

# “Eating Hanness”: Uyghur Musical Tradition in a Time of Re-education

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**ABSTRACT:** In February 2019, two major musical performances by residents of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region were widely circulated on Chinese social media. These two performances, one a Mekit County Harvest Gala and the other a performance by a Uyghur school teacher from Qumul, featured Uyghurs dressed in Han cultural costumes performing Beijing Opera. Over the past five years, since the “People’s War on Terror” started, the space for Uyghur traditional song and dance performance has deeply diminished. Simultaneously, the space for Uyghurs performing Hanness through Chinese traditional opera and Red songs has dramatically increased. Drawing on open source Uyghur and Chinese-language media, ethnographic fieldwork, and interviews with Uyghurs in diaspora, this article analyses the changing role of music in Uyghur religious and ritual life by tracing the way state cultural ministries have dramatically increased their attempts to separate Uyghur music from its Sufi Islamic origins in order to produce a non-threatening “permitted difference” (Schein 2000). Since 2016, the re-education campaign of the Chinese government on Uyghur society has intensified this disconnection by promoting an erasure of even the state-curated “difference” of happy, exoticized Uyghurs on stage. Han traditional music is now replacing Uyghur traditional music, which shows an intensification of symbolic violence toward Uyghur traditional knowledge and aesthetics. In a time of Uyghur re-education, musical performance on stage has become a space for political rituals of loyalty to a Han nationalist vision of the Chinese state.

**KEYWORDS:** Uyghur, native music, Xinjiang, symbolic violence, re-education.

Since the official introduction and development of “vocational skills education training centres” (*zhíyè jìnéng jiàoyù péixùn zhōngxīn* 職業技能教育培訓中心) in Xinjiang that intensified in early 2017 – what is referred to by the public as the Uyghur “re-education” (*zài jiàoyù* 再教育) campaign – the Lunar New Year has become the largest cultural event of the year for Uyghurs. As more than 1.1 million mostly Han state workers were dispatched to Uyghur villages and as many as one million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims were detained, the Lunar New Year, along with other Chinese holidays such as the Spring Festival and Dragon Boat Festival, has replaced the sacred holidays of Uyghur traditional life, Eid al-Adha (*Qurban Heyt*) and Eid al-Fitr (*Roza Heyt*). These holidays, as well as the traditional Uyghur spring festival Nawruz, have been forbidden for Uyghurs as signs of “religious extremism.”

The cancelling of Uyghur sacred holidays has a historical precedent. During the height of the Maoist era in the 1950s and 1960s, all Uyghur traditions associated with Islam were labelled counter-revolutionary. But at that time, all traditional holidays, both Han and Uyghur, were cancelled. Celebrating Han cultural traditions such as the Lunar New Year was also associated with the Four Olds (*Sijiu* 四舊): old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Instead, people were directed to celebrate events associated with the founding of the socialist nation. They attended dance performances of the eight model revolutionary operas chosen by Jiang Qing, the wife of Chairman Mao Zedong. Uyghurs, too, celebrated these operas. They carefully translated the lyrics into Uyghur and performed them to the classical Sufi Islamic melodies of Uyghur *muqam*. At the time, state authorities believed that Uyghur cultural traditions could also become socialist traditions. In

contemporary Xinjiang, state-permitted Uyghur traditions of this type have entered a new stage. In recent years, state authorities have emphasised the importance of “anti-terrorist” (*fankong* 反恐) and “de-extremisation” (*quji duanhua* 去極端化) cultural work, commonly referred to as “stability maintenance” (*weiwén* 維穩), which includes “preventive measures against terrorism” (*yufangxing fankong* 預防性反恐).<sup>1</sup> In this context, regional authorities built a system of extra-judicial detention and coercive education programs, affecting all Turkic Muslim peoples in Northwest China. As Ben Dooley<sup>2</sup> and Adrian Zenz (2019) have shown respectively, this system focuses on “eradicating the tumours” of Islam and “washing the hearts and minds” of Uyghurs and other Muslim groups and filling them with Han cultural values and Chinese political beliefs.

In a 2018 government white paper on ethnic policy in the region, state authorities wrote that “Chinese” culture should now be considered the core of all other ethnic cultures (State Council Information Office 2018). They argued that Hanness should be seen as preceding all other identities. “The many ethnic cultures of Xinjiang have their roots in the fertile soil of Chinese civilisation, advancing their own cultural development while enriching the overall culture of China. All ethnic cultures in Xinjiang have borrowed

1. See, for instance, an official report by the news department of the State Council: “新疆的反恐、去極端化鬥爭與人權保障” (Xinjiang de fankong, quji duanhua douzheng yu renquan baozhang, Counter-terrorism, fight against extremism, and human rights protection in Xinjiang), *Xinhua* wang, March 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-03/18/c\\_1124247196.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-03/18/c_1124247196.htm) (accessed on 22 July 2019).
2. Ben Dooley, “Eradicate the tumours: Chinese civilians drive Xinjiang crackdown,” *Agence France Presse*, 26 April 2018, <https://www.afp.com/en/eradicate-tumours-chinese-civilians-drive-xinjiang-crackdown> (accessed on 22 July 2019).

from Chinese culture from the very beginning" (State Council Information Office 2018). In August 2018, the mayor of Urumqi made this even more explicit, declaring that "Uyghurs are not descendants of Turks" and instead are "members of the Chinese family."<sup>3</sup> These counterfactual erasures of Uyghur history by state authorities reveal the current politics of rewriting Uyghur identity. As this article shows, Uyghurs were also being forced to assimilate Hanness in all of its rich and varied forms by learning dances from the Northeast, singing styles from Beijing, and standard Mandarin, and by replacing their identities with imposed values and cultural performances. Although the so-called re-educators carried with them a "Chinese" national identity (*Zhonghua minzu* 中華民族) that was presented as unmarked by Hanness, they were in fact asking Uyghurs to consume the values and rituals of their colonisers. Across Uyghur society, people came to understand that this new-style performance was a primary way of demonstrating their loyalty to the state.

Drawing on multiple years of ethnographic fieldwork, open-source Chinese and Uyghur media, and recent interviews with Uyghurs in the North American diaspora, this article argues that the transformation of Uyghur society now consists of replacing Uyghur cultural traditions, not with socialist rituals, but with Han cultural traditions. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among Uyghur traditional poets, dancers, and musicians, and on an analysis of the transformation of music performance events in the Uyghur homeland, this article first examines the importance of music in Uyghur social life and traditional knowledge through the circulation of performances of Sufi legends. It demonstrates how these forms of performative knowledge have been appropriated by the Chinese state and turned into commodities for non-religious consumers in the 2000s. It then considers how they have been replaced by Han cultural forms since early 2017. The article shows that the subtraction of Uyghur society that has occurred through the re-education campaign using "training centres" as a final stage of the "People's War on Terror" has also been replicated in Uyghur musical traditions. The state expropriation and reengineering of Uyghur song and dance has shifted to force Uyghur performers to mimic Hanness and in this way has enacted a deeply-felt form of violation.

### Frames of analysis

In a 1992 article called "Eating the Other," bell hooks argues that in liberal multicultural contexts such as North America the commodification of Otherness is successful because it offers a fulfilment of desire more intense and satisfying than what is normally felt in the dominant context of the society. She notes, "[w]ithin commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (1992: 21). Continuing, she shows how in this context the desire is "not to make the Other over in one's image but to become the Other." As Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) noted in relation to Aboriginal traditions in Australia, the desire for minority others as part of the liberal multiculturalist framework forces native subjects to stage and "identify with the impossible object of authentic self-identity" (2002: 6) that is always centred on an exotic slot imposed from above. Aboriginals are forced to perform for the gaze of the majority. They need to meet the expectations of those who come to "eat" them.

In China there was a similar efflorescence of the imposed exoticisation of minority others in the 1990s and 2000s as minority cultural tourism became a popular pastime for an emerging Chinese middle class. Although the genealogy of socialist multiculturalism that underpins ethnic relations

in China is different from the multiculturalism that hooks and Povinelli describe, the racializing impulses of capitalist systems produced similar dynamics in China as a logic of consumption and dispossession took hold of Chinese ethnic relations. Schein (2000) and Litzinger (2000) described this new gendered and sexualised commodification of Others as an "internal orientalism" that mimicked many of the colonial and capitalist impulses of Western imperialism in the global South. Scholars such as Gladney (1994) and Walsh (2006) have shown how this new logic forced minorities from Yunnan to the Uyghur region to perform for a sexualised gaze. As Gladney noted over two decades ago, "[o]ne cannot be exposed to China without being confronted by its 'colourful' minorities. They sing, they dance, they twirl, they whirl. Most of all they smile, showing their happiness to be part of the motherland" (1994: 95). Yet, while this commodification of sexualised exotic minorities has continued among non-Muslim minority populations, since the rise of the discourse of Islamic "terrorism" in mainstream Chinese society after the introduction of the United States' "Global War on Terror" in 2001, Muslim minorities have come to be seen increasingly as an existential threat to the Han social order. This is particularly the case for Turkic Muslim minorities such as Uyghurs, who speak a different language, have a non-Han appearance, and have historical claims to a native homeland. Since the re-education campaign began in 2017, their difference seems to be less permitted even in a commodified, happy, dancing form.<sup>4</sup>

This shift has produced an inverse desire to the one bell hooks identified in North American contexts. Chinese state authorities are no longer promoting Turkic Muslim traditions to be consumed by Han citizens. State authorities no longer desire their exoticness. Instead, Han state workers are asking Uyghurs to deny themselves and become like them. They want Uyghurs to mimic Hanness. In Uyghur epistemology this feeling is captured by a proverb that conveys a feeling of abject subjection: "It is like the self must eat its own flesh" (*öz gushini özi yigendek*). Here the proverb places the reader not in the position of the coloniser, as is the case in hooks's "eating the Other," but rather the way the colonised can be forced to eat parts of themselves through this process. In this case, "eating" produces a diminishment of life rather than sustenance. Rather than being slotted into the role of providing "seasoning" for the "dull dish" of mainstream Han life, Uyghurs are now in fact being forced to eat Hanness and replace their own difference.

The self-cannibalisation evoked by this proverb indicates not only a desperate situation where a basic denial of one's human dignity is required for survival, but also a feeling of "not being one's true self" (*men özem esme*). This native Uyghur conceptualisation anticipates what Du Bois ([1903] 1994) referred to as "double consciousness," a term that describes the way racialised minorities are always forced to see themselves from the perspective of the dominant. In the Uyghur context, however, the symbolic violence of double consciousness is actually institutionalised and staged by the state through the coercive threat of an extrajudicial internment camp system. Uyghurs must eat Hanness or face the threat of removal and detention.

The symbolic violence of performing the cultural rituals of the coloniser and fealty to a political system that has destroyed countless Uyghur families makes Uyghurs feel as though their lives are no longer their own. They are

3. Shan Jie, "Uyghurs are not descendants of Turks: Urumqi mayor," *Global Times*, 26 August 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1117158.shtml> (accessed on 22 July 2019).

4. A notable exception to this new retraction of permitted forms of Uyghurness is the way Uyghurs have been asked to perform Uyghur songs and dances for visiting diplomats and journalists at "model" re-education camps. See, for example, Ben Blanchard, "China says pace of Xinjiang 'education' will slow, but defends camps," *Reuters*, 6 January 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang-insight-idUSKCN1P007W> (accessed on 22 July 2019).

not able to mourn the loss of children taken from their parents and placed in state-run boarding schools. They cannot speak of the disappearances of fathers, brothers, and sons in the prime of their lives lost through detention, prison, internment, and sometimes death. Instead, they must live with the unbearable strain of being left behind to be “re-educated” while they carry on with their lives. Uyghurs in the diaspora and in the region whom we interviewed for this article told us that when they see Uyghurs performing Beijing Opera (*Jingju* 京剧) on stage or singing patriotic songs, it feels to them that they are watching Uyghurs “desecrating themselves” (*haram bolmaq*). The sense of violation comes from the way they are forced to do this in place of their Uyghurness, rather than as a *supplement* to it. They are being forced to swallow and embody Hanness.

### The importance of music traditions in Uyghur society

It is difficult to overstate the deep relationships between Uyghur song and dance and Uyghur religious and traditional knowledge. The refrain of a well-known Uyghur proverb, “God goes with the Prophet, song goes with dance” (*Khuda bilen Resul, nakhsa bilen usul*), works on analogies between the essence of being, God, and the messenger of that being, the Prophet. God is the song of life while the Prophet is the embodied expression of this sacred essence. In the logic of the couplet, Uyghur dance is the expression of one’s experience of the mystical. Together the four objects of the couplet indicate the intensity of Sufi influence in Uyghur cultural life. For example, for centuries thousands of Uyghurs performed collective mass dance performances in front of the large regional mosques that form the cultural centre of Uyghur life until they were forbidden in 2014. Song and dance imbue life rituals such as weddings and funerals with historical, mystical significance. In the more mundane poetics of daily life it provides a rhythm and refrain that affirms their belonging in Uyghur society (Byler 2018).

Although there are variations in particular musical stylings in every oasis region, song and dance play an important role in Uyghur society as a whole. Historically these traditions have centred around oral poets called *meddah* or *dastanchi* and singers called *el-neghme* or *nakhsichi*, who made a living as respected carriers of knowledge in the community by performing at weddings, festivals, and weekly gatherings in community bazars. Musical training and knowledge were transmitted via a master-apprentice system (*ustaz-shagit*) in which young performers learned the oral traditions of Uyghur society over the course of years of training. The late Jay Dautcher (2009) notes in his fieldwork in rural Ghulja in the 1990s that “the truly successful event requires one or perhaps two special participants (...) someone is known as a skilled raconteur of jokes (...) or a skilled performer of [Uyghur] folk and popular music” (Dautcher 2009: 144). Funerals also hosted a wide range of Sufi performances. Sufi laments were indispensable to the performance of funerals, and families invited local pious women to perform them for the entire day of the ceremony. The melodies of these laments often moved people to tears, a cathartic effervescence that helped people cope with the trauma of loss. These lyrics highlighted the importance of accepting one’s fate, the existence of the world of the ancestors, and satisfaction and humility in the face of divine intervention.

Before the re-education campaign started, healing ceremonies were undertaken by healers called *pirs* or *bakhshi* who were trained in animistic traditions.<sup>5</sup> As scholar Rahile Dawut demonstrated through decades of ethnography prior to her disappearance in 2017, sacred music in *mazars* (shrines), pilgrimages, and saint veneration were deeply rooted both in

Islam and in the shamanism that is native to Central Asia. As Dawut and Harris (Dawut 2001, 2016; Harris and Dawut 2002) demonstrate, music was an important part of the *mazar* festival, from oral poets and storytellers accompanied by horns, drums, and stringed instruments to the many *ashiq* (religious mendicants) singing *meshrep* songs while accompanying themselves on *sapaya* percussion sticks.



Figure 1. Spiritual music and dance at the Ordam Shrine pilgrimage taken by Rahile Dawut in 1993. Credit: *Sounding Islam in China* Project Archive.

One of the key examples of this was the ritual structure of the Ordam Mazar festival, the most significant shrine in the Kashgar region (see Figure 1). This tomb for Islamic saints who were celebrated for defeating the Uyghur Buddhists more than a millennium ago was particularly interesting because although the performance of music at sacred gatherings is forbidden in many forms of pious Islam, for pilgrims at Ordam the site and practice became an enactment of sacred ecstatic experience. Since state authorities are deeply alarmed by embodied Islamic practice that appears to be connected to global piety movements, the music at Ordam could be read as representing a native counternarrative to so-called extremist forms of pious Islamic practice (Thum 2014; Millward 2016). As a pilgrim told Dawut while she was visiting musicians who had been part of the Ordam shrine pilgrimage in the 1990s:

We would start playing our music as soon as we left the house (...). [By doing this] we re-live the battle [when the Turkic Muslims from Kashgar defeated the Turkic Buddhists from Khotan] through this music. It is not ordinary music. Shadiyana helps us to contact the spirits. That music made our blood boil, our drummers’ hands were bleeding, my throat was dry, but we never wanted to stop. The more we played the more excited we got. I wish we could do that again. (Dawut and Kadir 2016)

Throughout the Kashgar region, this shrine and the mystical experiences it triggered formed a key locus of Uyghur musical tradition. Mystics from the Dolan region, whose tradition we will describe in detail below, drew deep inspiration from their experiences with this site.

### Uyghur musical tradition and permitted difference

Since the 1950s, the Chinese state has attempted to create permitted forms of minority nationality culture for all of the 55 minority nationality

5. See Sultanova (2011) for an analysis of the amalgam between religion and music in Central Asia. Her work demonstrates the continuity of music between shamanism and Sufism.

groups that are recognised by the state. Because of the political tension that has arisen from the Chinese colonisation of Uyghur land, this social engineering process has been contested with particular intensity. Due to the centrality of musical tradition in every aspect of Uyghur life, it has become a central element of symbolic control imposed on Uyghurs by Chinese authorities. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the way the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has canonised certain aspects of classical traditions, for example the *muqam*, a suite of classical epic song and dance performances, and *meshrep*, a community-based assembly tradition of regular performances that include music, dance, drama, acrobatics, oral literature, foodways, and games (UNESCO 2005, 2009).

Harris (2008) argues that the state-directed standardisation and canonisation of the Uyghur *Twelve Muqam* in the 1980s began a process of turning the Uyghur Sufi repertoire into a codified symbol of Uyghur identity. Focusing on the textual aspects of the Uyghur *Twelve Muqam*, Nathan Light (2008) examines the history and transformation of *muqam* lyrics in order to show how privileged Uyghur elites have been co-opted by state ethnic policies to do the work of disconnecting these epics from their roots in the Islamic Sufi tradition and politically and aesthetically "correct" them to create a more proto-socialist, secular version of the *muqam* that was celebrated by the state and packaged for commercial consumption. The ethnomusicologist Mukeddes Mijit has focused on the dance form in the *muqam* in order to show its Sufi roots and the transformation of its performance from a community art form to its current standardised, theatricalised stage presentation (2015). Although traditional musicians express their concern regarding the way the state has shaped authenticity and classification, since the 1990s a new generation of Uyghurs has gradually come to accept state-approved versions of *muqam* as an authentic Uyghur tradition and has integrated these forms into their popular culture. Yet despite this legacy of official support, even performing state-approved *muqam* has become dangerous sign of Uyghur pride since 2017.

The second major form of intangible cultural heritage that the state has attempted to "rectify" (*jiuzheng* 糾正) and control is the Uyghur community assembly tradition or *meshrep*, which in the past often formed the occasion for *muqam* performances. The effort to segment and codify *meshrep* began in the 2005 when native state-affiliated scholars successfully campaigned to have *meshrep* recognised as an "Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding" by UNESCO. *Meshrep* is a community-centred fellowship tradition in which different households take turns hosting and sharing food and folk talents. The goal of these informal events is to use native talents and protocols to build conviviality and pass on traditional knowledge to future generations. Dawut and Abliz (2015) have identified more than 50 different types of *meshrep* assemblies ranging across geographic locations within the Uyghur social space. In general, though, across these locations *meshrep* utilises music, dance, drama, and games to function as a community "court" where the host mediates conflicts and ensures the preservation of moral standards, and as a "classroom" where people learn about their traditional customs, environment, and modes of heritage production (UNESCO 2010). *Meshrep* culture is intrinsic to Uyghur life. In many ways, these weekly and monthly ritual events form the essence of what it means to be Uyghur. As the popular Uyghur folk song goes, "I won't stay here, I won't perform here, there is no *meshrep* here" (*Baghum yoq mining, chalgum yoq mining, meshrep yoq yerde*). The lyric implies that without a *meshrep* the vitality of Uyghur cultural life is lost, and with this disappears the desire to stay in place and express one's love for life. A lyric from a song by the most famous Uyghur pop star Abdulla Abdurehim

repeats this sentiment: "Uyghurs don't need permission to have *meshrep*" (*ezeldin zati Uyghurgha, izajetsiz rawa meshrep*). Wherever there are Uyghurs there is *meshrep*.

Yet, despite the centrality of this tradition, since the late 1990s local authorities have come to see *meshrep* as a space at least partially outside the purview of the Chinese state. Following large scale police violence against Uyghur protesters in the town of Ghulja in 1997, the state began to regulate and control gatherings (Roberts 2007). In the mid-2000s, *meshrep*, like *muqam* in the previous decades, was given UNESCO recognition and was folklorised by the state. State-determined "authentic" *meshrep* events began to flourish under the watchful gaze of censors on state television. Every month, every county and town began to organise official *meshreps* that displayed happy, dancing traditions removed from the moral instruction and religious culture out of what the tradition emerged. Instead, increasingly the emphasis shifted to showing "authentic" loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party through song and dance. Paradoxically, the recognition of *meshrep* as UNESCO-approved Intangible Cultural Heritage has resulted in a sharp decline in its practice. Linda Tuhiwai Smith has argued in the Maori context of New Zealand that in the colonised world, the term "authentic" has been used as a way of "reorganising 'national consciousness' in the struggles for decolonisation" (1999: 73). This symbolic struggle is important because of the way it demonstrates the limited forms of self-determination and autonomy that are available to native peoples such as the Uyghurs. As sacred, essential traditions were co-opted by Chinese state authorities and packaged for a consumer audience, rather than the vital uses it had in the past, the last social institutions of Uyghur cultural sovereignty are being undermined.

Even more troubling, in the most recent iteration of the "People's War on Terror," the *meshrep* form has been turned into a form of political oppression. As Harris (2018) notes, since the "war" began in 2014, "tackling extremism *meshrep*" has emerged. At these obligatory weekly dance parties, Uyghurs are forced to dance to secular non-Uyghur songs and perform fealty to the Xi Jinping administration. Failure to attend the political *meshrep* can result in detention and imprisonment. Since 2016, "tackling extremism *meshrep*" has shifted further and further away from Uyghur traditions to enactments of Han cultural traditions. Near the end of that year and into 2017, as many as 1.5 million young Uyghurs were detained for transgressions deemed connected to the "three evils" of "ethnic separatism, Islamic extremism, and terrorism" and sent to re-education camps (Hunerven 2019). Those that remained in the villages were asked to perform their fealty to the state. They were asked to express their love for the Xi administration, even as their families were torn apart and society as a whole was overwhelmed by a re-education system. The participatory *meshrep* space and *muqam* performances have become a key space in which this symbolic violence is enacted. Performing Uyghurness in this key public performance ritual space is increasingly only permitted if it has a Han component at its centre.

### *Uyghur music tradition in a time of re-education*

A quintessential example of this new shift in Uyghur cultural performance was on display on 19 January 2019 in Mekt County in rural Kashgar prefecture.<sup>6</sup> Mekt is at the centre of the Dolan region, a name used by the Uyghur people who live in the Mekt, Awat, Maralbeshi, and Yeken area on the rim of the Taklimakan Desert. At a harvest festival performance that

6. The entire performance can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/caqptWBaNYw> (accessed on 30 July 2019).

was nationally televised on CCTV-7, Uyghur singers and dancers performed for a crowded concert hall filled with mostly Han state workers, many of whom had moved to the county to oversee the many facets of Uyghur re-education. For example, some of them may have been employed by the 15,000 square meter internment camp – the size of a city block in Manhattan – that was built in Meket in 2017. The county has a population of around 250,000 people, more than 95% of whom are Uyghur. Over the past two years, Meket authorities have hired hundreds of state employees to work in the re-education system. The advertisements for these recruitment efforts target politically-motivated Han high school graduates with a relatively high salary of 5,600 to 8,000 *yuan* per month and subsidised housing.<sup>7</sup> The CCTV-7 gala was an effort to lift the morale of the troops on the front lines of the Uyghur re-education effort. It was also a chance for re-education workers to show the country how successful they had been in retraining Uyghurs through the nationwide broadcast.

For Uyghur viewers, what was striking about the gala was the way Uyghur language was spoken for only two minutes over the course of the 74-minute performance. The gala, which was presented through the lens of two foreign female and three Han male hosts, presented a fantasy of rapturous minorities embracing Han cultural knowledge. In general, the Uyghur performers, ranging from children to classically-trained opera singers, evoked a Meket County that was suffused with Beijing opera, Henan-style Yu opera, and Errenzhuan northeastern China-style two-person performances. Uyghur culture had been replaced by the diversity of Han cultural practices that re-educators had brought with them from eastern China. The audience of internment camp workers, Mandarin-language instructors, police, and other government employees was thrilled.

A through-line of the performance was Uyghur folk painting. This painting medium is a Maoist cultural aesthetic that has been used throughout the history of the Chinese settlement of the Uyghur region since the 1950s. Up until the beginning of the “People’s War on Terror” in 2014, the paintings had been primarily a way of imagining in visual form the state narrative of socialist progress, happy Uyghurs, and inter-ethnic harmony. Then, as the state turned toward transforming Uyghur society, the message in the paintings turned to representations of terrorism and religious extremism.<sup>8</sup> The paintings on display at the gala featured none of that dark violence. Instead, they featured Uyghurs enjoying a shared life with the recently arrived Han education workers. The Uyghur life that was on display was a new post-Han-fear aesthetic. The “three evils” had been locked up and hidden in the local camp. The new images were of Uyghurs dancing with Han.

In a key moment of the gala, a painting of a Han state worker bringing a giant key to the Dolan Uyghur community came alive on stage (see figure



Figure 2. A Han Party member brings the “key of civilization” to the Dolan Uyghur community in a painting that was featured in January 2018 gala, CCTV. Screenshot provided by the authors.

2). At the 25-minute mark, Uyghur performers were permitted to perform a Dolan *muqam*, a performance rooted in Sufi dance, the first performance of Uyghur song and dance during the gala. But the performance was no longer purely a Uyghur performance of ecstatic music and dance; instead, to the delighted applause of the mostly Han audience, the performance was co-opted by Henan-style Yu opera sung by a Uyghur performer named Reyhangul Kuwan after the opening minute. Then, one minute later, Han audience members enacted the scene in the painting by coming on stage, bringing the key of “civilisation” to the Uyghur performers.

### *Dolan as a sacred native tradition*

There is a long history to the Dolan *muqam* performance that was being overwritten by Henan opera. Already in the nineteenth century, travelogues documented this sacred Sufi musical tradition. *Report of Trip from Kashgar to Maralbashee*, written on 4 February 1874 by Captain J. Biddulph, stated: “The natives of the district are called Dolans: they have a more Tartar-like cast of countenance than Yarkandees and Kashgarees, and are said to be distinguished for their fondness for music and singing.” However, much of the attention and appreciation from local state-supported researchers toward the Dolan began only in the early 2000s, after decades of systematic curation of the Uyghur *Twelve Muqam*. The Dolan *muqam* is also known simply as “*Bayawan*,” meaning “desert music,” in the local context. This additional *muqam* holds together the assemblage tradition of the community *meshrep* and the performance tradition of a sacred *muqam*. It is one of the last of these traditions to refuse the genre distinctions put in place by the state folk arts industry. In fact, its performance is often still referred to as a single unit: the “Dolan *muqam-meshrep*” (Dolan *muqam meshrepliri*). In Uyghur literature and popular culture, it is seen as one of the last authentic and fluid Uyghur musical performances in terms of the use of instruments, vocal style, and verse.

The lyrics of the Dolan *muqam* reflects a devotion to God that appears in Sufi poetry and dervish singing from many parts of Central Asia (Light 2008). Dolan *muqam* usually starts with the repetition of the refrain “Allah... Allah...” in a rhythm similar to other Sufi *Zikir* or *Sama* rituals. The beginning of the *muqam* begins as follows:

*Hewa bilen Adem qeni? Eysa bilen Musa qeni?*  
Where are Eve and Adam? Where are Jesus and Moses?  
*Ikki alem serdari, ghojam resulilla qeni.*  
Where is the prophet of the two worlds? Muhemmed Resulilla?  
*Gör ichi qarangghuluq, qaydin chusher yuruqluq,*  
The grave is dark, there is no light,  
*Bichare bulup yatquluq, bu dunyaning payani yoq.*  
We will be inside, this world has no limit.<sup>9</sup>

7. “2018年新疆喀什地区招聘引进事业单位优秀干部人才公告” (2018 nian Xinjiang Kashen diqu zhaopin yinjin shiye danwei youxiu ganbu rencai gonggao, Announcement of the recruitment of outstanding cadres in the institutions of Kashgar in Xinjiang in 2018), *Shiyebian.net*, 27 October 2018, <http://www.shiyebian.net/xinxi/275243.html> (accessed on 22 July 2019).
8. For more on this see China blog staff, “The colourful propaganda of Xinjiang,” *BBC*, 15 January 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-30722268> (accessed on 22 July 2019); Darren Byler, “Imagining Re-engineered Muslims in Northwest China,” *Milestones: Commentary on the Islamic World*, 20 April 2017, <https://www.milestonesjournal.net/photo-essays/2017/4/20/imagining-re-engineered-muslims-in-northwest-china> (accessed on 22 July 2019).
9. Tursunjan Hasan, “Dolan meshrep muqamlirining qedimiylik toghrisida” (The ancient history of Dolan muqam meshreps), *Wetininim Munbiri*, 21 June 2018, <https://wetininim.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=2146> (accessed on 22 July 2019). Translation by authors.

Yet, the lyrics do not remain deeply tied to Quranic and mystical references; instead they turn to the native origin story of the Uyghur journey from Ili, the present-day Kazakhstani border region on the other side of the mountains north of the Dolan region. They describe the current of the Tarim River as the pull of love. The lyrics also describe the mundane poetry of working in the cotton fields or harvesting wheat. In some versions of the performance the narrative centres on the story of the Ordam, the defeat of the Uyghur Buddhists by the bringers of Islam and King Ali Arslan Khan:

*Atasi Shahi Mërdandur*

His father is Shahi Merdan

*Anasi Nur Elenur khandur*

His mother is Nur Elenur Khan

*Khudaning yolida jan Bergen*

He sacrificed himself for the path of God

*Sultan Ali Arslankhandur*

His name is King Ali Arslan Khan.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the *Twelve Muqam* texts that have been carefully selected from classic Sufi poetry, Dolan texts are much closer to everyday language. They are not fully standardised. Instead they stress strong rhymes and fast rhythms embedded in lively oasis life at the edge of the Tarim River. When the Dolan *Muqam* was performed in Paris by six traditional performers from the Dolan community in 2007 for a UNESCO cultural festival, many members of the rural Uyghur community interviewed by the authors during their ethnographic fieldwork were very proud.<sup>11</sup> For them, the significance of this rested in the way it had promoted community musicians to the world stage, not state-trained cultural performers. Since then, among community elders interviewed by one of the authors, there has been growing support to protect the authenticity of the Dolan *Muqam*, and support for the cultural property rights of Dolan folk artists. Dolan has come to be regarded as the most authentic source of ancient Uyghur civilisation. Increasingly, though, as Harris (2018) has noted, it has also become a site of commodification as state authorities began to promote Silk Road tourism, and of contestation as state authorities began to promote Turkic Muslim re-education.

### **Dolan as an object for Han consumption**

At the centre of the appropriation of the Dolan allure in the service of domestic Silk Road tourism is a Han man from Sichuan Province called Luo Lin. Luo, who was born in 1971, began playing music at a young age, and after dropping out of high school, he began touring the country performing in nightclubs. In 1995 his life took a dramatic turn when he met his future wife, a Han Xinjiang settler, while touring in Hainan. She persuaded him to follow her back to her home town in Xinjiang. After working in music production teams in Urumqi for five years, Luo Lin produced his first album. Disappointed with the sales of the record, he travelled to Southern Xinjiang, where he found himself inspired by the cultural differences he encountered. He was particularly taken with the musical traditions of the Dolan (*Daolang*) people. In order to fully co-opt this allure, Luo Lin decided to begin to refer to himself as *Dao Lang*, the Chinese transliteration of "Dolan" (Finley 2015).

In his first "Dao Lang" album, entitled *The First Snow of 2002* (2004), Luo Lin focused primarily on unrequited desire for exotic Uyghur and Kazakh women, an openly sexualised form of "eating the Other" as discussed previously. Utilising his distinctive hoarse voice, Chinese folk, and blues guitar fusion, and a precise deployment of the power ballad, Luo Lin announced

himself as a distinctive presence on the Xinjiang stage. Drawing on his experiences in Uyghur oasis cities, he delivered songs that placed himself in the Uyghur position – describing the ideal minority subject for a Chinese-speaking audience. Luo Lin demonstrates his desire to stand in for Uyghurs; yet in the process of co-opting or "eating" their culture he misrecognised their perspectives and misrepresented their language and music. While one can hear the Uyghur two-stringed *dutar* and seven-string *rawap* in many of his songs, his melodies and voice have very little resemblance to the music of his namesake, the Dolans.

In 2004, the Uyghur musician Erkin Abdulla was accused of stealing the name of his 2002 album, *A Dolan from Out of the Desert*, from Luo Lin. In the years that followed, Abdulla, a native of the Dolan region, had to patiently explain that "Dolan" is the name of a group of people from Kashgar and that his album, which features *Dolan* music from near his hometown in Kashgar, was released before Luo Lin emerged on the scene in 2004.<sup>12</sup> Abdulla went on to say that he would never use the name Dolan to refer to himself since it is something sacred that represents an ecstatic form of dance and spirituality – he would not lightly use a name that represents a whole group of people. Luo Lin had in effect claimed ownership over a whole group of people, a sacred landscape, and a spiritual practice. Abdulla asked *China Cultural Daily* in 2012, "What would you think of an American who calls himself Jingju (Beijing Opera) and does things completely unrelated to *jingju*? Would you accept it?" (Byler 2013). Since 2017, state authorities have moved from this earlier model of staged performances and "eating the Other" through Han commercialisation of Uyghur arts to what appears to be a new mode of cultural work: forcing Uyghurs to eat Hanness.

### **"Eating Hanness": Replacing Dolan Muqam with Chinese opera**

This question of contested opera forms and who can represent the other re-emerged in the CCTV show in Mekit in 2019. Now the question is not whether or not Han pop stars have the moral authority to appropriate sacred Uyghur music, but whether Uyghurs will be forced to replace their sacred music with Beijing Opera. The older question of Han musicians stealing and commodifying Uyghur sacred music (Harris 2005: 382) has been replaced with a question about the future existence and continuity of native Uyghur music itself. These questions reflect changes in minority policy more generally, particularly in relation to Uyghurs' future. As James Leibold (2018) and others have noted, the turn toward forcing Uyghurs to "eat" Hanness has been shaped by policy-makers such as Hu Lianhe, Hu Angang, and Ma Rong. These figures have advocated a greater emphasis on a "Chinese" national identity (defined as *Zhonghua minzu* 中華民族) and a de-emphasis on "national minority" identity (defined as *shaoshu minzu* 少數民族). In practice, this means that minority identities, particularly Uyghur identity, are now being replaced with an ostensibly unmarked "Chinese" identity that in fact amounts to a full embrace of Han identification.

Speaking about the effects of this on her relatives back in Xinjiang, a young Uyghur woman whom we'll call Gulmire said:

10. Collected by Rahile Dawut, also cited for this article: <http://www.soundislamchina.org/?p=1521> (accessed on 22 July 2019). Translation by authors.

11. A short video of the Uyghur Dolan *muqam* musicians in Paris is available here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSZ0srB0Kws](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSZ0srB0Kws) (accessed on 22 July 2019).

12. "艾尔肯回首辛酸往事" (Aierken huishou xinsuan wangshi; Erkin looks back at the bitter past), *Sohu Music*, 30 May 2005, <http://yule.sohu.com/20050530/n225759124.shtml> (accessed on 22 July 2019).

If it was any other time, it would be a cool thing to perform a neighbouring culture’s music, but when it comes at the price of not being allowed to perform your own [culture] it is just devastating.<sup>13</sup>

For her, like many of the Uyghurs interviewed, watching these performances made them feel hollow inside, as though their tongues had been cut out. They wanted to speak but felt an overwhelming sense of paralysis. They said that when they watched Uyghurs “eat Hanness”, they were watching Uyghurs eat their true selves. They noted that in the past it was often the case that folk song lyrics might be seen as too “sensitive” because of their political or religious content and thus could not be performed. The state had attempted to regulate and commodify the “proper” expression of the *muqam* and *meshrep*. But now, even these model cultural forms of “permitted difference,” if unmixed with Han cultural elements, are seen as too Uyghur.

In 2017, as this shift took hold, numerous performers who had promoted Uyghur musical traditions began to disappear. Chief on this list are world-class performers such as Abdurehim Heyt and Sanubar Tursun, both of whom are masters of Uyghur vocal performance and traditional instrumentation. Other popular performers who have disappeared, such as the pop star Ablajan Awut Ayup and comedian Adil Mijit, were famous for promoting new forms of Uyghur masculinity and celebrating Uyghur language education. Scholars and cultural critics have also been taken. One of these figures, Yalqun Rozi, an influential literary critic, was sentenced to life in prison. Although no one outside of those who attended his closed trial know what he was accused of, we do know that his much-debated article (Rozi 2005) in the *Journal of Xinjiang Culture* (*Xinjiang Medeniyeti*), “How did we become a song and dance ethnicity?” (*Biz qandaq bulup nakhsa usul milliti bolup qalduq?*), had raised red flags at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. In the article, Rozi compared popular Chinese articles from the 1980s that described Uyghurs as “brave and hardworking” with articles and books from 2005 that described Uyghurs as “talented at song and dance.” He argued that Uyghurs were using the same hands that their ancestors had used to master archery to bring applause through song and dance performances. From his perspective they were blindly taking pride in these performance arts, and in commodifying their culture for the gaze of consumers, when in fact they should be cultivating the masterpieces of science and literature that their ancestors had handed down to them over generations. Now it appears that even these permitted forms of ethnic difference are being swallowed up by Hanness.

During the 2019 Harvest Gala, the two minutes of the “harmonious” Dolan *muqam* featured none of the key lyrical forms we included above. Instead, the lyrics were simply about the longing of two lovers for each other. The symbolic chorus of “Allah...” was replaced with “Jenim...,” or “my lover,” until it was interrupted by the Chinese opera. This performance moves the debate around cultural property and moral authority to a discussion of the violation of the basic integrity of Uyghur sacred tradition. In the moments that followed this symbolic desecration, four Uyghur children burst onto the stage performing Chinese opera for seven minutes. Their appearance, not in the performance of Uyghur sacred traditions but in embracing Han cultural performance, indicated the future replacement of Uyghur musical culture. The CCTV hosts effusively praised their teacher Hebibe Emet, an elementary music teacher in the Meket community, for teaching outstanding traditions to the next generation.

## Chinese opera as proof of re-education

What was enacted on stage in Meket was similar to another early 2019 performance in Beijing, in which a Uyghur school teacher named Cholpan Yunus performed a concert that included selections from Maoist Model Operas. These ranged from *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Taking of Tiger Mountain* to traditional Beijing Operas such as *Lady General Mu Takes Command* and *Su-San Under Police Escort*. Yunus, a music teacher at an elementary school of Qumul, began her ascent to prominence when she became a finalist at the national “Red Song Competition” in Jiangsu in 2009. In 2015 she was given a scholarship to receive special training from one of the premier Chinese opera singers in the country, Wang Shikai, at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. Although in the past Yunus performed traditional Uyghur *muqam*, she now exclusively sings Chinese opera in Chinese while playing or accompanied by Uyghur traditional instruments. In a national radio interview, she said:

[F]rom a very young age, I always admired the beauty of the music and costumes of the Peking Opera. When I began studying it, I truly realised the profound depth and meaning of traditional Chinese culture. I then became determined to teach these outstanding forms of Chinese cultural to the next generation through my education career.<sup>14</sup>

Delighted by her adeptness in both socialist and Han cultural styles, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has now begun to promote her as a model for Uyghur performers across the region to emulate. She represents the future of what Uyghur performance should look like. All elementary school teachers, such as Hebibe Emet, the teacher of the five Uyghur children who performed Chinese opera in the Meket performance discussed earlier, are now being told to “learn from Cholpan” and force their Uyghur students to push Uyghur traditions to the side and instead embrace musical traditions from across the Han heartland as well as the Maoist past.

Yunus’s celebrity as someone who is working to hollow out her Uyghur core and replace it with a Han essence is now beginning to resonate across the Uyghur homeland. Another young Uyghur *muqam* performer from Korla, Ghulamjan Litip, also exemplifies this new spirit. A state media article that chronicled his turn to Han-centric cultural performance celebrated the way that “Ghulamjan conducted thorough research and through this realised that traditional Qinqiang Opera has much longer history than Uyghur *Twelve Muqam*. It has been performed for more than five thousand years, and so he was determined to learn it.”<sup>15</sup> According to Ghulamjan, learning this new style of performance required more than simply learning the melody and memorising the lyrics. It required learning the emotive experience of the music, the gestures, the pace, the way one must wave one’s fingers. Even the expression on his face had to be mastered through thousands of repetitions. He described it as a process of relearning how to behave. Staying active in the relearning process was also a way of excising the “bad elements” from his mind. Through this embrace of “diversity” and “morality,” he and the

13. Interview, January 2019, North America.

14. “Parlaq Yol: pirogrammissida chaqniqan cholpan” (Bright Road: A shining star on the program), *UYCNR*, 17 January 2019, [http://www.uycnr.com/sd/201901/t20190117\\_1304644.html](http://www.uycnr.com/sd/201901/t20190117_1304644.html) (accessed on 22 July 2019).

15. Guo Hong 郭宏, “我是一棵石榴籽” (Wo shi yi ke shiliuzi, I am a Pomegranate Seed), *Tianshan Wang*, 30 September 2017, [https://web.archive.org/web/20190402181517/http://news.ts.cn/content/2017-09/30/content\\_12842178.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20190402181517/http://news.ts.cn/content/2017-09/30/content_12842178.htm) (accessed on 22 July 2019).

other villagers were learning what it means to be an “inter-ethnic family.”<sup>16</sup> In a time of “re-education,” Ghulamjan and many others were forced to subtract the “bad” Uyghurness of their selves and eat the “good” elements of Hanness.

The subtraction of the Uyghur self that is modelled and exemplified on stage in Meket and in the lives of performers such as Yunus and Litip is symptomatic of a widespread replacement of Uyghur cultural traditions with Han cultural traditions. Xinjiang’s official social media now actively promote and incentivise young Uyghur performers to perform Chinese operas and teach children to learn these art forms. Across Uyghur society people have come to understand that this new-style performance is something that prevents them from being sent to the “transformation through re-education” camps. As a result, every small town from Meket in Western Xinjiang to Qumul in Eastern Xinjiang has organised Red song singing competitions and centres for learning Chinese opera.

### The Red Songs of re-education

Patriotic or Red songs are central to the dissemination of the Communist Party’s authority in China. They provide a lyrical rhythm to state ideology, forcing citizens of all ethnicities to internalise their message. Until 2014, minority nationalities such as the Uyghurs were permitted to perform them in their own language and in their own aesthetic style. In a time of re-education this adaptation of state politics to native cultural systems is no longer permitted. Unlike during the Cultural Revolution, when state culture products such as the model operas could be translated and performed in a Uyghur style, under the Uyghur re-education campaign, Uyghur performers are increasingly pushed to enact a newfound Hanness. Uyghur children are now being forced to study Beijing opera and patriotic songs. Although they are still at times permitted to wear colourful Uyghur-style costumes to signal their difference, across the Uyghur nation as whole musical performances now centre on a post-Uyghur cultural aesthetic. These performances display the success of the Xinjiang re-education system.

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has used songs and drama to convey Party ideology since the beginning of the Mao era in the 1950s. During this period, Red songs centred on the truths of communism, the unity of the people, faith in the leadership of Mao Zedong, and the socialist movement. Yet what distinguishes that time from the present was that at that time Red songs were often translated and adapted to Uyghur language and aesthetics. Songs in praise of Mao Zedong were sung with the passion and heart-felt belief of Sufi mysticism. The Party propaganda of the Cultural Revolution produced a common vision and belief in communism. Uyghurs sang “Without the Communist Party, There is No New China” (*Kompartiyе bolmisa, yengi Jonggo Bolmayti*) in the Uyghur language in village fields. Now they are singing the same song in Chinese (*meiyou gongchandang, meiyou xin Zhongguo* 沒有共產黨, 沒有新中國) on a daily basis in re-education camps and in village meetings. In 2018, Red songs from the Maoist Revolution became one of the primary melodies of the “People’s War on Terror.” The revival of the Red song tradition has not brought a revival of Uyghur adaptation of socialist aesthetics, but instead a hollowing out and replacing of Uyghurness with the jargon of socialist ideology and the additional imposition of Han cultural practices. The socialist songs of the past are now used not as process of socialist indoctrination, but as a way of forcing Uyghurs to prove their loyalty to the state by forcing them to identify with the Chineseness of the past. The same Red songs are now being performed to prove the fluidity of Chinese and Uyghur culture, to

prove that Uyghurs are Chinese too. The performance of Chinese operas takes the symbolic violence of the Maoist past and the nationalist present even further. This replacing of Uyghur traditions with Han traditions has the effect of asking Uyghurs to turn their inner selves over to Hanness, in all of its diverse forms.

### Conclusion

The shifts in music performance we have discussed throughout this article demonstrate that the space for public expression, or even discussion, of Uyghur self-determination is now fully overwritten by the “People’s War on Terror.” Uyghurs no longer have the opportunity to discuss their own social problems. All attempts to search for and cultivate a true sense of self are blocked and redirected by the Han “relatives” who have come to their villages by the hundreds of thousands. The generational knowledge passed on via master-apprentice relationships is being cut off. There is no longer any genuine conversation about how tradition should be preserved, transmitted, or expanded. Instead, everyone is deeply concerned with being seen as “too Uyghur,” since this will result in being sent to the ever-growing re-education camp system. Many young Uyghurs are now internalising feelings of lack, expressed in our interviews in sentences such as “Being Uyghur sucks” or “I don’t want be Uyghur anymore.” During research trips to the region and in interactions with the Uyghur diaspora in 2018, we saw expressions of desperation and hopelessness over and over again. We also heard numerous accounts of Uyghurs attempting to move their household registration to other cities in China, attempting to adopt Chinese names, and changing the ethnicity category on their identity card. Feelings of shame, and internalised lack, are part of the process of the forced consumption of an imposed identity. The Uyghur poet Tahir Hamut, whom we interviewed for this article, told us that the current situation can be captured by the Uyghur proverb “The sky is too far away, the earth is too hard” (*Asman egiz, yer qattiq*). There is no place to go. Uyghurs feel as though they are in a void. There is no place to burrow away and hide, no atmosphere in which to fly away or even air to breathe. The only way to survive is to eat Hanness.

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16. *Ibid.*

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