

## **Barren Chickens, Stray Dogs, Fake Immortals and Thieves: Coloniser and Collaborator in Popular Uyghur Song and the Quest for National Unity**

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[Music from *Qaldi Iz* to play in]

### ***Introduction***

The concept of encouraging Uyghur national identity through cultural forms is not new in Xinjiang. Back in the 1920s, Uyghur intellectuals used elite cultural forms (poetry and poetry recitation) to disseminate political ideas. One such intellectual was Abdukhaliq Uyghur [OHT - and I borrow this image from Justin Rudelson's book *Oasis Identities*] Since the late 80s and 90s, and in response to certain domestic and international conditions, Uyghur national identity has strengthened rapidly. This time around, it has been popular forms of culture that have played a key role in the reproduction of identity, and these have succeeded in reaching a far wider audience. In particular, contemporary New Folk songs [and I borrow the term from Rachel Harris] have found resonance with all sectors of the Uyghur populace. They have cut across divides such as oasis origin, social group, generation, political orientation, educational background, and degree of religious observance. And they have achieved this by highlighting instead the ethnic boundary between the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese 'Other.' In this way, they have raised awareness of the need for Uyghur national unity in response to the perceived colonial threat.

In this paper, I examine metaphorical representations of the coloniser (and for this read the Han Chinese) and the 'collaborator' (that is, Uyghurs thought to place personal ambition above ethnic loyalty). These representations reflect popular

perceptions held among different groups of Uyghurs, and are thus able to reproduce a broad-based Uyghur national identity across the region. They fuse a common sense of ‘emotional’ unity, if you like. At the same time, however, they highlight the perceived barrier to Uyghur national unity - a national character grounded in political passivity, self-interest and opportunism. And so representations of the Uyghur ‘Yes-man’ may paradoxically foster negative self-identity and low self-esteem. This perhaps explains why certain songs have apparently been able to avoid censorship by the Chinese government. In lamenting the flawed Uyghur character, New Folk singer Ömärjan Alim assumes the role of ‘illuminist’ (intentionally or not) and provides a timely wake-up call to Uyghurs in the 90s.

### ***Popular song and reproducing the nation***

Along with the negative oral stereotyping of the Han, which occurred daily in Xinjiang in the mid-90s, the other powerful means of uniting Uyghurs against the Han proved to be orally communicated forms of popular culture: jokes, stories, oral histories, and popular songs. There are several reasons why song in particular has proved a useful tool to Uyghur nationalists:

Firstly, it carries messages to the Uyghurs in their preferred cultural form. Song and dance have been integral to Uyghur culture since ancient times and today remain the focal point of Uyghur social life. Secondly, popular song appeals because of its oral form. The late Uyghur novelist, poet, and historian, Abdurehim Ötkür, was undisputedly a symbol of Uyghur nationalist aspirations in the 80s and 90s. However, his media – poetry and the historical novel – were circulated predominantly in urban, often intellectual, spaces. This means that the extent to which his works reached the Uyghur farmers was surely limited, due to the high instance of rural illiteracy.

Furthermore, the Uyghur language has undergone repeated script changes during the period of Chinese Communist rule, and this means that Ötkür's work – published in the Arabic script – is essentially inaccessible to a whole generation of Uyghurs educated in the Latin script between 1960 and 1982. In contrast, song words are communicated orally and can be received and understood by all. This is why many popular singer-songwriters began in the nineties to borrow the Ötkür's poetry and adapt it for use in their song lyrics. Nationalist sentiments are thus transmitted far beyond urban, intellectual circles and deep into the heart of the countryside.

Thirdly, new folk songs can be speedily disseminated via the low-budget independent cassette industry. Cassettes are affordable, and easy to duplicate and pass on. And, with the growing trend of young Uyghur men coming to urban centres to work, there are more and more opportunities for these cassettes to find their way back to the countryside. Songs are then played or even performed in the rural home before an audience of relatives, neighbours and friends, and the images and ideas within are reproduced in rural settings. With the advent of this performative dimension, popular song becomes “an active means by which to experience the nation,” and I quote Sue Tuohy here.<sup>1</sup>

Fourthly, new folk singers sing in the Uyghur language. This ensures that messages can reach rural Uyghurs, many of whom speak no Chinese. It also carries significant symbolic value. By favouring the Uyghur language, Xinjiang's new folk artists reject the too often assumed superiority of the Han language and construct an alternative national (Uyghur) voice.

Finally, there are certain qualities of Uyghur singing style that make Uyghur music enormously affective. Sue Tuohy has argued that music can be even more

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<sup>1</sup> Tuohy 2001: 109.

powerful than the image (and, I would add, than written or spoken discourse) as an active means of organising people. She writes that music can “can stir as well as depict emotions, can create as well as represent community.”<sup>2</sup> Traditional Uyghur singing style is highly expressive and embodies a distinct sense of grief. This, combined with emotive lyrical content, can give rise to very strong emotions.

### *Five songs by Ömärjan Alim*

In summer 1996, one cassette in particular was blasted ceaselessly from cassette kiosks in Ürümchi and oasis towns across Xinjiang. Wherever you went, Ömärjan Alim’s voice rang out in public and private places, in urban and rural spaces. The cassette *Qaldi Iz* (or *Traces*) temporarily became the Uyghur national soundtrack. Alim’s followers attribute this extraordinary success to the singer’s ability to “speak to the peasants,” to use simple, direct language. But this was clearly not the sole source of the cassette’s popularity. When asked what they liked about Ömärjan Alim’s songs, the vast majority of respondents indicated the song-words, which they described as “heavy with meaning” (*mänisi čong*). The lyrical content articulated their situation *as they perceived it*.

### *The Han Coloniser*

With one or two exceptions, almost every song on *Qaldi Iz* invites reflection on common Uyghur grievances and is conceived within an implicitly assumed framework of opposition to the Han. Take the first song I describe here, *Tuğmas Toxu* (Barren Chickens). [OHT] According to one interpretation, the ‘barren chickens’ in *Tuğmas Toxu* are the Han Chinese, depicted as coloniser. They are occupying the

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<sup>2</sup> Tuohy 2001: 109.

‘roost’ or the beautiful land of Xinjiang (*uwuluqni igälläp; ötär orun igälläp*). This coloniser has adopted a birth control policy in order to control its own numbers. It has then imposed a slightly modified version of that policy on China's minority nationalities. For many Muslim Uyghurs – particularly those in rural areas and the deeply religious south - the concept of choosing not to bear children is preposterous, ridiculous and even humorous (this humour further lends the song appeal). More significantly, the policy makes it practically impossible for the Uyghur population to stay astride with the Han population (now vastly swollen by immigrants from China proper). Before birth control policy was introduced, many Uyghurs raised families of between 8-14 children. They considered childbirth to be a blessing from Xuda (that is, Allah). And the suggestion here is that, had they been allowed to continue having large families, Uyghurs could have fully occupied the land of Xinjiang. Instead, they have been ousted from it by the Han (and we find this in the line *they who'd lay twice as many eggs rove the streets*).

Based on an alternative reading, the ‘barren chickens’ are the Uyghur leaders. It is implied that these individuals make no attempt to gain rights and privileges for the Uyghur people, and yet continue to eat finer foods (*esil dan*) and live in better houses (*uwuluq; katäk*) than others who have done much for the nationalist cause. This view of ethnic Uyghur officials as collaborators is not new. Already under the late Qing, indigenous officials in Xinjiang conspired with Qing officials and oppressed their fellow Uyghurs. They were known as “dogs with human faces.”

In a third interpretation, the ‘barren chickens’ are Han immigrants in white-collar jobs. And this reflects widespread concern that Uyghurs are marginalised in the urban job market where Han-run state organs and private enterprises hire only fluent Chinese speakers. Many Uyghurs complain that Han Chinese get jobs purely on the

basis that their mother tongue is Chinese even though they may lack the necessary abilities.

Clearly, such metaphors invite multi-layered interpretations. It remains ambiguous who the ‘barren chickens’ - or those they represent – really are, and this has to an extent helped new folk singers avoid detection by the government censor. At the same time, the Uyghur people can - and do – read what they like into lyrical meanings. Their readings are of course tempered by their perceptions of the social, political, and economic situation, of their increasingly marginalised position in their region and their continued oppression by the Han state. It can take time for the Chinese authorities to realise that certain lyrics are politically problematic. This is partly due to the wide use of metaphor, allegory and allusion, and partly because songs are sung in the Uyghur language, indecipherable to most Han Chinese. Ironically, it is often through tip-offs by Uyghur ‘collaborators’ that the Cultural Bureau comes to learn of particular interpretations.

### ***The Uyghur ‘Collaborator’***

[OHT] In the second song, *Some people*, Uyghur officials are portrayed as puppet leaders chosen not by Uyghurs but by the Chinese government. They stand accused of ignoring the misery of their people while enjoying privileges extended by the Han (note the line *like stray dogs who’ve learned to lick at the dog bowl*). This reminded me of the popular concept of the ‘man of the people,’ summed up in the Uyghur proverb: “A good man is in touch with the people; a bad man only with property” (*Yaxşı är älgä ortaқ, yaman är malğa*).<sup>3</sup> The song voices keenly felt popular resentment, and at the same time pricks the conscience of the officials themselves by

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<sup>3</sup> According to Ämät’s annotation (2001: 399), the proverb implies that a man who thinks of his people and native place is pure while one who thinks only of the road to riches is selfish. I heard it said often in interview in 2002 that a true man is a ‘man of the people.’

accusing them of ‘selling out’ their ethnic group (...*and pawn their consciences*). Again, this perceived phenomenon of betraying the nation is not new. There are an unusually large number of words in the Uyghur language that express precisely this notion, for instance, *milliy xa'in* (ethnic or national traitor); *milliy munapiq* (scum of the nation); *wätän satquč* or *satqin* (person who ‘sells’ the nation); *maqulči* (collaborator or ‘Yes-man’).

In the third verse, the metaphor of the dog, used during the Qing colonial period, re-surfaces in the modern context. Dogs in the wild exist in hierarchically ordered packs, living and hunting together as a team. Yet, separated from the pack, the domestic dog becomes opportunistic, parasitic, betraying his own kind to accept favours from a dominant race. This ‘stray dog’ metaphor can be linked to one of Alim’s older themes: the idea that Uyghurs have been displaced from their homes by the Han ‘boss’ and forced into the hostile desert (and I refer here to *Mehman Bašlidim* - I Brought Home a Guest). Once dispossessed, the temptation towards opportunism is too great, so that some dogs break away from the pack and come to lick gratefully and obediently at the dog bowl proffered by the new master.

In the final lines, the rotting wood metaphor evokes at once the notion of Uyghur leaders having no conscience and also the sense that they are of no practical use. After all, a house cannot be built with rotten wood. Again, we revisit the idea that a ‘real man’ is a man who thinks and acts for his people.

### ***Social Climbers***

[OHT] In the third song, *Äwliya dostum*, petty Uyghur officials are ironically dubbed ‘immortals.’ It is suggested that such individuals act as though invincible before the ‘chick’ (i.e. the powerless Uyghur people) and yet become servile before the ‘lion’

(i.e. the powerful Han or higher-ranking Uyghur leaders - See Verse 2). The following lines “*You whine if a fly alights on you, but when struck by a stick say nothing*” can be read in at least two ways. One interpretation has it that petty officials offer excuses (*whine*) if an ordinary, powerless Uyghur (the *fly*) approaches them for help, yet are silent and complicit when pressurised (*struck by a stick*) from above, that is, by the Han or higher-ranking indigenous officials. In an alternative reading, the ‘stick’ becomes a thick wad of money, the implication being that such officials do favours only for those compatriots who can afford to bribe them. The ironic use of the word ‘immortal’ suggests that there will come a time when petty officials of this kind know that they are not immortal but in fact helpless.

And indeed, since summer 1993, a small number of militant Uyghur nationalists had begun to make assassination attempts on low- and mid-level Uyghur party cadres and officials where previously they had targeted only Han cadres, police, and military. One particularly horrific incident in 1996 involved a multiple assassination of a Uyghur cadre and three of his relatives in their home in Kucha. This was also the first occasion on which the Chinese authorities encountered Uyghur suicide bombers. This background then provides the context for the closing line of the song: *Farewell my friend*. On the one hand, it is implied that Uyghurs must say goodbye to the bad character trait (that is, the perceived inclination to prostitute oneself for power and wealth. However, a darker interpretation indicates that it is Uyghur officials and social climbers – our ‘immortal friends’ - who must bid farewell to their lives. Or as one respondent put it: *Ölisän!* (“You die!”)

*The flawed national character*

[OHT] According to respondents, our final song, *Häsärät* (or Sadness), is the most emotive. One middle-aged Uyghur woman working in the service industry told me: “When we hear Alim’s songs, it does something to us...It gets you right in the chest.” I asked her whether this was a good or bad pain. She replied that it was a good sort of pain. For her, the song embodied a strong element of catharsis. The sadness in *Häsärät* derives from its preoccupation with Uyghur national disunity (see the lines *No room for us to tread one wide road, we hurry down our narrow lanes*). The perceived source of this disunity? Infighting and envy. This perception is common at least among educated Uyghurs. For instance, two Ürümchi intellectuals cited a Uyghur saying: *Paltining sepi yağaç tur* (The axe-handle is ever made of wood). This is a particularly emotive image. While the axe blade is symbolised by the Han, it is Uyghurs (i.e. the handle made of wood) who assist the axe blade (the Han) in its assault on the wood (the Uyghur people).

In 1995-1996, I found that views on secession differed significantly between rural and urban areas, across generations, and, to an extent, between social groups. Yet the song *Häsärät* suggests that some perceive there to be a flaw within the Uyghur national character itself: petty jealousy and a reluctance to see others achieve. In Lines 7-8, the dog metaphor is once more evoked. This time, we find the dogs fighting over the spoils (*snap and gnaw at each others’ success*). Hence Uyghurs listening to *Häsärät* experience feelings of pain or regret combined with emotional release or catharsis.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, then: Uyghur artists in the mid-90s were able to construct and disseminate representations of the Uyghur nation that contrasted sharply with the Han-produced images of happy, colourful ethnic minorities. These alternative representations may not always have painted a wholly true picture of complex social conditions. But they nonetheless proved powerful reflections of popular perceptions and frustrations. They achieved an emotional resonance among Uyghurs of all walks of life. Through the active and repetitive process of listening to (and performing) Alim's songs, the meanings, perceptions, and assumptions contained therein were reproduced throughout Uyghur society. They came to influence attitudes among a growing number of individuals. Alim's lamentations thus possess an illuminative quality in the modern context. This role of 'illuminator' is itself explored in a fifth song taken from the same cassette, *Därwaziwän* (or *The Gatekeeper*): *There was a time when we lost everything to thieves; From now on, I shall be vigilant, for I am the gatekeeper*. Once more, the Han appear as coloniser, this time as 'thieves' who have stolen the beautiful land of Xinjiang along with its natural resources. Meanwhile, Alim sings in the first person, apparently presenting himself as his people's lonely saviour.

In the mid-90s, Xinjiang's 'new folk' singers built through music a sense of 'emotional unity' that religious figures, intellectuals, and émigré guerrilla leaders have so far failed to produce. Yet if taken too far by persons of a particular disposition, exhortations to ethnic loyalty can lead to violence both within and between ethnic groups. It could for instance be argued that one extreme consequence of Alim's songs against so-called 'collaborators' (and perhaps one unforeseen by the singer himself) was to catalyse an increase in the number of assassinations and attempted

assassinations on Uyghur cadres. In other words, such events not only inspired Alim's songs, but were also *inspired by them*. This in turn begs the question: why haven't the Chinese authorities censored these songs? It is true that the language barrier creates problems. But most colonial situations produce individuals willing to cooperate with the coloniser, and song lyrics, along with other literary forms, are eventually translated and made available to the Chinese state. Moreover, it seems clear that if uneducated Uyghur peasants can understand the hidden messages in Alim's songs, then so can educated Han officials, trained to identify precisely these political references.

It seems more likely that in this case the Cultural Bureau weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of giving airplay to songs that highlight disunity among the Uyghurs and decided that it was in the interests of the state to let them circulate. After all, Alim's mix of lamentation of disunity and exhortation to unity will affect different individuals in different ways. Some Uyghurs, rather than reacting positively and vowing to build unity among their people, may instead end up internalising negative perceptions like the 'bad character trait,' and this will lead to low ethnic self-esteem and a gradual loss of hope. Conversely, if the authorities were to ban the entire cassette or arrest its author, Alim would be heralded as an ethnic hero and martyr. This is surely an effect the authorities must wish to avoid.

### ***Epilogue***

By 2002, the environment surrounding music and politics in Xinjiang had significantly changed and public opinion regarding Ömärjan Alim was split. Some remained loyal to the singer, and continued to laud him as the 'voice of the Uyghurs.' They circulated rumours of his arrest and censorship, and claimed with pride that he

had been warned by the government not to sing “songs that threaten the unity of the nationalities (*minzu tuanjie*).” Others, however, deemed him a hypocrite, and accused him of “selling out” in recent years. In an interview in 2002, close relatives of the artist claimed that Alim had never been in trouble with the state, claiming that he was “unaware of the content of the songs” since they were *written for him* by local poets and writers. They added that he himself was “entirely uneducated.” Clearly the family’s standard line of defence, this argument has apparently been – successfully - used to defend Alim against formal charges of ‘ethnic splittism.’ Alim’s double CD release in 2002 appears to contain no obvious political reference to Uyghur/Han relations, and concentrates instead on intra-ethnic social themes. In this way, permitting (or perhaps even instructing) Alim to continue in a diluted or castrated form allows the state to orchestrate his public fall from nationalist glory and further promote the sense of hopelessness taking root among the Uyghur people.