

Book Review:

The Sound of Salvation: Voice, Gender, and the Sufi Mediascape in China (Guangtian Ha)
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Mariati Aprilia Harahap

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Indonesia
mariati.harahap@uiii.ac.id

Guangtian Ha completed ‘The Sound of Salvation: Voice, Gender, and the Sufi Mediascape in China’ while undertaking his Ph.D. dissertation for Columbia University. As an anthropologist who conducted ethnographic research, he was mired in uncompleted fieldwork. When writing this book in 2021, he remarked that the COVID-19 global pandemic was in its second year, leading to the deaths of over half a million people in the United States and an unknown number in China, where the total number of deaths has been kept secret by the government. Even before the pandemic, the role of Islamic seminaries in Ningxia had been substantially reduced due to political pressure. But when the pandemic hit the region, most religious locations, such as mosques and Sufi graves, were ordered to close their doors to outside visitors. Even though much of his fieldwork was already completed in 2018, he lamented that much had changed in the intervening years, and so noted that the book had been written with a deep sense of loss.

Ha was impressed by the sounds produced by the Jahriyya Sufi order in their recitations, which displayed distinctive vocal dynamics: the individual voices comprising the group recitation do not completely unite into a coherent whole, they are always a little out of sync, and some are always a little off key. Even though it lacks a rigid structure, the Jahriyya’s recitation displays a naturally pleasant contrapuntal harmony. Ha’s first

introduction to Jahriyya recitation was when he first visited Hong Le Fu, the countryside Jahriyya school (*madrassa*) in Wuzhong, Northern Ningxia, in 2011. The term '*jahriyya*' is derived from the Arabic word meaning 'the loud ones', fitting as it represents a kind of Sufi recitation performed by several individual voices in a loud manner. It represents the spiritual path of its followers, who recite melodic vocal chants such as *awrād*. *Awrād* is a concise liturgical text composed of rearranged Qur'anic passages, including rhythmic chants of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) scattered throughout.

Ha's book is divided into five chapters, namely Archaeology of Sound, Sacred Circles, Tempo of Time, Voice of the Teacher, and Work of Faith. This is combined with comprehensive ethnography and an examination of the Jahriyya sound, which is the strength of this book's study. Chapter 1 presents an archaeological analysis of the Jahriyya method for reciting, especially in Arabic, where the group's pronunciation and pedagogy prove important because of the melodic and political nuances common among Sinophone Muslims. Most Jahriyya recitations are in the pentatonic scale and, as a result, clearly resemble Chinese classical music. This musical similarity may be suggestive in that the pronunciation compresses the consonants and goes against almost all the rules of consonant recitation, making the recitation distinctly non-Arabic, further absorbing the influence of Chinese language and culture. An influencing factor here may be that Muslims in China had long studied Arabic pronunciation in the Persian style.

Chapter 2 offers a detailed ethnographic description of the Jahriyya in full ritual glory in two opposing contexts: the private family setting and public mosques. Here, Ha examines the Jahriyya's *daore*. *Daore* and *dayi'er* actually are not found in Chinese languages - they are derived from Arabic. The Arabic word for *daore* is *dawr* while *dayi'er* is the original term of *dā'ira*. Both share the same trilateral root, d-w-r, with all of these terms centering on the sense of circle and cyclical rotation (Ha 2022). The Jahriyya adherents consider their voices to be their lifeblood: if their voice remains, life continues. The emphasis on good sound and correct pronunciation in recitation is extensive among Muslims but is certainly not a focus for the Jahriyya. Still, the recitation of *Mukhammas* (a Persian-

style poem) by the Jahriyya, if viewed from its own perspective, creates a form of social bond that embraces and surpasses the sensory existence of those reciting it. Therefore, between *dayi'er* and recitation there is a linguistic as well as a ritual link.

Chapter 3 explores the recitation of *Madā'ih*, a panegyric text devoted to the Prophet Muḥammad, linked to the tempo of the reading speed and the social conditions that deeply influence the community. Perception accelerated reading in chanting mantras is not limited to the *Madā'ih* alone; it includes all Jahriyya readings. This is evident even when looking beyond the speed for the *Mukhammas* ritual. Where, usually, one *Mukhammas*¹ session should last between twenty and thirty minutes. If the congregation is larger, the recitation tends to be performed more slowly.

Chapter 4 shows how the Jahriyya's authority uses the new sound technologies to root out variations in *dawr* and generates a more unitary ritual soundscape. An important characteristic of the ritualization of recitation among the Jahriyya is the separation of the recitation from the semantic meaning of the text. Most Jahriyya *murīdūn* (disciples) had no knowledge of Arabic beyond a basic understanding of the alphabet. Thus, a lifetime of devout recitation and devotion could be built on almost zero knowledge of the Arabic text.

Chapter 5 argues that Jahriyya women have never been quiet. In the Jahriyya community, they have formed their own female congregations and spaces. There is no leader among the women because they are all considered equal. Even so, in the Jahriyya recitation circles, males are given priority when receiving *guodiezi* (fruit platters for elites), which are prepared by male specialists. Other meals (*youxiang*) presented to the reciters after the conclusion of rituals are the product of women's labor. In *guodiezi*, persimmons are the centerpiece, with dates ranking second. Other food present depends on their availability in local markets. Since

¹ Recitation of *Sūra al-Mulk* (67) or called as *Tabār* among *Jahriyyūn* (Jahriyya followers) precedes the chanting of *Mukhammas*. This *sūra* is consisted of 30 verses but was read collectively by them during *Mukhammas*'s recitation. *Mukhammas* is a Sufi complementary poem structured in Arabic which contained of 163 five-line couplets by Muḥammad al-Tabādkānī al-Ṭūsī— a Herat Sufi saint.

this is considered elite food, only some are permitted to prepare it, and very few are granted the privilege to enjoy it. Ha explored all of these elements through an ethnographic approach.

Women were often permitted to attend (*gen*) recitation circles but were rarely allowed to recite. They were not prohibited from entering the prayer hall, where the *ermaili* (ritual activity) takes place, but neither were they encouraged to do so. Pride of place is reserved for men only - even if there are vacant sitting spots remaining. According to Ha's account, women preferred to sit close to the prayer hall entrance, where the sounds of the *ermaili* reached them just before those sounds vanished into open space. Saba Mahmood identified this as an 'audio division gendered' problem, where women face 'the individuation problematic' alone through the male voices they hear in the Jahriyya ritual recitation and where this segregation actually leads to discontent among women themselves (Mahmood 2011).

However, nowadays, advances in technology have created a contradictory shift in women's engagement with the previously androcentric recitation in the Jahriyya. Women are still excluded from reciting in formal rituals but they often use simple smartphone applications to record their own recitations to circulate among themselves (female friends and relatives). Occasionally, their recordings move beyond their own community and reach larger, male audiences. This seemed to confirm the relationship between androcentrism and mediatization among the Jahriyya.

This book examines the use of the human voice in the cultivation of mystical truths. Ha argues that the Jahriyya's melodious voices have survived for two and a half centuries, defying the gradual rise of oppressive political discrimination. Thus, this ritual structure established a "fragile transcendence" among many of the Jahriyya's followers. Fragile transcendence characterizes the ambiguity that keeps God out of reach of abstract mediation of holiness, thereby highlighting that the history of the creation of non-concrete saints depends on a certain way of seeing the differences between ritual worship and hermeneutics. In addition, this book only covers the use of voice in Sufi liturgical rituals, not all types of rituals. Where the ambivalent condition is built on its core

characteristic “fragile transcendence.” Therefore, the arguments used in this book cannot be applied to all types of rituals.

Interestingly, Ha notes that *mūsīqā* often designates types of music that do not include Qur’anic recitation. In this statement, Qur’anic chants (not recitation), calls to prayer, pilgrimage chants, eulogy chants, and chanted poetry with noble themes; are a part of non-*mūsīqā* sounds which are “legitimate” (*ḥalāl*) sound-making practices. But listening to “sensuous music” ought to be categorically forbidden, even if the separation between non-*mūsīqā* and *mūsīqā* are not always clear. Thus, Ha regards the Jahriyya as a potential paradigm, a midpoint of moderate transcendence that is neither too secular nor too religious.

The Jahriyya, to sum up, is not the only Sufi order in China that practices vocal recitation, but they do not merely perform ritual recitation. Instead, they also ritualize social processes with distinct consequences, highlighting the fostering of fragile supremacy among the Jahriyya *Murīdūn*. The world of the Jahriyya is almost the same as any other world, full of chaotic, tangled threads, conflict, contradictions, and disturbances. However, Guangtian Ha’s ethnographic study has managed to reveal the complexities surrounding the Jahriyya, while also leaving space for the voices of the Jahriyya men and women where salvation lies in the sound.

References

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