
Islam by Smartphone: the changing sounds of Uyghur religiosity

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Over the past few years, localised violent incidents have become commonplace right across Xinjiang. State media blames the ongoing violence on the spread of Islamic jihadi ideals via the Internet and social media, while independent observers suggest that much of the violence is related to local grievances and is often a direct response to heavy-handed policing. Given these polarised interpretations of the situation, it is important to investigate what kinds of religious ideologies, images and sounds are actually in circulation. This paper focuses on one form of social media – Weixin.

In January 2011, the Chinese IT giant, Tencent, launched the smartphone app Weixin (WeChat in English). By 2015 it had become the media of choice for some 468 million users worldwide, 368 million of them within China. Amongst Uyghur users too, Weixin (Ündidar in Uyghur) became an essential communication tool. From mid-2013 to mid-2014, perhaps a million Uyghurs inside Xinjiang and in the diaspora were using this app, often several times a day, to chat with their friends and to participate in online groups or circles.

During this period we observed a steady rise in the circulation of Islamic content, most of it apolitical but some of it openly radical and oppositional. All this communication proceeded for over a year with apparently little control or surveillance, until the security forces apparently caught up with the new technology and implemented a crackdown in summer 2014.

WeChat provides particular affordances for the creation of community, specific to its capabilities as a media platform. It offers a choice between one-to-one messaging, closed circles, and posting to all friends. People can share text messages, images including their own photos, links, or emoticons. They can record and share their own audio messages and videos. Thus it is a flexible platform – it ranges between the intimate (especially in its capability for voice messaging) and public – and arguably a democratic platform, in that it supports local production, and encourages grassroots voices and creativity.

Example 1: Transnational Islamic Charity



This is a transnational circle that includes people from Kashgar, Urumchi, Guangzhou, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Europe and Kazakhstan. These are highly educated, well-off people. They are involved in raising money for the poor and sick, mainly in impoverished southern Xinjiang.

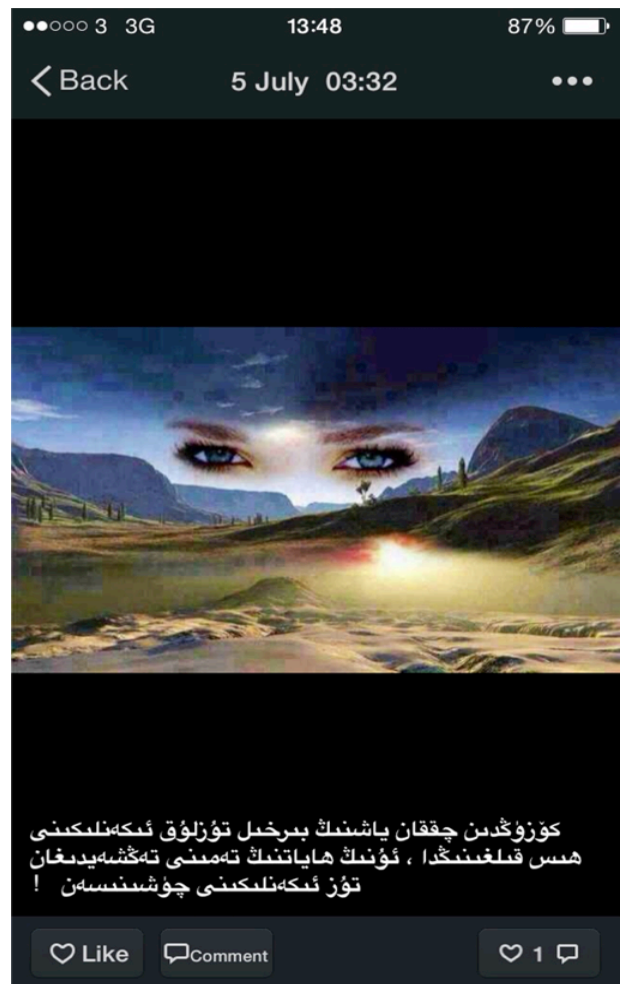


Example 2: *What's Up: 'The meaning of my life is patience'.*

'When you taste your salt tears, then you understand the meaning of life. Being content with life is like a beautiful veil. Whoever wears it will find their way in life'.

These kinds of images and short texts are very common; they promote idealised images of Islamic womanhood and notions of piety and self-restraint. Women also share intimate personal voice messages with their circles – some of which reference the ongoing violence and police controls. In late May 2014, after a bomb attack on an Urumchi market, one woman posts:

'Every time I go to work it seems like all my Han Chinese colleagues are looking at me like I am the enemy'.

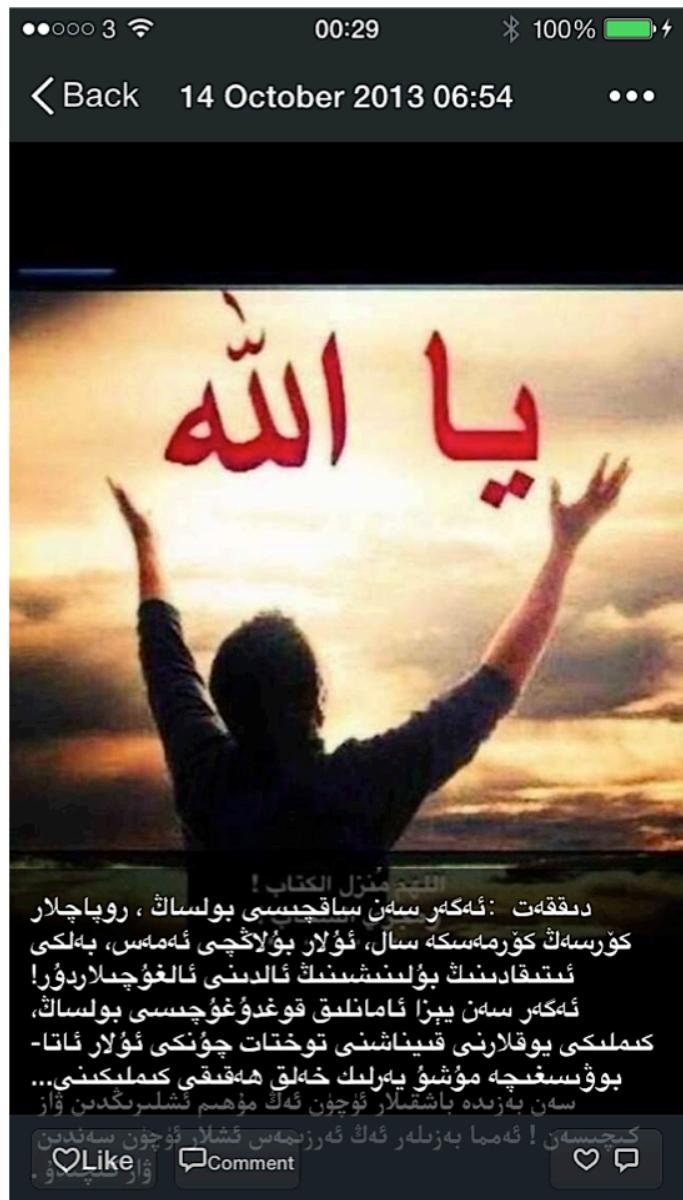


Others use the platform to make more public statements concerning Uyghur experiences of the crackdown on extremism – linking religion directly to politics.

Example 3: *Warning!*

Police, try not to see veiled women. If you see a veiled woman, try to ignore her. They are not robbers, but defenders of religion. If you are an assistant policeman in the countryside stop torturing people who have no ID cards, because their ancestors have lived here for generations, they are the owners of this land.

Many of the ways that religious experiences and ideologies are shared are not text-based, indeed the most powerful mediated religious experiences come through images and sound. Below I consider three audio files and links shared by a young man in his early 20s, a labourer from the rural south.



Some of the items he shares display a strongly nationalist form of Islam. A link shared in June 2013 contains an audio file of a Uyghur language sermon which links oppression directly to a national failure to follow proper Islamic ideologies. The heavy use of reverb evokes the sound of sermons preached in the huge echoic spaces of the mosques of Mecca, and which has come to serve as an index of orthodoxy religiosity worldwide.

Audio File 1. Tebligh (Sermon)

http://www.soundislamchina.org/av/Jihad_tabligh.mp3

... on the Day of Judgement, Allah will open the doors of hell to the nation who forgets him. He will punish the nation who does not follow him ... We are under Allah's punishment now. We live under the oppressive Communist regime like slaves ... When will this nation wake up and open its eyes and hold the holy book in their hands, and restore their decency, when will they have hope, when will our girls protect their modesty, then great Allah will give our nation victory ...

Other items suggest a very different kind of Islam. This 'ghost sermon', a link to an hour-long audio file posted on the Chinese internet site Tudou, which had been accessed by over 280,000 users – records a group of young men visiting a village holy woman (*bakhshi*).

Audio File 2 Jin Tebligh (Ghost Sermon)

http://www.soundislamchina.org/av/Jin_tabligh.mp3

I will tell you one miracle. That girl is Hayrinisa. She can only speak with her husband, not with anyone else. She can talk to women but not to any man. That is Allah's miracle. [Men's voices: Ya Allah! Ya Rabbi!] She is dumb. She can only talk to her husband, not to other man... You must all follow Allah. You have committed many sins. You must pray. Allah sent the prophet to guide you. Have you followed Allah's way? Why do you fight each other? [Men: Allah!] You are full of sin ... Allah didn't create you to make money. He created you to pray. Allah gave you a great chance bringing you to this place to change your lives. Cry some more. Cry more!

Examples like this impel us to pay attention to the affective power of the mediated voice, and its mobilizing power. They also impel us to focus on the sound qualities of particular media forms: the typically poor sound quality of these audio files, recorded by individuals on their phones, uploaded and shared – means that they are very good at signifying authenticity, conveying the urgency and affective impact of a charged moment of experience, caught and frozen in time and shared.

Another link, shared in May 2013, holds an emotionally charged audio file contains a 'letter to mother'. This is an audio version of a much more professionally produced video, probably made by Uyghurs abroad, which portrays a young Uyghur man writing to his mother to explain why he has joined the mujahidin. Here we have a young male voice, singing a simple, very musical 'tune'. In melodic style it is linked to the transnational sound world of Islamic pop – illahi or nasheed. It may be inspired by audio recordings circulated by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and by the Taliban since the 1990s.

Audio File 3 'Letter to Mother'

http://www.soundislamchina.org/av/Anamgha_yezilghan_xet.mp3

If someone says you can live 100 years like a rabbit, I reply I am happy to live one day like a tiger...

Please mother, understand your son is now a mujahid, I must be brave in spirit. The rocks and stones will be my blanket...

Maybe some day you will hear a quiet voice. If that voice says your son has died, mother, then your son is living joyfully in heaven.

In terms of religious and ideological stance this material is diverse. It ranges from overtly nationalist, intellectual style of political Islam to a folk preacher's discourse of magic and miracles, promoting women's modesty, to a song which seeks to establish an intimate bond between the listener and the mujahidin. Clearly this material is coming from multiple sources, and much of it is locally produced; the political mingles with the apolitical, the personal with the public, Qur'anic recitation with images of racing cars. It is crucial to consider why it is circulating so widely, and what makes it so popular.

I argue that by listening to and sharing these media items, people experience a form of cultural intimacy in powerfully affective ways. The listening experience is at once personal, intimate, and secret, and public, collectively shared. Together they produce a sense of crisis, one to which Islam – in all its many diverse forms – is believed to provide a solution through personal and collective transformation.

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