

***The Sound of Salvation: Voice, Gender, and the Sufi Mediascape in China.***

By Guangtian Ha. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. Pp. xvi + 295. \$35.00 paperback.

Guangtian Ha's *The Sound of Salvation* is the first book-length ethnography of the Jahriyya in English. It is also a singularly insightful and elegantly written work that rewards close and repeated reading with a refreshing critical intervention into the study of religion and community in China based on years of intimate fieldwork. Ha's book illuminates the Hui past in a new way, demonstrates innovative approaches to anthropology in the present, and comments powerfully on the possible futures of Chinese Islam.

The Jahriyya are a Sufi (Islamic mystic) community around Northwest China that trace the origins of their doctrines and practices to Ma Mingxin 馬明心 (1719–1781), a Sino-Muslim who returned from Yemen with the argument that the remembrance of God (Arabic *dhikr*) must be done out loud (Arabic *jahr*). In Ma Mingxin's time, this practice contrasted with that of most Chinese Muslim Sufis, who remembered God more quietly, if not silently, and the quiet/aloud distinction subsequently served as a vehicle of politics, social differentiation, and sometimes violence. As Ha writes, Jahriyya *dhikr* and scripture recitation have grown into a powerful, organic sonic expression of community in which no one individual is entirely in command.

The Jahriyya are, thus, defined by their form of liturgical recitation, a kind of communal ritual that most scholars have analysed in terms of the narratives encoded by its text or its connection with social relations. Ha, against previous anthropological studies, argues that liturgical ritual is powerful, not because of its explanatory capacity—not because it provides a narrative, or a text, or a clear connection with the transcendent—but rather because of “its intrinsic explanatory opacity” (p. 9). As Ha puts it, ritual works because it cannot be explained and so offers a persistent feeling of mystery and ambiguity. This observation accords not only with the general trend in religious studies but also with Sufism, which is suffused with metaphors of endless seeking; nevertheless, Ha's insight has deeper implications. He argues that, among the Jahriyya, the ineffable is reflected both in the epistemology of Sufi knowledge, which is experienced as coming from “some saint,” and in the non-hierarchical structure of ritual, in which, despite the presence of a leader, the experience of ritual imparts a feeling that someone will always carry the recitation on. Therefore, Ha argues, recitation forms the foundation of a notion of abstract sainthood that has developed among the Jahriyya since its origins (p. 9).

Ha, in the various articulations of his argument, suggests that this ambiguity is powerful because the act of recitation produces a state of “fragile transcendence.” This ambiguous state corresponds neither to the hegemon nor its Other—rather, it stands both astride and outside that dyad. It produces “suspense” and a “weak agnosticism,” in which the practitioner relates to an “abstract saint” that becomes sublimated in

them (pp. 3–5). This abstract sainthood, Ha asserts, is historically specific to the Jahriyya, and it refers both to the various ways in which some unknown spiritual ancestor in the Sufi lineage has interceded between the practitioner and God's Truth to produce Jahriyya ritual knowledge, and to the potential of all Jahriyya to become saints (pp. 77–79). Frequently in *The Sound of Salvation*, this abstract saint—a “disembodied, hovering presence” (p. 34)—seems more like a metaphor for the transcendent feeling one gets from participation in recitation, or for how the knowledge and practice of recitation is embodied diffusely in a community, rather than directed by a text attributed to a single historical figure. To Ha, who takes Sufism seriously on its own terms, the abstract saint is all of these things at once, and, per his anthropological sensibility, the metaphor is the thing itself.

It is difficult to grasp Ha's notion of fragile transcendence, and perhaps this is the point. This ineffable concept, like the saint itself, is not meant to be grasped easily, but to lead the reader on a journey towards understanding and to unfold in stages as Ha explores a specific kind of Sufi soundscape, a core concept that I will return to below. Ha's analysis is explicitly meant to be rooted in an epistemology beyond the academy or its usual sources. In this sense, *The Sound of Salvation* is a rare example of a truly subaltern project in the China field. To put a finer point on it: much scholarship in what has come to be termed “New Qing History” claims to excavate marginalized voices simply by presenting sources written in non-Chinese languages, but these voices typically came from elite strata and were engaged in the hegemonic system of knowledge-making. Meanwhile, anthropologists of China have sought out dynamics of alterity, particularly in the context of the state's construction of ethnonational categories and resistance to them. This is true of studies of Sino-Muslims, or Hui: as Ha points out, the earliest Western scholars of Islam in China were obsessed with exoticizing Sino-Muslims as potential objects of proselytization. Many historians improved on this by considering the Sino-Islamic textual tradition but focused on a rarified canon, while others have explored the Hui navigation of difference, specifically in the political field, across time. These approaches all cleave to a more or less positivistic perspective, which Ha also identifies in prior scholarship on sound and subsequently rejects as a mode of analysis (p. 7). Ha begins with a radically different question: What happens when Muslims engage in recitation? How, in Ha's words, does the human voice cultivate mystical truth (p. 3)?

Some of the book's initial opacity and terminological complexity comes from its responses to a variety of other theoretical approaches that deserve more attention in the undertheorized field of Chinese studies. Most important is Ha's engagement with an approach to sonic and affective landscapes and experiences, or “soundscapes.” China scholars across disciplines would do well to attend to the sonic transcript. As Ha demonstrates, the human voice expresses histories outside the written word and records perspectives from beyond the usual scholarly frames. Speech's ephemerality

betrays its power. Moreover, sound is political: it defines groups and spaces in ways that human beings can feel and manipulate, but not always articulate. Because Ha begins by problematizing the core of Jahriyya identification—sound—he is able to present a new and more coherent picture of this community. This picture emerges as the chapters proceed through different kinds of intimate spaces.

Chapter 1 of the book takes a highly original approach to history—one that, I think, is worth imitating—in order to introduce a historical and social consciousness tied to the intimacy of communal sound. Through a historical anthropology that incorporates hagiography as well as participant observation of ritual, Ha traces the emergence of a distinct mode of recitation by studying how people have learned and produced sounds across time. Ha outlines distinct stages in the Sino-Islamic encounter with Persian- and Arabic-language texts that led to the messy, “unclean” (p. 72) sounds we know today. Ha, having accomplished a remarkable feat of sonic history, shows how the voice embodies history in practice.

The significance of this sonic intervention is demonstrated powerfully in Chapter 2. Here Ha attends to the affective dimensions of recitation: what people think they are doing and what they feel in the midst of liturgical ritual. In this case, focusing on sound leads Ha to shift his attention from a written tradition of authority that has led to a preoccupation with Foucauldian discipline and self-cultivation among anthropologists of Islam, towards, instead, a question of what emerges in practical engagement with the intangible. Ha finds there a distinct kind of social consciousness: the momentary imagination of a vast community in which the voice of the Jahriyya saint, appearing in the “choral dynamic” (p. 91), is “a silent whisper . . . charged with the intense voice of society” (p. 103). Ha’s argument is very theoretically disciplined, and he is careful to distinguish concepts that scholars often lump together. Moreover, in this chapter’s rich ethnography, the reader can feel the importance of Ha’s own experience of ritual.

Chapter 3 relates the Jahriyya soundscape to China’s modern political history. It problematizes a perceived shift in the Jahriyya sound dating to 1960, the year of the persecution and death of a man considered to be the order’s last true *murshid*—that is, the final successor of the Jahriyya founder capable of expanding and articulating the order’s teaching. In that year, the Jahriyya sense of history changed, as did the tempo of its recitation of *Madā’ih*, a panegyric to the Prophet Muḥammad. Ha explores the connection between the rhythm of ritual and the sense of history moving swiftly through decline. He shows how the sacred is prior to the social, rather than ritual being a mere reification of the social, as the figure of the saint and practices associated with the recitation hall shape and refract throughout family life.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the possibilities and limits of fragile transcendence, specifically in terms of its role in gendering. In both chapters, Ha is very much in harmony with Rachel Harris, whose recent *Soundscape of Uyghur Islam* (Bloomington,

IN: Indiana University Press, 2020) emerged from the same project and explores similar issues of gendering, authenticity, and the circulation of media.

Chapter 4 explores how mediatization has changed ways of engaging in ritual over distance through the consumption, production, and transmission of recitative sound, specifically with regard to male socialization. Ha examines how, while live recitation can maintain ties across continents, displacement and the increasing role of recorded recitation have led to struggles over authenticity. Here it becomes even clearer how Ha's book is a story of the violence of modernity and the tyranny of hard boundaries, as he makes distinctions between the generative mobility of pilgrimage and the transgressive mobility of crossing national borders. Meanwhile, where a smartphone can make recitation immediately available to a practitioner, it robs the sound of its ritual context. This book is, in many ways, about the importance of not fixing things in place, and here again we see an example of what happens when things are not remembered, but recorded and replayed. China scholars may take note of how Ha contrasts memory with repetition through performance—the field's interest in memory as an analytical lens may have encouraged us to find “memory” in too many places, from bodies to communities to rivers, while Ha's framework may make productive distinctions.

In Chapter 5, Ha offers a critique of the androcentrism of Islam in China and the scholarly study thereof, which derives in no small part from the different ways that men and women in Chinese Islam engage in sounded practices and experience soundscapes. Ha (like Harris in *Soundscapes*) partially rectifies the inattention to women by demonstrating how recitation, that powerful vehicle of community-building, systematically excludes women. This is the case even as women make their own congregations for teaching and performing recitation, in part by drawing on practices of pedagogy and transliteration that have become marked as distinctly female (p. 201). Here Ha reintroduces the materiality he has initially rejected, and which has since crept gradually back into the text, in order to explore how women's labour enables men's liturgical ritual. Most strikingly, Ha explores how women's group recitations—built on women's labour, time, and dedication but limited by gendered access to teaching and other resources—lack the “satisfying” sonic quality of men's group recitations. Men's recitations, he shows, reflect in their sonic practices the principles of the abstract reciter as participants organically drop and pick up verses, while women's are more egalitarian in their organization, meaning that they are simultaneously more individualistic and somewhat leaderless but also more regimented in their following of a written text.

*The Sound of Salvation* concludes with an “epilogue,” in which Ha reflects on the politics of his fieldwork and writing, both in the context of the crackdown on Islam in China that began in 2016 and that of the modern neoliberal university. Ha's fieldwork, like that of most Western social scientists concerned with Islam in China, ended in

2015 and prior to the sea-change in Chinese policy. This lends his book a somewhat historical quality and, paradoxically, a sense of political urgency similar to that which many of us in the field are grappling with today—“the pace of change,” Ha writes, “is flabbergasting” (p. 240). Ha argues here that an anthropologist, perhaps like a Jahriyya reciter, is engaged in a project of maintaining resilience through constant contestation and ambiguity in the face of a state that desires fixity and legibility.

Ha’s argument possesses political, historiographical, and social scientific significance. In relation to other anthropologists of Islam in China, Ha’s focus, facilitated by his positionality as an insider-outsider scholar and peculiar analytical toolkit, is entirely different. We can compare and contrast, for example, the Sino-Muslims in David Stroup’s recent (and differently excellent) *Pure and True: The Everyday Politics of Ethnicity for China’s Hui Muslims* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022). Stroup’s fieldwork found self-identified Hui engaged in a diversity of boundary-policing practices centred around the notion of authenticity in contexts of socio-economic change, particularly urbanization. In contrast, Ha conceives of Jahriyya liturgical ritual as existing in a space beyond the question of authenticity itself, wherein one relates not so much to the absolute revelation of a transcendent God, but through the melody and rhythm of communal recitation to an epistemology of saints. In this sense, *The Sound of Salvation* approaches a fundamentally different set of questions.

In terms of historiography, most Western scholarship on Hui history is focused on Hui betweenness, either in the creation of a Chinese Islamic canon or in the negotiation of a place for Hui in the Sino-Islamic binary. Ha’s sonic history and his centring of a Jahriyya ethnohistory narrated through revelation and sainthood presents a radically different way of thinking about and exploring aspects of the Hui past that are much more inwardly oriented.

I admit to being less than completely convinced of the analytical value of the “abstract saint,” which is “essential to [the] book” (p. 3) but largely disappears from it from Chapter 3 onward. Ha may be correct to push back against materialist approaches to skill, embodiment, and community that have been taken in some of the most challenging and anthropologically engaged interventions in the field of modern Chinese history, for example, Dorothy Ko’s *Cinderella’s Sisters* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007) and Jacob Eyferth’s *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009). I certainly think he is correct to think through his subject matter using its own categories, as historians of the Mao era now do very productively. However, given that the book ends with a more materialist perspective on gender anyway, I am inclined to think that the abstract saint has been a reliable guide on a path of knowledge but may be reducible to the sociological concept of “ritual energy” as manifested both in satisfying ritual practice and in a structural position in the ritual, concepts on which Ha’s analysis ultimately seems to rely (pp. 104, 139).

Ha's political argument hits its mark where he implicitly points out that hegemonic discourses of Islam and tolerance in both China and Europe are based on false empirical and epistemic premises, and that Muslims' struggle for acceptance in either society's mainstream reproduces false binaries of secular/religious, extremist/moderate, etc. Premodern history, he suggests, gave Islam ambiguity, and modern history took that away. Ha is aligned with the scholarly consensus that imperialism and its knowledge formations have created essentialized ideas of Islam that have gained purchase among Muslims worldwide. In this sense, Ha shows us not only that scholars of Islam in China have been missing the core of what matters in Chinese Islam, but that Chinese Muslims are also losing sight of the powerful ambiguity that gives faith and identity meaning.

Ha's assertion that this Chinese Islamic practice provides a new foundation from which to probe tolerance, apart from Jürgen Habermas's notion of it as articulated in a 2008 piece on "post-secularism," may be overstated (p. 13). Habermas's argument is historically specific to his particular patch of Europe in the early twenty-first century, as Ha's is to his corner of the world, and neither one ought to be overgeneralized. Where Habermas waves his hands vaguely at phenomena, Ha sews together disparate minutiae on the basis of deep experience, and so the two gestures are not exactly commensurable. Ha seems to tell us that, while Habermas must seek out tolerance within the Western liberal democratic tradition, such a thing already exists in the ambiguity of Jahriyya practice, which is losing ground to the violence of certainty in the present day. One could be forgiven for detecting a certain romanticism, even essentialism, in Ha's characterization of the Jahriyya tradition, which, after all, he has shown to be a producer of difference and exclusion as much as one of tolerance and inclusion.

But these are the complaints of someone who has read *The Sound of Salvation* multiple times and continues to find it a bracingly original book and a challenging intervention. China scholars beyond Islamic studies could most productively read Ha's book as one would read the work of another transdisciplinary analyst such as James Scott: as a deep methodological intervention that inspires us to ask questions that decentre our received perspectives. We, as scholars, could continue to ask questions that centre our perception of a binary, such as, "How have Sino-Muslims navigated the two halves of their identities?" Alternatively, we could follow Ha and inquire instead about our relationship to the abstract saint that emerges in glorious outline when the human voice rises in search of the transcendent.

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