially on their freedom to gather and perform rituals. Most Sufi music in China is banned as part of China's "war on terror," which regards anything overtly religious as a potentially separatist activity. Imams, before giving Friday services, must have their talks approved by a government review board.<sup>9</sup> Musicians caught performing, as in the case of one group who sang for a Japanese videographer who subsequently broadcast the performance on Japanese television, suffer heavy penalties under which their wages are cut and they are subjected to close surveillance by local police. But many Uyghurs in the region find salvation in these rituals, which relieve them from the harsh reality of their daily lives and the hard labor they have to endure. This was a frequent topic of conversation throughout my visits to the gatherings.

I found the Uyghurs extremely well informed on international news, speaking passionately about the American occupation in Iraq and the detainees in Guantanamo Bay. We talk about the rapid changes to Xinjiang's landscape in the past 20 years, the mass Chinese migrations and the de facto segregation of Uyghurs as they are pushed further toward the edges of the desert and away from the newly minted urban infrastructure that Beijing lauds as benefiting all residents. Yet the only desire they expressed was to be left alone and allowed to sing.

What of the nuclear testing grounds near Hami, or the abundance of natural gas and oil on which the province sits? As we gathered in the depths of the night, as I recorded Sufi music and bore witness to rituals that brought men to tears and overwhelmed them with sheer emotion that caused them to collapse on the ground, we talked about their lives in the context of the Chinese government's designs for the region. In the middle of the night, there was solace in the Sufi rituals, where the community converged, and where religious devotion found its voice in musical aphorisms.

A prominent family of Sufi musicians agreed to gather in

Umit's brother's house the night before I left. There were three generations of musicians in the family, and through the course of 12 hours they sang the entire range of their repertoire. Village elders lament the potential death of this music, the tenuous task of passing it to younger generations, and the overall direction in which Sufi music is headed, given the ban on performances. As more and more Uyghur youth are educated in Chinese schools and move to the cities seeking better opportunities, abandoning traditional Uyghur practices and dress, it becomes harder for this art form to assert a definite trajectory.

My trip in Southern Xinjiang among the Sufi musicians lasted two weeks, after which I had to return to Urumqi and set out for Beijing. In Kashgar, a pair of Uyghur tour guides allowed me to ride with them to Urumqi if I did half the driving, and we sped across the desert highway listening to pop music on the radio. The time in the desert had transformed me. I was lucky to have been welcomed with open arms into a new family and invited to Sufi rituals that elevated my perceptions of the Uyghur situation in China and gave me a deeper understanding of a unique part of its population. The passion and strength of the musicians taught me that Sufi music will not die in the region. They taught me to hope for a future in which the Uyghurs can live freely and express their faith through music.

#### NOTES

1. "Guantanamo Uyghurs Try to Settle in Albania," *Radio Free Asia*, May 10, 2006, [http://www.rfa.org/english/news/2006/05/10/uyghur\\_guantanamo/](http://www.rfa.org/english/news/2006/05/10/uyghur_guantanamo/).
2. Despite speculation that the bombings were carried out by Uyghur separatists, the police concluded later that peasants from Jiangxi province were responsible. BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/despatches/69752.stm>.
3. *Lack of evidence continues to undermine china's claims of terrorism in East Turkistan*, <http://uhrp.org/articles/247/1/Lack-of-evidence-continues-to-undermine-Chinas-claims-of-terrorism-in-East-Turkistan/UHRP-Backgrounder-Lack-of-evidence-continues-to-undermine-Chinas-claims-of-terrorism-in-East-Tur.html>.
4. *Uyghurs Fleeing Persecution as China Wages its War on Terrorism*, Amnesty International, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170212004>.
5. The twelve muqams are the most famous genre of Uyghur music. Each muqam hails from a different region of Xinjiang and have maintained their distinct style and instrumentation. The muqams consist of 170 songs and dances that require over 24 hours to perform in their entirety.
6. For the purposes of protecting the identity of the people I met and worked with, I have changed their names and obscured their locations.
7. The Balaman, also known as a shawm, is an oboe-like instrument that appeared during the Han Dynasty in Xinjiang and has become part of the standard repertoire of Uyghur music. Though the instrument has traveled to Korea and Japan, the tradition is disappearing in Xinjiang.
8. Dastan recitals typically run from one to four hours.
9. *Xinjiang: Strict Control of China's Uyghur Muslims Continues*. <http://uhrp.org/articles/222/1/XINJIANG-Strict-control-of-Chinas-Uighur-Muslims-continues/XINJIANG-Strict-control-of-Chinas-Uighur-Muslims-continues.html>. See also "Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang," Human Rights Watch and Human Rights in China, 2005, [http://hrichina.org/fs/downloadables/pdf/downloadable-resources/Xinjiang%20Report?revision\\_id=21519](http://hrichina.org/fs/downloadables/pdf/downloadable-resources/Xinjiang%20Report?revision_id=21519).