

Chuen-Fung Wong***Even in the Rain: Uyghur Music in Modern China***

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Chuen-Fung Wong's *Even in the Rain: Uyghur Music in Modern China* joins a small but distinguished group of monographs as well as a few excellent but as-yet-unpublished doctoral dissertations on Uyghur music and music history produced since the beginning of the twenty-first century by ethnomusicologists based outside of China. These studies draw on fieldwork conducted from the late 1980s to 2017, when China's intensifying repression of Uyghurs and suppression of Uyghur culture made ethnographic fieldwork in the Uyghur homeland all but impossible. Wong addresses the current situation head-on in the first two sentences of his book: "This book is being published at a time when over one million Uyghur and other indigenous peoples in their homeland have disappeared into mass internment camps or suffered from other forms of incarceration, torture, forced labor, and family separation—including a number of individuals anonymously mentioned in the text. Having contact with foreigners and even family members living abroad would be grounds for arrest and detention" (ix). Wong notes that the majority of his own fieldwork was conducted between the early 2000s and the late 2010s, and that he "made many trips to various locations in the Uyghur territory, as well as a number of specific visits to Uyghur musicians and other informants in Kazakhstan, the United States, Hong Kong, Germany, Turkey, and China" (22).

While previous monographs on Uyghur music largely focus on *muqam*, the sprawling genre commonly glossed as "classical" that has been serially reconstructed and re-reconstructed within the context of China's ever-shifting cultural politics, *Even in the Rain* views Uyghur music through a wide-angle lens that captures not only *muqam* but also contemporary singer-songwriters, pop, film soundtracks, and hybrid fusion music. Wong is conversant with all of these musical idioms, and his narrative traces their evolution and entanglement since the 1950s, with a focus on the period of his own fieldwork. He does this by using close "readings" of specific musical pieces to support evidence-based inferences about the interaction of music, identity, and cultural politics in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, as the Uyghur homeland is called in official Chinese parlance, as well as in China more broadly. Throughout the book, Wong advances an original hypothesis that, in a nutshell, explains Uyghur musicians'

embrace of various forms of stylistic modernity as a conscious strategy of subaltern empowerment and self-representation that pushes back on official and popular attempts to exoticize and Orientalize Uyghur music as an uncontaminated form of indigenous cultural heritage. At the same time, Wong describes how Uyghur musicians have deftly used the “original ecology” (*yuan shengtai*) movement in China to maintain a connection to their own traditions as well as to transnational networks of indigenous sounds. Wong explains that “The notion of ‘original ecology’ has its root in the late 1980s as a part of the liberalization of cultural expressions following the end of the Cultural Revolution” (181), and that the “original ecology” style “celebrates a variety of loosely defined premodern and folk practices often understood in an environmental frame, such as uncontaminated musical species and original, natural performing habitats” (182). Wong remains skeptical, however, that the “original ecology” movement can serve as a panacea for the precarity of Uyghur performing arts. “Despite optimistic analyses and speculations,” he writes, “the sanctioned expression of Uyghur performing arts remains tightly regulated by the state and aligns closely with the changing preferences of mainstream Chinese audiences. . . . As the Uyghur continue to be dispossessed of their heritage, musicians ask crucial questions about what it means to be indigenous as they struggle to reclaim their musical place” (195).

Several different narrative registers interweave throughout the six substantive chapters of *Even in the Rain*. The first of these, introduced in chapter 1 (“Ethnography and Music Scholarship”) and appearing episodically throughout the book, is reflexive. Wong handles reflexive writing with nuance and sensitivity, inserting himself into the narrative at key moments to provide verisimilitude in his descriptions of musical life amid ubiquitous government surveillance and to describe his anxiety about “colonial ethnography” and his role in it as a Hong Kong-born cultural outsider to Uyghur music. The second register comprises historical narrative, in which Wong draws both on oral sources from his fieldwork and on written sources in Chinese and Uyghur languages as well as on photographs, films, musical scores, and recordings to synthesize an account of Uyghur music and musical life from the early modern period to the late 2010s. The third register is ethnomusicological and strives to encapsulate the author’s rich ethnographic and historical material within contemporary culture theory, particularly in relation to conflicting constructions of cultural modernity. Wong is a strong writer and succeeds in integrating the different registers into a cogent narrative that moves briskly and purposefully.

If there is one element that I wish could have been added to the book, it would be a companion website with links to the many musical items discussed in the text, some of them in great detail (e.g., two songs performed by the well-known singer Shir’eli Eltékin, who offers pop reinterpretations of *muqam* songs) (118–28). Wong does provide a discography of his audio sources, and while Uyghur music specialists and enthusiasts may have access to these CDs, others are likely to be stymied in their attempt to find the songs and specific performances Wong discusses, not only on CD but also online. Given the potentially disastrous consequences for Uyghur musicians residing in China of having their recordings included on a website for a book like *Even in the Rain*, not to mention the complexities of licensing recordings of Uyghur music from China-based media companies, it’s understandable that Wong demurred. This means, however, that course instructors who want to adopt Wong’s soundly researched book for classroom use should be prepared to hunt down audio or video recordings to make the contents truly

come alive for their students. Such an effort would be well worth it, for *Even in the Rain* offers a superb model of how to write simultaneously for scholars and nonspecialists in a way that is at once engrossing and illuminating.

Theodore Levin
Dartmouth College