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Soundscape of a Women's Mosque and Potency of Silence: Evocations of Islamic Faith, Ruptured Memory and Precarious Presence in Kaifeng, China

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To privilege voice over silence and secrecy as evidence of empowered agency ignores the transformative potential of a complex mix of choices. Indeed, Gal argues that the relationship among silence, speech, gender and power must be taken into account (Jane Parpart).

This presentation forms part of an on-going study, as yet at an early stage, which seeks to problematize the coming-to-voice of Chinese believing women within the interlinking frameworks of aural ethnography and cross cultural feminist theory. The focus of the presentation is the traditional soundscape of Chinese



Figure Wangjia Hutong Women's Mosque Prayer Hall Prayer Mat

Hui Muslim women's *nüsi*, women's mosques—resonating throughout history with issuances of authoritative instructions and the sound of lively debates, with collective memorizing of scriptural texts and sermons delivered by the resident *nü ahong* (female Imam) on *zhuma*, and with the collective voices of women reciting *jingge* (Islamic chants). But sound without sight, appearance, smell, movement, architecture and material life is wanting in important respects; it calls for the ethnographic lens, a close-up on how social life reproduces itself in the daily rhythm of ritual, renewal and mundaneness. The gendered observer moreover seeks to construct meaningful interpretations in what Jane Parpart identifies as a crucial and fluid 'relationship among silence, speech, gender and power.' Expanding this 'complex mix of choices' in relation to the feminist core concept of 'voice' (or agency), serves to raise I would argue, interesting issues. If the sound of a female voice, according to an influential Kaifeng-born *ahong* is *xiuti* (shameful, and thus allowed only if off-stage), how do we evaluate the rich oral tradition of *jingge*, transmitted and cherished by generations of Hui Muslim women in central China's women's mosques? If 'safe space' is a necessary pre-condition of voice (Parpart), what does the history of its aural architecture, of *nüsi*, tell us about the nature of collective agency, transformation and the impact of piety on gendered choices?

Our concern must be as much with the evidence for such faith-centered life-worlds as it must be with the problematic of evidence in the writing of marginalized history, as much with the enduring strength of women's own traditions as with their ever-present vulnerability to political appropriation in a context of secularist authoritarianism.

That the experience of space and time and sound is gendered creates important issues for students of women's lives, raising questions about the relationship with male-gendered space and sound and the various ways in which gender regimes and hierarchies, intersecting with ethno-religious and secular-developmental factors, problematize the concept of sound. In turn, the complex relationship between sound and voice entails critical questions as to the popular equation of voice with coming-to-voice as assertion of female agency, a linkage that will be furthermore explored in the case study of an aural/spatial history of Wangjia Hutong Women's Mosque (WJHT) in central China. What light is thrown by sensory anthropology, specifically aural ethnography, on the nature of 'voice' of generations of charismatic and dedicated female *ahong*-led congregations which might be seen as effectively *silenced* by an entrenched patriarchal regimes of Islamic and Confucian institutions? An aural ethnography, a widening of sensory evidence gathering which alternative writing of history, importantly the history of women, asks for, challenges—according to Michael Hirschkind—the conventional suspicions of 'the pitfalls of the ear' as antithetical to constructions of history rooted in positivist epistemology and articulations of reason and knowledge. Instead, in the words of Hirschkind, the fluid heterogeneity of modernity demands 'an alternative history of the senses' which renders listening as a significant site of enquiry.

I shall elaborate on alternative approaches to interpreting sound in women's lives, particularly in conservative, patriarchal contexts, by drawing on the work of Jane Parpart. In her seminal article on 'Choosing Silence: Rethinking Voice, Agency, and Women's Empowerment' (2010), Parpart argues the need to interrogate positivist equations of voice with empowered agency. Her writing on the problematic association of passivity and disempowered acquiescence with popular notions of voiced agency appears to me particularly relevant to contexts of entrenched gender segregation. Women's own sites of religious learning and worship evolved predominantly in the milieus of rural townships and villages where female voices, historically and well into contemporary times, have been subject to constraints—whether in terms of *side* 四德, Confucian prescriptive notions of female virtues which included the virtue of meekness of voice, or in terms of *xiuti*, the Islamic prohibition regarding as shameful all unguarded or uncovered manifestations of a female presence in the public sphere of men. But within

the gendered walls of confined spaces, women evolved traditions and their own aesthetics which engendered a sense of belonging. As Terry Eagleton (1990) points out, sharing of, and participation in, unique forms of common rituals—as in the case of Islam, feasts marking the Islamic religious calendar—create and shape what is the sound of collective experience into sustained cultural, institutionalized identity. Relevant to my exploration is Adam Chau’s conceptualization of the culture of Buddhist folk festivals as *renao* 热闹 understood by Chau as the engendering of social life in the collective experience of energetic celebration (2008). I will ask how the culture of women’s mosques and women’s own understanding of the uniqueness of their institutions as evolved over the centuries both partakes in the collective engendering of *renao*, of social events as defining of their shared identity, and also diverges in important respects. Recording and documentation of a still vibrant, orally transmitted body of pedagogy and worship that has been a source of innovation and creativity in women’s mosques (if somewhat diminished in function and practice these days) will provide additional material for exploration of sound in tension with patriarchal regimes of silence. It is suggested that silence demands closer interrogation. Within contexts of patriarchal/political oppression, silence acquires an important role, becoming ‘a means of resistance, a way of holding one’s ground against the encroachments of oppression.’ When transcripts authored by communities besieged are produced off-stage, silence can turn into a site of transformation, in readiness for a time when an opportunity arises to negotiate and overwrite unequal gender practices. Women’s mosques have ever been such sites of waiting and engagement.

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Islamic Education for Women in China: Vocational or Ethical Schooling?

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The Hui, an ethnic minority group—*shaosu minzu* or national minority in the socialist context—in China, has a population of more than 10 million people (last recorded in 2010) and as such, is the second largest ethnic minority group in China. The Hui have managed to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity, including their Islamic faith, throughout the approximately one thousand years that they have inhabited China's territory alongside other ethnic minorities and the majority Han, which has a population of 1.2 billion people. The Hui speak Chinese as a colloquial language. The Hui are concerned that if they lose their customs and their Islamic faith, they may be assimilated into the culture of the Han majority. They, therefore, fear for the loss of their cultural identity and thus strive to maintain their unique identity through various activities such as the promotion of religious education at community mosques, eating halal food, issuing appeals against ethnic hate speech and discrimination, and also demanding for equal employment opportunities and treatment among the Han majority. The primary mechanism that the Hui employ to maintain their cultural identity is Islamic education. In the past, young Hui males were educated at community mosques, where they studied Islamic scholarship in both the Arabic and Persian languages. On the other hand, young Hui females were not allowed to study except in some districts, such as in Henan, Hebei, and the Northeast. In the Northwest with a large Hui population, young Hui girls did have the opportunity to study Islamic scholarship at women's mosques.

Since the time of China's Reform and Open Policy of 1978, numerous private religious schools for women and female children—called *nixue* or *nixiao*—have been established in the Hui communities in the Northwest such as Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Yunnan, as well as Henan and Inner Mongolia. These communities were



Figure Islamic School in Yinchuan, Ningxia



Figure Islamic School in Zhaotong, Yunnan